

What Everyone Ought To Know About Brainwashing

Description

What Is Brainwashing?

Brainwashing is a manipulative set of action that seek to control the brain. The goal is typically to reduce independent, rational, and selfish thought, and instead to introduce new ideas that are beneficial to another party. Brainwashing techniques are best seen as a subset of [manipulation](#). Brainwashing seems similar to persuasion but is typically differentiated by the concept of willingness. Persuasion usually assumes a person is willingly changing their mind while brainwashing implies some element of coercion.

[Cults](#), businesses, governments, and other social groups use various forms of brainwashing. See this article for more on the [secrets of cult indoctrination](#).

Some argue that brainwashing is completely made up. There is some debate over the term itself and what should be called brainwashing versus persuasion. But some forms of coercive persuasion do work. The American Psychological Association had a task force that researched brainwashing in relation to cults. It said "[techniques can compromise individual freedoms...](#)" That being said you might look more at marketing and movie making if you want to understand brainwashing techniques that are most effective today.

Who Is Susceptible To Brainwashing?

There are some [studies](#) that show characteristics that make a person more susceptible to joining cults. While this is not a one to one correlation with brainwashing, cults often prey on people who would also be vulnerable to brainwashing. This gives us some small view into what could make a person more susceptible to brainwashing. Variables that increase a person's likelihood to be recruited by a cult include the following:

1. generalized ego weakness or emotional vulnerability
2. propensities toward dissociative states (dissociative disorder leads people to escape reality in various ways)
3. tenuous, deteriorated, or nonexistent family relations or support systems
4. inadequate means of dealing with exigencies of survival
5. history of severe child abuse or neglect
6. exposure to idiosyncratic or eccentric family patterns
7. proclivities toward or abuse of controlled substances
8. unmanageable and debilitating situations stress and crises
9. intolerable socioeconomic conditions

Additionally people who are less skeptical, assertive, and more agreeable might be at risk for being brainwashed. **Weaknesses** can also cause someone to be more likely to be taken advantage of in

general include desire for validation, lack of stable identity, mental disorders, and low self worth.

How To Know If Someone Is Brainwashed (Signs)

There are a few ways to know someone is brainwashed. These don't come from studies but rather are inferred from what we know about cults and brainwashing.

- They don't question what is being said.
- They don't push back when something definitely hurts their interests.
- Excessive group think or lack of a desire to express individuality.
- Study how brainwashing and cults work by looking at the steps below. Look out for those steps.

Brainwashing Examples

In Advertising And Marketing

- Repetition, a technique commonly used in many types of persuasion is common **in advertising**. If you see something enough it builds awareness and increases your chances of purchasing.
- **The news** uses brainwashing frequently when they fear monger, character assassinate, rewrite history, or scapegoat groups. Most major news organizations have done at least some of these things.
- **Design techniques** are used to increase [purchasing](#) and funnel user behavior towards [certain actions](#).

In Religion

- Many religions use elements of brainwashing. Repetition, social pressure, shaming individuality, and attacking those who question leaders are common practices.

In The Workplace

- The notion of **the workplace "Family"** is incredibly manipulative. Workers are taught to sacrifice for the common goal of the family, but are then disposed with little remorse. [Watch this channel if you think your work mates are your family](#). This is repeated over and over again. Those who disagree are shamed and isolated.

In Relationships

- Your partner tries to make you feel guilty and attacks your self esteem via insults, criticism, and guilt tripping.
- They gaslight you when you try to talk to them about issues. This typically involves emphatically denying it happened.

In The Military (Brainwashing techniques)

- The military commonly uses exhaustion and other personal attacks to break down recruits. They do this with the purpose of “building them back up stronger.” This is a lower form of brainwashing but still includes some elements. See [hell week and basic training](#). **They isolate people from their families, destabilize their minds, remove the ability to access information that might provide counter viewpoints, restrict food access, increase physical exertion sometimes to exhaustion, and more.**
- Korean War American POWs were subjected to incremental brainwashing. Some eventually moved back to the area after the war. They were asked first to simply admit that the USA wasn't perfect. Then they were asked to do increasingly more things until they were giving speeches publicly denouncing the USA. See the foot in the door technique and other [compliance gaining strategies here](#). See the book at the bottom of the page for more information. Keep in mind that their thinking eventually returned to normal.

