

CLINICAL ASSESSMENT OF ADOLESCENTS INVOLVED IN SATANISM

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ABSTRACT

Satanism is a destructive religion that promises power, dominance, and gratification to its practitioners. Unfortunately, some adolescents are seduced by these promises, often because they feel alienated, alone, angry, and desperate. This article explores the psychosocial needs of adolescents that are often met by participation in Satanic worship. Gratification of these needs, when met, may make leaving the cult a difficult and lengthy process. Included is a method for determining the adolescents' level of involvement and an assessment strategy for the therapeutic evaluation process. A brief overview of clinical intervention is also discussed. An adolescent who practices Satanism recently said to the author, "I was a throwaway kid. Nobody wanted me and I needed a place to belong. I had a lust for power, and I needed to find a place where my violence was acceptable." This teenager is one of a growing number who feel empty and alienated, and may be searching for an identity and a place to belong. Unfortunately, some adolescents are fulfilling a number of their needs by aligning with deviant subcultures, one of which is Satanism. Satanism is devil worship, a recognition of Satan as the charismatic being who is honored and exalted by his followers. Satan and his demons are considered to be all-powerful and will extend their power to those who choose them as their supreme deity. It is a religion that advocates violence, hatred, and revenge. In the adolescent culture, many teens learn about Satanism from peers, books, the media, and from heavy metal bands. Most teens initially lack sophistication when practicing Satanism and make it up as they go along (Magic, A Deadly Solution, 1985). Curran (1989) describes Satanism as "a hole in the ground that some adolescents stumble into because they have been wandering desperate, angry and alone . . . and we should wonder less about why the hole was there than why these young people are wandering alone in the dark" (p. 13). Therefore, it is important to understand the needs of adolescents that frequently are met by Satanism.

Adolescent Needs Met by Satanic Involvement

When these psychosocial needs are met, teens' allegiance to the cult is often reinforced, thus making separation much more difficult.

Sense of belonging. Many adolescents who practice Satanism do so out of a need to belong and to address feelings of alienation and detachment from friends, family, and community.

Bronfenbrenner (1986) describes social alienation as a serious threat to the successful resolution of an adolescent's identity crisis. Because a sense of belonging is crucial to identity formation, teens struggle to find a place to belong (Levine, 1979). Unfortunately, some young people turn to deviant subcultures. Teenage involvement in Satanism has been termed an immediate antidote for loneliness (Curran, 1989) and a possible solution to alienation and neglect.

Mastery and structure. Adolescents require structure, order, and limits, which Satanism provides. Satanism is based on nine Satanic statements which furnish tangible principles for practice (LaVey, 1969). Since a sense of mastery and efficacy are integral to identity formation and development of a healthy sense of self, an adolescent may derive these from practicing Satanic rituals.

Power and Control. Satanism is purported by its users to be a source of great power, one that

offers a "quick fix" to their problems. Some Satanic rituals are performed as a means of deriving that power. Satanists believe that there is power and energy within the souls and bodies of animals and humans which is released through torture and death and subsequently absorbed by the practitioner (America's Best Kept Secret, 1986).

Rebellion. Adolescent rebellion is considered by many as a normal developmental process and many teenagers experiment with different values and lifestyles. Satanism represents a hostile and extreme form of rebellion. Curran (1989) describes it as an irreverent rebellion against the accepted order which provides a way to escape conformity and the values of the established society. For many adolescents, Satanism is a violent and passionate form of rebellion that is acted out through rituals, incantations, spells, and ceremonies that is most often directed at parents and society.

Curiosity and relief from boredom. Teenagers are fascinated with magic and the supernatural. Often, merely out of curiosity, teenagers will seek to learn about the occult and various forms of magic. Satanism also provides an escape from boredom and conformity since it is a belief system that is radically different from the social mainstream.

