

Avoiding Unhealthy Religious Organizations

Stanford | Office for Religious & Spiritual Life



Office for Religious & Spiritual Life

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Religion is a powerful force. Most of the time religious organizations **promote healthy habits that encourage spiritual growth and personal well being.** However, sometimes, religious organizations can encourage practitioners to engage in unhealthy religious behaviors.

Everyone is capable of being persuaded to do something they did not want to do, and that susceptibility is what these groups **use to increasingly control people's thoughts and lives.** Unhealthy religious activities do not start with something dramatic, but rather with incremental efforts.

New students and others experiencing major life transitions are often especially vulnerable to unhealthy religious groups. These groups often seem extremely friendly. They provide many opportunities for community and seem to create stability in a time of change. However, unlike healthy spiritual and ethical communities, these groups do not ultimately support students' intellectual freedom, academic success, physical and mental health. Unhealthy religious organizations often undermine positive relationships with family and friends.



Stanford University values the positive role of religious and spiritual life in higher education as a balancing complement to the numerous challenges one faces on campus and in life. Therefore, the Office for Religious & Spiritual Life sponsors diverse religious student organizations. Stanford Associated Religions is a coalition of over 30 recognized student organizations that provide healthy spiritual life for our campus community. We strongly encourage students to begin their exploration for religious and philosophical communities with those listed on the Office for Religious & Spiritual Life website (orsl.stanford.edu) or by contacting our Student Engagement Director.

Find Support

If you think you or someone you know is involved in an Unhealthy Religious Organization, then please consider these resources:

Office for Religious and Spiritual Life

Dean Tiffany Steinwert
tsteinwe@stanford.edu

Director of Student Engagement
Colleen Hallagan Preuninger
cpreunin@stanford.edu

Confidential ORSL Spiritual Care Support
spiritualcare@stanford.edu

Counseling and Psychological Services
Counseling Center
650-723-3785

Confidential Support Team (CST)
650-725-9955

Non-Emergency Campus Police
650-329-2413

How to Avoid Unhealthy Religious Organizations

- Explore recognized spiritual or philosophical student groups through the Office for Religious & Spiritual Life.
- Talk to people with different worldviews and maintain relationships with people of different perspectives.
- Explore and stay involved in multiple groups and activities.
- Report any group on campus you think might be an unhealthy religious organization to the Dean of the Office for Religious & Spiritual Life.



Recognizing Unhealthy Religious Organizations

Unhealthy religious organizations can be hard to recognize at first, and there is a spectrum in the aggressiveness of these groups' tactics. Some groups seem to share some of the beliefs or features of mainstream religion groups – ***the issue is not their beliefs per se, but their emotionally abusive and destructive practices.*** These groups seek to create an all-or-nothing reality and a situation in which people are totally dependent on the group in every way – spiritually, socially, romantically, and financially.

Some Characteristics of Unhealthy Religious Groups

LACK OF FORMAL RECOGNITION: The guidelines that govern recognized religious and philosophical communities at Stanford University are put in place to protect your wellbeing. All religious organizations on campus must be recognized by the Office for Religious & Spiritual Life and follow the policies outlined by Office of Student Engagement (OSE). Groups that refuse to comply with university policies or that are not connected with university structures should raise questions.

DECEPTIVENESS OR MISINFORMATION: Unhealthy religious groups often do not provide clear, complete, or honest information about themselves. Their affiliations, practices, and expectations may not be fully transparent. They may not provide complete details about their activities, activities may turn out differently from what was publicized, and information about leadership, resources, etc. may not be clear.

OUTREACH EXCEEDS YOUR COMFORT LEVEL: Unhealthy religious groups generally appear very friendly and seek to become instant friends with you. Their outreach may be uncomfortable in frequency, pressure, not taking “no” for an answer, or occurring in methods, times, and places that are inappropriate (e.g., residence halls). You may be asked or expected to recruit others to the group as your primary goal before you are really involved.

INAPPROPRIATE ADVISING/MENTORING: Unhealthy religious groups usually involve “advising,” mentoring, or supervision that is intense and seeks to pressure and control rather than empower students. Advisors may have little formal training, credentials, or experience. They may make you feel like you are being watched and judged. They may pry into your personal life for private information (sexual, financial, etc.) that can later be used to control you. They may seek inappropriate influence over your life, regarding dating, romance, or sexual behavior. They may request excessive financial contributions and jeopardize your future independence.

ABSOLUTISM: Unhealthy religious groups discourage doubts, differences of opinion, criticism, and research. They may present only one right way to think and claim to have all the answers. They may demand rigid loyalty, present issues in terms of either-or thinking (e.g. saved or unsaved, with us or against us), and suggest catastrophic consequences for difference or disobedience such as withdrawal of relationship or graphic eternal suffering.

SEPARATION: Unhealthy religious groups may seek to separate you from your family and friends and encourage you to only be friends with and date other members of the group. They may seek a disproportionate amount of your time and attention so that you are not able to be involved in relationships or activities beyond the group. They may disparage, discredit, or promote prejudice against people who are not members of the group.

MAJOR CHANGES: Unhealthy religious groups may pressure you to make major life changes, such as cutting off relationships with family and friends, changing your major, disregarding grades and exams, and dropping out of or taking time off from school. These practices are meant to destabilize your connections to your support network and make you less self-sufficient and more dependent. They may make it hard for you to leave easily.

EMOTIONAL DISTRESS: Unhealthy religious group activities may leave you feeling chronically bad. You may experience lower self-esteem and/or higher levels of anxiety, depression, unworthiness and shame. Your participation may make you feel fatigued, disempowered, and trapped.

DENIAL: Unhealthy religious groups often deny being unhealthy even though they are widely regarded as such. They often disparage people who suggest they might be unhealthy as the enemy.

EXTREME LEVELS OF COMMITMENT: Unhealthy religious organizations may make high demands of your time or resources. They may require multiple meetings each week or a regular payment of money.