

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast
Episode 51: [How To Free Our Minds with Cult Deprogramming Expert Dr. Steven Hassan](#)

- Tristan Harris: How would you know if you were in a cult? Okay, well, if not in a cult, at least under some form of undue influence? There you are and you know that you're right. You believe you're thinking freely. Your social network shows everyone's agreeing with you. Again, how would you know if you were under undue influence? And how could we regain sovereignty over our minds? I'm Tristan Harris.
- Aza Raskin: I'm Aza Raskin, and this is Your Undivided Attention, the podcast from the Center for Humane Technology. Our guest today is Dr. Steven Hassan, an expert in undue influence, brainwashing, and unethical hypnosis. Dr. Hassan is the founder of the Freedom of Mind Resource Center, a coaching, consulting, and training organization dedicated to helping people think clearly and freely consider how they want to live their lives. Dr. Hassan himself was a member of a cult. For over two years he was part of the Unification Church, also known as the Moonies, which was developed in the 1950's in Korea by Reverend Sun Myung Moon who considered himself the second coming of Christ. Since leaving the Moonies, Dr. Hassan has helped thousands of individuals and families recover from undue influence.
- Tristan Harris: Dr. Steven Hassan, welcome to Your Undivided Attention.
- Steven Hassan: Thank you, Tristan and Aza. It's a real honor to be with you today.
- Tristan Harris: Well, it's a real honor for us, too, because back when we launched this podcast Your Undivided Attention in June 2019, we actually promised our listeners that we would be talking to cult deprogramming experts, and we failed to deliver on that promise until today, 2-1/2 years approximately later. The reason, actually, that this was always in our agenda to talk about cult deprogramming is that there's so many dynamics of the way that social media works that mirror some of the social manipulative processes that occur in cults. Many listeners actually may not know this. Steve, I don't know if you knew this, but I actually spent about three years touring different cults from the outside, going to large group awareness trainings, going into different groups. I had many friends in the paid area who were part of and participating in various New Age cults.
- Tristan Harris: Aza would hear of my stories when I would talk about these various groups I would join. Steve, the thing I'm so excited to get into with you is that people really underestimate the degree to which psychological influence can work in an invisible way regardless of intelligence, regardless of PhD level. In fact, there's many of the ways that social media acts like a cult factory. It identifies these buckets of human behavior that are similar. The people who are clicking on flat Earth videos, the people who are clicking on various political tribe videos, and then pulling you deeper and deeper and deeper into the rabbit hole.

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- Tristan Harris: And so what we're really excited to just speak with you about today is the dynamics of how cults work. And then we'll get, hopefully, all the way into a conversation about the techniques of cult deprogramming because I think if there's any discipline that is most needed right now to reverse our way out of the mind warp of the last 10 years of psychological derangement it's the discipline of cult deprogramming. We're just incredibly excited to talk to you today about everything you've got to offer.
- Steven Hassan: Thank you. Ultimately, I believe if you're an adult you should be in control of your own mind, and not turning over your power, getting rid of your conscience, your critical thinking, and having blind faith, and having certainty that your doctrine is the truth with a capital T no matter what it is.
- Aza Raskin: Yeah. And maybe just to mark for listeners that I think that there are cults on all sides of the different political aisles, obviously, to different degrees and people are going to argue about that, but I want to mark that explicitly because I think one of the actual challenges of cult programming is the belief that those who are being accused of being in a cult get very defensive. And just to name that no matter which group you might be a part of, or which set of beliefs we might touch upon, try to come to this conversation if you're a listener with an open mind, really just studying what are the processes that have us go more and more extreme into a set of self-reinforcing beliefs in groups, and what would it take to liberate us? So maybe just to warm our listeners up for a bit, to understand your personal story and how you got recruited into the Moonies, who were you back then and what were the steps along the way that got you recruited? I know this is setting the table for listeners.
- Steven Hassan: My story is not that unusual, actually. I was victimized by a honey trap. I grew up in a very middle class Jewish household in Flushing, Queens. I was not a joiner. I was introverted. I wrote poetry and short stories. That was my major in college. I worked as a banquet waiter at a Holiday Inn in Hempstead while I was going to college to make my money. I was in the last draft lottery to go to the Vietnam War. I was very disillusioned with what I had been taught growing up about fighting communists. When I realized this was an unjust war and that the government has been lying to us, I was like, "I'm just not interested in wanting to make the world a better place." My girlfriend had dumped me abruptly over the Christmas break at college. I was an upper junior.
- Steven Hassan: I was blue starting the new semester. I was sitting in the cafeteria of Queens College, and three very attractive women asked if they could share my table with me and were flirting with me. And I was like, "Wow, sure. Here, sit down." I had a whole pile of college textbooks that I had purchased for the next semester. I think I had Heidegger's Being and Time, and a book on the Upanishads, and a whole bunch of other philosophy course that I was taking. And they just asked me a billion questions. I was so happy to tell them all about me.