How Brainwashing Works

In general, the goal of brainwashing is to **break someone down and then rebuild them**. Breaking down someone can be as coercive as physical attacks, isolation, and insults. But it can also be as simple as showing someone friendship and connection. The goal is to open people's minds for a new way of looking at the world. This step sometimes involves the hurt then help technique.

Next the person is presented with persuasive arguments both verbally and socially. This can be coercive like shaming and isolation, or it can be positive like appeals to authority, social [altercasting](#), and more. The goal is to implant a new ideology that leads the person to act in a certain way.

See this [article](#) for more.

Subconscious Brainwashing

Brainwashing at some level takes place in the subconscious. There are three examples of subconscious brainwashing we included. First takes place in marketing or propaganda, the second is discussed in a book called persuasion, the final one is seen to some degree in hypnosis.

Marketing and propaganda attempt to influence people without being noticed. This can be as simple as selecting which things are seen on a person's social media, to as complicated as news organizations scapegoating an individual for a negative public event. Repetition is used in marketing to create brand awareness but also to persuade. [Propaganda](#) often involves reframing how people approach an idea which is a somewhat benign application of a brainwashing technique. We will discuss more about [framing](#) next.

A book called [PreSuasion](#) by Cialdini talks about how some events can influence how people react to other events. For example, asking people if they thought of themselves as helpful before asking them to complete a survey yielded more participants. Describing crime as a monster makes them more likely to support more punitive measures of law enforcement. These tricks can be applied to subconsciously brainwash someone if done correctly. See this article about frames and how they [control](#) how we think about things.

Some might say hypnosis can lead to brainwashing. Hypnosis does work in certain situations, namely when a person is highly suggestible and willing. Situations of trust like this could be abused in order to subconsciously brainwash someone towards an idea. Here is a decent article about what we do know about [hypnosis](#).

How To Undo Brainwashing (Deprogramming)

Deprogramming is a process used to 'fix' someone who is brainwashed. Keep in mind that the text below is referring to why people leave cults. It doesn't directly focus on brainwashing, but we do know from other studies that brainwashing (mind control attempts) are typically part of cult leadership tactics. Our goal here is to simply provide ideas for further research.

First it is important to understand the main reason people leave groups like cults that brainwash. [People leave because of disillusionment](#). This is when a person starts thinking something is not as good as they thought it would be. It typically happens after a person has had a period of deep reflection. The study found that people didn't leave because outside interventions or anti cult informational groups.

This gives us one key to undoing brainwashing. People often enter manipulative situations because they believe the result is better than what they are currently experiencing. They are disenchanted with their lives and want something better. Thus the key to undoing this is to [help people identify what missing element of their life that drove them to the manipulative situation](#) in the first place. For example they might feel that they have no sense of purpose or that they can never get ahead in the current world. Show them they can find a job, develop skills, and be well paid.

Another important element is helping the person recognize the manipulative tactics used. They must understand what happened to them, why it was bad, and what tactics were used.

Finally they can help mobilize the person's social support group or help them build a new one.

How Long Does It Take To Undo Brainwashing? Can It Be Undone?

There is no clear timeline that says how long for the full effects of brainwashing to be undone. Brainwashing can be undone though, but a person's psychology, history, and other characteristics will effect how long it takes for it to be undone. One example of brainwashing being undone was what happened to the Korean POWs who returned to the States after the war. Many of their brainwashed compatriots [returned to normal](#) after a period of time.

How To Brainwash Someone

The psychiatrist Robert J Lifton wrote a book on [Brainwashing](#). The following examples below come from the book.

8 Criteria For Thought Reform

1. Milieu Control – controlling information and communication. Often involves isolation from support

- groups.
2. Mystical Manipulation – Making experiences seem spontaneous when they are actually orchestrated. These experiences make the leaders appear more divine.
 3. Purity Demands – The world is portrayed as wrong and a member of the out group the person must fight. [Guilt and shame](#) are instantiated in this step and they are explained by the wrongness of the world.
 4. Confession – sins are confessed and then exploited by the powerful.
 5. Sacred Science – the groups narrative for reaching the ultimate truth cannot be questioned. Neither can the leader.
 6. Loading the Language – the group reinterprets and redefines terms so as to separate itself from the outside world. The words often are meant to stop the people from thinking and conform.
 7. Doctrine over person – individuality is shamed and subordinated to the group and the group narrative.
 8. Dispensing of Existence – the group decides who is talked about and who isn't. Leave and they will pretend you don't exist.

