

**PRELUDE TO VIOLENCE:**  
***The Striking Similarities Between The Seduction Into Violent  
Domestic Relationships And Induction Into Abusive Cults***

by  
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Back in the '60s, Kenneth Keniston wrote a book about alienation, The Uncommitted (Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., New York, 1964), that described the feeling of disconnection and of non-belonging experienced by young people as they sought to live in an increasingly impersonal society. Fast forward to today. That feeling of alienation is no longer the sole province of the young. As the world around us shifts and changes at an ever-increasing pace, many of us--young, boomers and elderly alike--feel out of sync with the world in which we live.

Too often we feel interchangeable, easily replaced, of no consequence, or, as Keniston said, alienated. In the midst of an increasingly chaotic and confusing rapid-paced world there is a deep and pervasive need for a safe place, a place in which to feel secure, accepted, special, valued, and loved. Unfortunately, that place is too often found in the beckoning arms of an abusive relationship, be that with a person or a cult.

A cult is most commonly defined as the "extravagant devotion to a person, cause or thing." Cults are frequently religious, but not necessarily so. Cults are a group phenomenon--many people subservient in their devotion to a specific person, cause or thing. Just as there are non-violent domestic relationships, so too are there non-abusive cults. Our concern is with cults which are abusive, cults which deprive individuals of their personal freedom. Violent domestic relationships or violent dating relationships are also characterized by "extravagant devotion" but the "extravagant devotion" is to another individual. A violent domestic relationship could easily be described as a one-person abusive cult.

Violent domestic or dating relationships and abusive cults share a surprising number of characteristics. The beginning of both kinds of relationships promise a safe haven from an unfriendly world. Both seem, at the beginning, to be Heaven on Earth. Both seem to offer peace, security and sanity in a troubled and troubling world. Both are apparently freely chosen relationships, based on love and unconditional acceptance. Both promise a return to the right order of things, a return to ideals such as true love, truth and devotion to a higher cause. Both quickly become controlling and highly conditional. In the end, both severely limit personal freedom, often causing great emotional, mental, spiritual and financial damage, physical abuse, and in too many cases, death.

As disturbing as these similarities are, there are other similarities that provide hope. There is a common thread running through the seduction (romantic, sexual or platonic) into a violent domestic relationship and the induction into an abusive cult. How is this a hopeful message? Because, if indeed, the prelude to abuse is basically the same in the micro-abuse (involving individuals) of domestic violence as it is in the macro-abuse (involving groups of people) of an abusive cult, then forewarned is truly forearmed. Abuse is abuse. One set of warning signs is enough to help the individual steer clear of both types of abuse. What matters is recognizing the prelude to abuse whatever the form it takes, and responding so to avoid the danger. There are certainly many more warning signs than those that follow. These, however, are the most compelling.

The Warning Signs

## WARNING SIGN #1: A WHIRLWIND BEGINNING

Whether romantic, sexual, or platonic, the beginning of a violent domestic/dating relationship is typically intense. There's often a feeling of "hot pursuit," where partners of abusers find themselves vigorously pursued by the abuser. The pursuit is marked by charm, passion, huge amounts of attention, compliments and gifts. Victims (although they certainly don't appear to be victims at this point) feel as if they are the most important thing in the abuser's life. There is a feeling of being incredibly special, wanted and appreciated.

So too, the beginning of a person's involvement in an abusive cult is marked by great intensity. Those who have been recruited into such cults talk about "love-bombing," the sense of being "bombarded" by love, and of receiving enormous amounts of attention and acceptance. Cultists make recruits feel important, unconditionally accepted and cared for. Indeed, recruits are often even fed and housed. Whatever their current need, the cult seeks to fulfill it.

### THE PUSH

So what's the problem? What is wrong with a person receiving mega doses of attention and affection? What is wrong with being cared about? Nothing, of course. Many wonderful marriages, friendships and love affairs are based on such feelings. Many non-abusive cults and sects provide such feelings for their members. The problem is, that in both the development of a violent domestic/dating relationship, and the induction into an abusive cult, somewhere in this wonderful beginning, abusers or abusive cults will pressure their partner or cult recruits to do something that is uncomfortable for them, without regard for their discomfort.