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Steven Hassan: I want to mark this part of my story, if I may, for your listeners because back in the '70s, and I want to add this was February of 1974 the whole idea of cults was not mainstream at all, but back then you needed to elicit information about people directly from them. "Tell me about your family. What does your father do?" "Oh, he has a hardware store that he took over from his father." "What does your mother do?" "Oh, she teaches art for eighth grade." "Do you have siblings?" "Yes. I have two older sisters."

Steven Hassan: They elicited everything about who I was and what was important to me. These days all of this data is now being collected online and is being used by agents, bad agents, good agents, whatever, to sell us products, or to recruit us into cults. And if I may take one more minute. When I was a Moonie recruiter, and that's part of the story is they recruited me into a front group through deception, but when I was a Moonie recruiter, I was told to sort people into thinkers, feelers, doers, or believers. The idea was what's their lead thing? If someone says "I'm a strong Christian. I pray every day." There was going to be a different recruitment scenario developed for that person versus someone who's like, "I'm an atheist, but I want to fix the world and help starving children." Different angle, but back to my cult story, if I may.

Steven Hassan: They asked me all this information. Then they were like, "We would love to get to know you better. You're so special. And you're so wonderful." What's known as love bombing, which online is called swarming, I believe. They were just love bombing me up. And I was lapping it up because, wow, attention from three attractive women. I do remember asking them, "Are you students?" "Yes." "Are you part of a religious group?" "No." And they looked me straight in the eye. And that's another thing I want to share with your listeners. My dad, who was a hardware store owner in Ozone Park was like, "Steve, you can always tell if someone's shady they won't look you straight in the eyes." That was how I was inoculated by my dad.

Aza Raskin: Right. People in cults are actually very good at actually looking you directly in the eye persuasively.

Steven Hassan: They were very sincere, and I learned. Later as I was helping people get out of Scientology, I learned they were actually drilling people to stare people in the eyes and not blink, et cetera.

Aza Raskin: Well, actually, just to mark a few things because I think it's nice to interactively go back and forth and name some of the features of what pulled you in because the first thing I heard you say is that the Vietnam War is happening, and there's a disenchantment with government is part of that which preceded going into something because I think there's some similar processes now. There's mass disenchantment with a lot of the systems that have run our society. That's one thing I heard you say.

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Aza Raskin: Another thing I heard you say is the affirmation and love bombing, and lots of attention from attractive women. And just to make this concrete for listeners with social media if I'm designing a social media product, the first thing I want to do when you enter is say, "Boom, you're so special. Your interests are really special to us. We're going to give you all of these things. In fact, we're going to show you the most attractive people on here when you first open that TikTok app. We're going to show you the most attractive either men or women." Just to make some parallels for listeners, then I'd love for you to keep going.

Steven Hassan: Yeah, attractiveness is important, but identification is even more important that you're meeting people who are like you, or people that you can really relate with. And so as a recruiter, if we knew someone was a disaffected Catholic from the Bronx, and we had a disaffected Catholic from the Bronx we would make sure to introduce them to each other.

Tristan Harris: The Wall Street Journal did a great video about the TikTok algorithm that when you swipe a couple things and it actually tests, hey, is it the religious videos that work with you? Is it the dancer videos? Is it the soft porn videos? It figures out which of these things work. And so just that matching, Steve, that you're talking about of making sure that we have people who look like me because the creature brain inside of us, I'm taking my neuro-linguistic programming knowledge out here, the creature brain is saying, "Am I with like kind? Am I with people who look like me?" And that's what creates that trust.

Aza Raskin: What exactly is a cult? How do you define undo influence? What differentiates brainwashing versus persuasion versus mind control versus influence? Because I could imagine a question arising in our listener's mind which is, okay, how is this not all relative? How is it not that there's a cult of the mainstream? And then each one of these cults is a different kind of right belief in their own right. How do you even know what a cult is? I think if we can go right to the heart of that question that will help the rest of this conversation land much more strongly.

Steven Hassan: Yes. I would like to start. I have what's called an influence continuum graphic, which is on my freedomofmind.com site. It basically talks about ethical influence on one end of the continuum, the unethical influence, and so for me, there are cults that are on the ethical end, and authoritarian cults that are on the unethical end. So when people say ethical cults, what are you talking about? So for me, there are some behavioral criteria that helps flesh that out and people can self-assess.

Steven Hassan: I refer to the four overlapping components as control of behavior, control of information, control of thoughts, and control of emotions I refer to as the BITE model of authoritarian control. The more a group or person controls your behavior, information, thoughts, and emotions to make you over in their image, or to have a pseudo identity that's obedient and dependent that's my definition

of an authoritarian cult versus an ethical cult where you know what you're getting involved with. You have informed consent. You're encouraged to read whatever you want to read, talk to critics, talk to former members, challenge authority, and you're free to leave without phobias that have been put in your mind that you're going to get hit by a car, or get cancer, or be possessed by demons, or go to hell, or whatever.