Lifton's Brainwashing Steps

This section provides one set of steps for brainwashing someone into **doing what they want** the person to do. This process isn't fast, but it works. Read the list below so you can spot it happening to you.

1. **Assault their identity.** Take the elements of how a person defines themselves and convince them they aren't those things. This destabilizes them. Eg. Priests were told they weren't true or real Fathers.
2. **Instantiate feelings of guilt.** Constantly interpret the person's actions as failures, incompetent, shameful, or embarrassing. If people feel these feelings enough they may even begin to feel they deserve punishment. Some cults trigger shame by having the person share past shameful or undesirable behavior the person did.
3. **Force self betrayal.** Get the person to denounce something that makes up their identity like family, friends, or important concepts and beliefs. This attacks their identity and also makes them feel guilty.
4. **Eventually they reach a breaking point.** This can look like a nervous breakdown, crying, or falling into depression.
5. **Offer respite.** On this step they are offered simple kindness or a break. This builds gratitude towards the person. See also hurt and rescue, an abusive tactic where someone causes an issue and then fixes it.
6. **Assist the compulsion to confess.** People feel obligated to exchange or repay the respite from step 5. This can also come from a need to get rid of feelings of guilt.
7. **Channel guilt.** Eventually the person has so many feelings they won't be able to keep them straight. This will leave them with an overall feeling of wrongness. This lets the brainwasher channel the guilt by focusing it on their past ideology. They convince the person the past ideology caused those feelings.
8. **Dishonoring logically the past ideology.** The person begins to grasp at the idea that the ideology is at fault. They scapegoat the ideology and the teachers and messengers and people who brought it to them.

9. **Idealized collegiality.** Once the past is rejected the person is offered a sense of friendship with their brainwashers. The removes negative feelings and gives the illusion of progress.
10. **Confession and rebirth.** Is when the person makes the full internal commitment to the new way of life. It typically involves a symbolic ritual.

Top 10 Common Brainwashing Techniques

All the brainwashing techniques employ an essentially two step process. First the person is shocked, frightened, or befriended. The idea is that people are more suggestible if they are emotion focused and not rational. Second persuasion techniques like repetition and social pressure are used to convince the person to accept the idea.

1. [Intimidation](#) through loud noises, physical presence.
2. Coercion via insults, physical violence, or threats.
3. [Indoctrination](#) via techniques like repetition. Brainwashing can also be countered with this technique with broken record refusal (saying no over and over again).
4. [Minimization](#) and catastrophizing. Minimize the counter arguments, catastrophize what will happen if the person doesn't comply with the new way of living being presented.
5. Isolation
6. Social pressure via shame and [insults](#). Forcing people to think about the group first instead of themselves.
7. Us versus them tactics to focus the person on fighting an external force instead of analyzing the rhetoric they are hearing.
8. Controlling basic actions like bathroom breaks, sex, and speaking.
9. Physical exhaustion through intense tasks or lack of sleep or food, followed by repetition and teaching.
10. Gaslighting is a brainwashing technique used to make someone forget or deny reality. Techniques include stubborn disagreeing and denial, questions that point out the weaknesses in someone's memory or argument, and other tricks like having them restate things.
11. Undermining rationality by making someone think they don't have the ability to decide or think for themselves.

Often these techniques are combined.

Brainwashing Books For Spotting Malicious Behavior

- [Forbidden Keys to Persuasion](#) talks about cult brainwashing tactics. Some of it isn't exactly scientific but it does contain an interesting point of view on brainwashing and persuasion.
- Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism is an interesting book on brainwashing in the Korean War. It covers [8 criteria for thought reform](#).
- Check out this crazy page on [Scientology and brainwashing](#). It talks about tactics to use in the war of humanoids.
- CIA Behavioral Modification research [report](#) from the Select Committee on Intelligence.

Category

1. Manipulation

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