For example, in the context of personal relationships, abusers will want to have sex before the pursued individuals are ready, or want to see the object of their desire far more than desired by their partner. Abusers may want to move in together right away. When their partners protest, abusers ignore their protestations and simply pressure with more flattery, attention and words of love. Flooded with good feelings, the pursued individuals will override their discomfort and go along with the abuser's desire. These individuals dismiss their feeling of being bulldozed into doing something they didn't really want to do. They ignore the long-term implications of not doing what's right for them in order to please the abuser.

In an abusive cult, a similar situation occurs. Somewhere in the whirlwind beginning, recruits find themselves pressured to attend certain meetings, pitch in to help out with various events and made to choose between an activity of their own and an activity the cult requires. Recruits speak of feeling pressured by the niceness of the members and by the wonderful attention they are getting. The "love" that the recruits feel overshadows whatever misgivings or discomfort they have about what the cult is asking of them. It seems so benign at this stage. So the recruits acquiesce, despite their discomfort or hesitation.

The danger, then, of a whirlwind beginning, is not the whirlwind of attention in and of itself, but is how abusers profit from the "high" of this attention to pressure individuals into doing something they don't want to do. Since the pressure takes the form of "niceness" and dulcet tones, individuals allow it. They don't realize that this is but the beginning of an underlying dynamic: the profound disregard abusers of all types have for the rights and feelings of others.

## WARNING SIGN #2: POSSESSIVENESS POWER AND CONTROL

A violent domestic/dating relationship is always about power and control, the power of the abusers over the individuals they are involved with. Abusers don't see their partners as separate beings, with their own identity, rights, hopes and dreams. Abusers see their partners as possessions, things that belong to them and which exist for the sole purpose of pleasing them.

So too, in an abusive cult. Members are viewed as belonging to the cult. Their lives are seen as at the disposal of the cult, to do with what it will. The sole purpose of the members' existence is to fulfill the cult's purpose. Abusive cults and abusers are alike in their extreme possessiveness of individuals.

How does this show up? In the beginning of a violent domestic/dating relationship, abusers seek to control their partner's time, whom they see and under what circumstances. For example, abusers will either want to be with their partners all the time, or insist that their partner be available to them whenever they desire. Using "because I love you so much" as the reason the abusers want either the togetherness or the availability, partners will feel flattered and acquiesce. Abusers will say that they want to know where the partner is going, what the partner is doing and with through the day "because I worry about you, I want to keep you safe." Partners, flattered by someone caring that much, won't initially think about the controlling aspect of such behavior. To feel so wanted is very compelling.

In an abusive cult, recruits are asked to attend meetings or participate in events that demand more and more of their time. Recruits will be asked by cult members where they are going or what they are doing and with whom. They are pressured with such statements as "Oh, it's too bad you're going off to do X, we were all going on a picnic this afternoon. We'll miss you." Or, "Oh, how too bad. X is speaking and we will all be there--what a shame you have to miss it." The apparent interest in their well-being, the appreciation of their presence, distracts recruits from seeing the underlying control mechanism.

At the same time as abusers, or abusive cults are subtly controlling their victim's time, they are systematically excluding other individuals from that person's life. This is one of the most insidious and powerful ways in which control initially operates.

Abusers, for example, will denigrate their partners' friends or family, saying things like: "they're not good enough for you," or "they don't really care about you like I do," "they're never there for you, they just take from you" to discourage the partner from wanting to spend time with friends and family. Abusers will also evoke "I'm all you need" and "I'm the only one who really cares for you," which, when the partner is in the throes of the whirlwind beginning, seems true.

Abusive cults similarly sever individuals from family, other affiliations or social groups and any activities that involve non-cult members. In the beginning this may be done subtly. Members joke with recruits about "Oh, you don't want to see that old so-and-so" while encouraging the recruit to come along on some cult activity. A member may say "Oh, I'll come along with you," or "Mind if I come along?" and by their participation change the independent nature of the recruit's social occasion. Members will tell recruits that the cult alone really cares about their well-being, making statements such as: "The world is corrupt--it will only hurt you to be out there," or "Nobody cares about you like we do. What has your family/friend/church/club done for you lately?" Eventually, an abusive cult

will become more forceful and demand that recruits choose between the cult and their old life.