Self-esteem. It is generally believed that the achievement of a clear sense of identity is a critical task of adolescence (Lloyd, 1985). Thus, many adolescents join cults at a time when their self-esteem is low, and once involved, their self-esteem may be heightened by a sense of mastery and belonging. This rise in self-esteem provides positive reinforcement for their behavior, and is likely to motivate further involvement.

Validation of anger and violence. Since a sense of alienation may foster feelings of anger and hostility, Satanism, by advocating revenge, encourages rage and the attainment of power through violent means. Thus, some teenagers find Satanic involvement a safe refuge for their hostility because it is encouraged and condoned.

Continuum of Deviant Cultism

The author has developed a Continuum of Deviant Cultism based on the patterns of drug using behavior described in the second report of the National Commission on Marijuana and Drug Abuse (1973). The continuum covers a range of subjects from those who have never participated in Satanism to those who are seriously involved.

Experimental use. Here experimental use of Satanism is defined as "dabbling." Adolescents who dabble are often introduced to Satanism at a social gathering of friends. Case example: Eric was a dabbler who began experimenting with Satanism when he attended a Halloween party. His friends suggested they go to a graveyard and perform a seance to summon Satan and his minions.

Eric participated, but was so frightened, he did not continue to pursue this type of activity. Such dabbling usually does not lead to deep involvement. Thus, it does not adversely affect psychosocial development, or lead to further exploration.

Social/recreational use. Social/recreational use of Satanism is defined as a deeper fascination with magic and the occult. The adolescent begins to find time to practice magic and learn about rituals and ceremonies. Case example: Adam often loitered near a teen center where devil worshippers were known to frequent. He had been introduced to them a week earlier by a friend. After reading about demon possession and ritualized human dismemberment, Adam became more curious and approached the cult members to inquire about attending a ritual.

At this stage, adolescents begin to seek opportunities for practicing their craft. Although they remain in the category of "wannabe's," they may develop psychosocial complications. However, most do not develop long-standing problems if the Satanic practice is discontinued.

Situational use. Satanic practice for the situational user has become a tool for coping with life's stressful situations. Adolescents at this stage are striving to learn more about Satanism and to rely on its practice to ease their discontent and to resolve specific conflicts. Case example: Nikki had been dabbling in the black arts for more than a year when she began using rituals and spells to seek revenge on her boyfriend for breaking up with her. Having lacked the skills necessary for asserting herself during the break-up, she resorted to Satanism to pursue reprisal.

Nikki used Satanism to deal with uncomfortable feelings and circumstances. If clinical intervention is implemented at this stage, the chances for successful recovery are usually good.

Intensified use. Once a teenager advances beyond situational use and moves into intensified use, treatment and recovery become more difficult. At this stage, adolescents are very deeply involved in Satanism, and formal cult initiation has almost always occurred. Case example: Allen was initiated by attending a ceremony that highlighted his own "debaptism," a rite performed to rid him of the Holy Spirit that had come into him during his Christian baptism. During the debaptism, he was forced to drink a mixture of blood, semen, and urine to force the "good spirits" out of him, thus allowing the demons to enter his body. He entered into a written contract swearing him to secrecy and pledging his allegiance to the cult. In addition, Allen committed a burglary that was witnessed by cult members, making it difficult for him to leave the group. He was told that if he tried to leave, the police would be notified of his crime.

By the time a teenager is this fully involved, other forms of delinquent behaviors such as truancy, petty theft, vandalism, and drug abuse become prevalent.

Compulsive use. At the compulsive stage, secretiveness increases as a direct result of the growing level of offensive activity. Case example: Cory was heavily involved with Satanism and performed rituals that summoned demons thought to enhance power and sexual energy. He would mutilate a small animal, make multiple superficial cuts all over his own body, and then lie in a bathtub of hot water. He would lie there for hours in his own blood while sexually manipulating the animal and chanting to Satan. Cory had dropped out of school following numerous suspensions and was seriously chemically dependent.