By systematically excluding all familiar support systems, abusers and cults cut individuals off from their normal sources of feedback and reality checking. In the absence of these sources, individuals have no way of gaining perspective on their current experience, no validation for who they are (apart from the relationship or cult), and are deprived of alternate points of view. Individuals are then truly isolated and alone, with nowhere to turn except to the abuser or abusive cult for understanding, comfort and love. Now the abuser or cult is truly in control.

As the relationship with an abuser or an abusive cult continues, the individual's life becomes increasingly restricted. The longer the relationship goes on, the more control abusers and abusive cults will exercise. Eventually, an abuser and an abusive cult will dictate everything the individual may or may not do, from major decisions such as where to work and live, to what happens to the individual's money, body and possessions, to such decisions as what clothes to wear and food to eat.

Interestingly enough, both abusers and abusive cults will justify their right to run the individual's life on the basis of their love and caring for the individual. The justification is based on "for your own good" or "for the good of the relationship/cult." Abusers will convince their partners that their dislike of the partner's friends is based on worldly wisdom, a greater knowledge of people, and that they are thus protecting the partner from harm -- all in the partner's best interests. An abusive cult will justify its demand that the recruit eschew all others but the cult ("in your own best interest") by pointing out how "the world is an evil place," and showing examples of how ordinary people have been horribly damaged in the world. Unfortunately, there are plenty of examples.

This approach is often difficult for individuals to resist, because it doesn't seem like manipulation. It just seems like someone appealing to their rational mind, helping them see something that they should have realized was good for them in the first place.

### WARNING SIGN #3: THE SWITCH

At some point early on in the development of violent domestic/dating relationships, the partners will say or do something to which the abuser will have an extreme reaction. For example, the partners will be a few minutes late to an appointment, and the abusers will scream, or turn to ice for days. The partners become completely disoriented. The difference between the loving, caring, gentle person an abuser was before the incident, and the screaming maniac the partner is now faced with makes no sense. The partner is right. The abuser's switch only makes sense relative to how the abuser defined the event, (and usually impossible for the partner to know). Abusers are disinterested in their partner's explanations of why a particular behavior occurred and are unwilling to discuss the sanity of their reactions. Abusers expect their partners to accept that they are justified in their extreme reaction.

The same "switch" becomes apparent in the development of recruits into an abusive cult. The recruits will have seen only the warm, positive, supportive side of cult members. At some point, recruits will say or do something the cult disapproves of, or they will witness what happens to a member who tries to walk outside the boundaries drawn by the cult. The recruit or member will be punished severely by the abusive cult for the disapproved word or action. The punishment will be excessive given the deed. Cult

members will justify the extreme punishment as "necessary discipline." There will be no discussion allowed as to why the punishment was reasonable or unreasonable. All cult members, including the member being punished, are expected to accept and fully agree with the punishment.

Although what abusers or abusive cults will define as unacceptable may change from day to day (much to the consternation of their partners or recruits), there are certain underlying principles that will trigger the "switch" that are common to both abusers and abusive cults.

#### Lack Of Constant Attention Equals Rejection

Abusers and abusive cults define events in terms of how those events are or are not rejecting of them. This can be expressed as: "Is this event or situation proof of the partners/cult members' 100 percent complete devotion, or does it demonstrate that their attention and devotion is less than 100 percent?" Anything less than 100 percent will be met with an extreme reaction from abusers and abusive cults. What behaviors specifically make up the proof of attention are solely defined by the abusers or abusive cults. These behaviors are not necessarily known to the individuals or cult members ahead of time, and change without notice.

#### Failure To Share All Equals Rejection

Abusers and abusive cults typically expect their partners or members to share their every thought and feeling upon request. Since both abusers and abusive cults feel they "own" the individual, neither grants their victims the privacy ordinarily accorded of those thoughts and feelings.

#### Failure to agree equals rejection

Abusers and abusive cults not only expect individuals to be willing to share their every thought and feeling, they also expect those thoughts and feelings to be unequivocally supportive and validating of them. The result is sacrificing truth.

The relationship between the individual and an abuser or abusive cult thus becomes more and more about the abuser or the cult's desires and demands. To stay in the relationship, individuals must accept and go along with the abuser/the cult's perceptions and definitions of the world, regardless of how differently the individual see things. To avoid the extreme emotional reactions of an abuser or the punishments of an abusive cult, individuals will sacrifice their own truth, giving up increasingly larger portions of their identity as the relationship continues.

No wonder it is so difficult for individuals to leave relationships with abusers or abusive cults. As such relationships continue, individuals become drained of all sense of self, leaving them devoid of the emotional and psychological wherewithal to support independent action.

#### WARNING SIGN #4: BLAME

Abusers consistently blame others for whatever goes wrong in their world. Abusers also blame others for their unhappy feelings and for their inappropriate behavior. Even if at some later point abusers express remorse, they do not take responsibility for their behavior. Regardless of the circumstances, it is always somebody else's fault if abusers feel unhappy or angry. Abusers will, for example, blame their partners if they had a bad day at work, a rotten time in traffic, got fired, have an ingrown toenail, or failed to win the lottery. The

obvious lack of rational connection between their partner's behavior and the abuser's life events is irrelevant. To an abuser, whatever goes wrong is the partner's fault.

So too, in an abusive cult, members are blamed for anything that goes wrong. If, for example, the cult isn't raising enough money, it's the members' fault. The fact that the cult may be going about fund-raising ineffectively, or simply may not be attractive to those who have money to give are not considered. If recruits don't understand a teaching, it's their fault for not having enough faith, brains or willingness. It is never the cult's fault for possibly being an inept teacher or having untenable teachings. If members dispute or disagree with the philosophy or discipline of an abusive cult, the cult will attack them as being corrupt, betrayers or enemies.

Abusers also blame their partners for the partner's unhappiness. If, for example, the partner expresses loneliness because the abuser is out every night, the abuser will blame the partner for being no "fun" and therefore causing the abuser's nightly absence. Abusers thus absolve themselves of all responsibility. If recruits are depressed by the severing all family ties, for example, an abusive cult will blame the recruits for their depression, saying that clearly they aren't truly one of the worthy, otherwise the severing of all ties would be cause for rejoicing. In neither case will there be compassion for the individual, nor sharing of responsibility or even discussion of possible shared responsibility. Whatever goes wrong in the individual's life is fully the individual's responsibility.

Recruits speak of being made to feel guilty, made to feel that there is something lacking in themselves when things go wrong. They are made to feel that they are just not good enough for the cult. Individuals who have been involved in violent domestic or dating relationships voice these same feelings. Both recruits and individuals involved in violent domestic/dating relationships will accept the blame and guilt, not because they are weak or deficient beings, but because the pain of what is happening is too great to bear.

Individuals in violent domestic/dating relationship don't want their dream to come crashing down. They don't want to believe that the abuser, who has been so loving and attentive in the beginning of the relationship, could possibly also be a cruel, irrational and unloving person. That's just too painful. So when abusers tells their partners, for example, that they are upset and it is their partner's fault, the partner is only too willing to accept the blame.

At least if it's their fault, partners feel that they can maybe do something to fix the situation, and perhaps they can have their blissful relationship back. So too, when recruits incur the wrath of an abusive cult for not raising sufficient funds, or failing to go along with the "party line," too often the recruit is willing to accept the blame, their hope being that if they do raise enough funds, for example, or toe the "party line," then all will be well once again. Longing to return to their original happiness, that euphoric whirlwind beginning, individuals often prefer to accept the blame.

#### WARNING SIGN #5: VERBAL ABUSE WORDS THAT HURT

In the development of a violent domestic or dating relationship there is a predictable sequence: the physical violence that is to come later in the relationship is always preceded by other types of hurtful behaviors. The most common is verbal abuse. Verbal abuse comes in all shapes and sizes, from the most easily recognizable insults of the

"bitch/bastard" variety, to indirect criticisms, general negativity, and demeaning put-downs. Abusers are verbally abusive without regard to the pain it causes. They are as free with cutting words as they will later be with fists and kicks.

In abusive cults, verbal abuse is common. Such abuse takes the form of reprimands, frequently in front of other members, shaming (calling the member defective, not good enough), and name-calling. A recruit witnessing the verbal abusing of a member for the first time will generally conclude such abuse is justified. Surely the member must have done something terribly wrong to merit the harsh words. Only later will the recruit realize that verbal abuse does not need to be merited to be meted out; it is used as a control mechanism and that various other types of physical abuse will be used later on.