At this stage, psychosocial development may be severely compromised, treatment is extremely difficult and lengthy, and the prognosis is often poor. It is important to understand that these patterns are descriptive in nature and do not necessarily imply that a youth will progress through these stages of deepening involvement. Some youths will remain in the lower stages, some may progress over a long period of time, while others may become deeply involved from the start and progress rapidly to the more serious stage.

Chronic addiction. While the term "chronic addiction" may not precisely define the level of Satanic involvement occurring at this final stage, it is used because it is consistent with the Drug Abuse Continuum (1973). At this stage, Satanism has clearly become a way of life, and leaving the cult is nearly impossible without therapeutic intervention. This level of involvement may include sacrificial human offerings (Wertheim, 1989; Young et al., 1991), or one's own suicide as a way of pledging unequivocal allegiance to Satan (Tennant-Clark, Fritz, & Beauvais, 1989). Young et al. (1991) notes an account of an adolescent who had been serially raped by male cult members when she was 13 years old, resulting in pregnancy. After premature induction of labor, she was forced to assist in her infant's sacrifice during a Satanic ritual. She also recalled two more pregnancies terminated by forced abortion where the fetuses were reportedly dismembered and

consumed during subsequent rituals. While gruesome accounts like these are extreme, they continue to be reported (Snowden, 1988; VanBenschoten, 1990; Young et al., 1991). Obviously adolescents at this level of involvement are seriously compromised psychologically and require extensive treatment. Their prognosis for a full recovery is very poor.

Assessment of Adolescents Involved with Satanism

As an adolescent becomes more involved with Satanism, withdrawal from normative society increases, secretiveness intensifies, and antisocial behaviors become more prevalent. There is a change in peer group, activities, and vocabulary. Drug and alcohol abuse, truancy, violent acts, family conflicts, and legal problems escalate. Serious cult members are often from disengaged, chaotic family systems, and lack the capacity to establish and maintain intimate and flexible relationships with peers. Their outlook on life may be dismal as they are frequently preoccupied with darkness, evil, and violence. Many cult-involved teens appear hopeless and harbor negative feelings about the future. Many lose their sense of humor and become deeply depressed. There are frequent episodes of suicidal ideation often accompanied by self-mutilation and/or blood-letting of themselves, animals, or both.

General Guidelines for Clinical Intervention

In order to treat an adolescent who is involved in Satanism, the clinician must be knowledgeable of precipitating factors. It is critical to focus therapy on the psychosocial needs being met rather than on attempting to understand the intricate details of the Satanic practice itself. Addressing the underlining motivators keeps therapy manageable and allows the clinician to address such fundamental issues as self-esteem, sense of belonging, and the need for structure (Clark, 1992).

It is useful to ask when the cult activity began because it is almost always preceded by a significant event. Involving the family is often effective, but this depends on the individual case. This author has had success in involving the family once a solid therapeutic alliance had been established with the adolescent and after he had demonstrated a desire to break loose from his cult activities. Therapy must include helping the teen develop reliable and healthy alternatives to both his participation in Satanism and probable substance abuse. Active involvement by the therapist is required to assist the adolescent with problem-solving and finding new ways of coping.

Occasionally an adolescent is so disturbed that hospitalization is required. Without the structure and safety of the inpatient therapeutic milieu, the adolescent may become increasingly self-destructive. Hospitalization provides resolution of a crisis, stabilization, and an opportunity to effect change. Many of these adolescents have long-standing problems that require continued outpatient therapy and follow-up long after hospitalization has ended.

CONCLUSIONS

While involvement in Satanism is a problem for teenagers, it is important to understand that the Satanic experience is usually an attempt to regain control, frequently in response to feelings of alienation, poor attachment, and lowered self-esteem. Adolescents who have been neglected, abused or unloved often act out violently. Thus they may be attracted to Satanism which is based on violence, power, and destruction. Clinicians dealing with these teens, must be knowledgeable and empathic about these issues and sophisticated in the application of treatment methods.

DIAGRAM: MODEL 1. CONTINUUM OF DEVIANT CULTISM

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