#### WARNING SIGN #6: INSENSITIVITY LACK OF CARING FOR THE WELL-BEING OF OTHERS

Long before abusers engage in violence towards their partner, their disposition to do so shows up in other areas. Most often, abusers' show their true colors as they willfully neglect the well-being of children, animals and plants. They disregard or destroy the property of others. Abusers will generally have no concern for the pain and suffering in the world, even in their immediate world. If, for example, a partner's parent is ailing, and the partner wants to visit the parent in the hospital, the abuser will say "What for? Don't they have a doctor?" and be aggravated by the partner's wish. If, for example, abusers acquire a pet, they will usually lose interest in the animal after a brief initial infatuation, and fail to attend to the animal's needs, oblivious (and usually annoyed by) to the animal's obviously failing condition.

Long before recruits suffer violence at the hands of an abusive cult, the cult has demonstrated a cold and unfeeling attitude towards others. Whether they talk of "brotherly love" or not, abusive cults have in common a total lack of compassion for the suffering of those they consider the unenlightened, the unbelievers, or the ubiquitous "them." Much as terrorists have no regard for the suffering of those they terrorize, abusive cults have no regard for the fate of those outside the cult. What happens, for example, to their recruits' families when the cult demands that the recruits sever all ties--the emotional upheaval, loss and grief that the families may suffer--is of no consequence to an abusive cult. What happens, for example, to the millions of people who will be left behind when the world ends or a savior transports the cult members skyward, is irrelevant to an abusive cult.

This warning sign is one of the most telling. No matter how much they cherish you in the beginning, people who can ignore the suffering of those around them--whether they cause the suffering or not--will eventually ignore yours.

#### WARNING SIGN #7: PAST AND PRESENT VIOLENCE THE ALARM GOES UNHEEDED

To abusers, violence is an acceptable response to stress and frustration. To abusive cults, violence is an acceptable response to failure to obey by recruits or members. In both cases, violence is part of the larger pattern of power and control over others as the primary way of interacting with a partner or members. The use of force or any display of physical violence toward a partner in a relationship is the single most reliable predictor of a violent domestic/dating relationship. The use of force or any display of physical violence toward a member or recruit is the single most reliable predictor of an abusive cult.

Physical violence in abusive relationships can be either direct or indirect. Direct is "hands-on" force: shoving, hitting, pinning down, pulling or pushing a body part and kicking. Indirect is violence that does not involve laying a hand on the individual: throwing objects, tearing up a room, kicking objects, walking a person into a wall or other dangerous area, locking a person in or confining a person to a room or area, or depriving a person of sleep, food, water or other essentials. Both kinds of violence are usually used in combination with threats of future or further violence. Many individuals fail to recognize indirect physical violence for physical force that it is.

Even if they do recognize the use of physical force, individuals in an abusive relationship, be that with another person or a cult, are rarely willing to see the violence for what it is. They collude with the abuser/abusive cult in whitewashing the violence, thus giving tacit permission to continue the abuse. Individuals don't do this because they are stupid or masochistic, individuals collude in minimizing the abuse because the horror of what is happening to them is too great to bear.

One of the most wonderful things about a close relationship with a person or a group is the feeling of safety inherent to the relationship. Given the precarious nature of the world we live in, such a relationship often provides the only place people feel truly safe and secure.

When abusers/abusive cults do something to shatter the safety, the individuals or cult members are in shock. They don't want to believe it is happening. they don't want to admit, especially not to themselves, that the safe haven they thought they'd found is a sham. That giving love to this person or cult means being hurt, and that whatever the abuser calls "caring" doesn't include caring about the individual's well-being.

The individual or cult member wants the fairytale back, those wonderful three months or so at the beginning of the relationship when it all felt so magical. So the individual will deny and discount the violence, hoping to make it all "go away," and never really addressing the source of the violence or dealing with it realistically.

The individual will seek to rationalize the behavior, and come up with "reasons" to make the unacceptable acceptable. Recruits, for example, will seek to rationalize the sleep deprivation imposed by an abusive cult as an understandable, albeit challenging, way to shake up old outdated ways of being and believing, so as to make way for the enlightened new ways. Partners, for example, will rationalize their abuser's throwing things at them as an understandable, although painful, response to a stressful day at work. Both deny the obvious, that neither sleep deprivation nor throwing things are necessary ways to deal with a problem.

Another way individuals attempt to make the violence "go away" is to discount it, make it appear less violent and less hurtful than it really is. "Well my partner didn't hit me, so it wasn't violence," is a statement often heard from both men and women. In many instances, victims of domestic violence discount anything short of outright battering. Recruits, for example, will discount being confined to a small room without food or water for hours as "necessary discipline," ignoring the cruelty of the act. Both individuals in domestic/dating abusive relationships and recruits in abusive cults seek to protect themselves from the awfulness of recognizing that violence has occurred by pretending it was less than it was.

Past violence is the surest predictor of future violence. When



individuals in domestic/dating relationships and recruits in abusive cults either hear of violence towards someone else, they often think "Oh, that could never happen to me. The other person must have done something awful to deserve that. My partner/cult leader would never be violent like that." Not so. Although people certainly can and do change, past violence still remains the number one predictor of future violence. Just as callousness towards the suffering of others will eventually become callousness towards the individual, so too will violence towards others eventually become violence towards the individual.

## RESPONSE TO THE WARNING SIGNS

Given the similarity of warning signs shared by both violent domestic/dating relationships and abusive cults, one set of "do's and don'ts" can help people steer clear from involvement with either kind of abuse. These are surprisingly few and simple, yet very powerful. The "do's and don'ts" don't require a total revamp of a person's self-esteem, nor do they require that one go about life with a suspicious distrusting mindset. All they require is a willingness to stop, look and listen more closely and deeply before entering a relationship with either a person or a group.

## THE DO'S AND DON'TS

**DO** take your time in getting involved. Only over time do people and groups reveal who they truly are.

**DO** listen to your feelings. If something feels "too soon" for you, or "not quite right" for you, respect those feelings.

**DO** speak your truth. Be true to yourself. Express your feelings, don't hide or minimize them.

**DO** pay attention to how the other person/s respond to your feelings of discomfort. If they fail to totally respect your feelings, and try to pressure you in any way despite your discomfort, pay attention! You are probably involved with an abuser/abusive cult.

**DON'T** let yourself be pressured by someone else's time frame, needs, desires or demands.

**DON'T** be afraid to say "No." Saying "No" to something that just feels a little "off" to you in the beginning may save your life in the end.

**DO** keep seeing your friends and family on a regular basis, privately, as you would have before meeting the new person or group. Your friends and family are your lifeline to what's real.

**DO** maintain your preferred lifestyle. Only make those changes that would still feel right for you even if the person or group disappeared from your life.

**DO** pay attention to the person or group's reaction to things they don't like. Notice if those reactions seem out of proportion to the event itself. Use your common sense. When in doubt, talk it over with friends and family.

**DON'T** accept blame just because it's aimed your way. Think about your share of responsibility. Talk the situation over with friends or family, ask for honest feedback on what portion of the situation is your responsibility, and which isn't.

**DON'T** put up with verbal abuse. Do not accept to live in a climate of negativity, criticism, harsh words, put downs or other demeaning language.

**DO** notice how the person or group thinks of and/or treats others and the world around them. However the person or group treats the world at large, is how they will end up treating you.

**DON'T** dismiss, ignore or deny a single act of direct or indirect violence, whether it's aimed at you or at another. Get professional help IMMEDIATELY. None of us deserve physical violence, ever, regardless of the rationale.

The world is likely to remain chaotic and unsettling for a long while. There are wonderful safe harbors along the way, enough good people with whom to have fulfilling friendships and mate-ships, enough good groups to belong to which empower and support every member, to provide security and comfort to each of us through the chaos. The existence of abuse, individual or collective, is not a good reason to avoid relationships. By being forearmed with the warning signs of an abusive relationship and how to respond to them, we can go forward, respecting our unique individuality, living life peacefully, in freedom and without fear. Relationships are too precious and too wonderful to forego because of the possibility of abuse.

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