Steven Hassan: And so by having a frame based on human rights, based on I'm an adult, these women who said they weren't part of a religious cult, but they were going back to the center bowing to an altar with Moon and his wife's picture on it, reciting a pledge to die for the Moonies cult that was a lie. These are the warning flags because if something's legit it will stand up to scrutiny. I say it over and over. The burden is on them to prove that they have this great thing, not on us to disprove it.

Tristan Harris: I actually would like to double-click on each of those because if we're starting to define cults as the ability to influence behavior, information, thoughts, and emotions, if you're saying, Steve, that those are the critical ingredients, could you give some specific examples? And if you could maybe do it through stories that actually happened in the Moonies as you were getting recruited because I think that would help ground people in what it means to be tapping into those things. So just to say one last thing. I think that if we can make a match to how social media is enabling the exact same manipulation on those four different axes that you're talking about to even a more precise degree than you experienced, or anyone experiences in a cult, I think we're starting to make the case that there is a mirroring and a matching, and even an extension of a super charging of those capacities.

Steven Hassan: Super charging is absolutely the right word. And as your work has so ably demonstrated we're needing to use ethics and wisdom to try to get a handle on this technology because bad actors can use it for nefarious purposes and exploit people. Let's go back to the Moonies. These women were flirting. They invited me over to meet their friends. I had a free dinner. I was like, "Okay, this is interesting." There are people from all over the world. They were sitting on the floor eating with paper plates. "Okay, nothing here for me. Thanks have a nice time."

Steven Hassan: I get my shoes on. I go out, it was snowing, to my car, and a dozen people follow me out without jackets or shoes and surround my car. I'm in a confused state, which is a technique of mind control, right? If you want to mind control someone confuse them. And how do you confuse people? You do incongruent behaviors that are not normal scripts for how humans interact with each other, so it makes the normal person curious, like, "What is going on?" I was surrounded, and people were like, "We like you so much. You have to promise to come back tomorrow. We want to get to know you better." I'm like, "It's cold. Go

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inside. Leave me alone." They're like, "No, we're not going to leave until you promise to come back." I'm serious. They actually did this.

Tristan Harris: They actually made you promise to come back.

Steven Hassan: I looked back with 20/20 hindsight, but they were so sincere and they were so nice. There was someone from Harvard. There was someone from Princeton there. These were not dummies. These were interesting people, but I was an introvert. I was not into groups of any kind, but anyway I promised to come back. I'm a man of my word. And that came back to haunt me again because after the second night they started with "We're going away this weekend. We're going to have a great time. We need you to come." And I'm like, "I'm a banquet waiter. I work on the weekends. I have never had a weekend off for two years. Please stop asking me to come. I work." And they kept bugging me and I said, "Okay, if I don't have to work some weekend I'll go."

Steven Hassan: And wouldn't you know two days later I call up my boss. "Okay. When do you need me?" He said, "You won't believe it, but the wedding was called off. Take the weekend off." So this is a very important point I want to share it with your listeners because it turns out a lot of people get recruited into authoritarian cults because of some type of coincidence that just happens to mesh with what's happening in your life, and it's a misattribution of causality. It was like in my back of my head this is weird. I promised to go. I didn't want to go. My boss gave me the weekend off, but I gave my word. I gave my word, so I'm going to go.

Tristan Harris: So there's a commitment device. There's almost a superstitious like, whoa, there's a coincidence here. Something's matching something else. There's a perfect timing, what they call kairos.

Steven Hassan: Yes.

Tristan Harris: The exact match of when something comes at the time that you might want.

Steven Hassan: Yes. I hear this all the time with people that I've helped where they were like, "I was praying that morning for God to show me what I should do with my life and knock, knock, the Jehovah's Witnesses knocked on my door, so, of course I let them in."

Tristan Harris: And social media can play on that as well to talk about just to make a mirror for our listeners in terms of the re-engagement paradigm. There you are. You're leaving your first night of dinner and you're like, "Okay, I'm done with this." But then they actually love bomb you and swarm you as you're leaving. So now notice that let's say you're on Facebook, or Twitter, and you started your account and you only engaged a few times with a couple tweets and then you stop using

it. Well, what do they do? Do they just sit there and say, "Well, it was nice to have Steve as a Twitter user for a day. We're just going to let him go." No, they get really aggressive. They start actually pounding you with here's all this content you're going to miss. Here are these people that look like you. Oh, don't go. They'll literally use language with exclamation points saying, "We're really sorry to miss you. We want you to come back." They use that kind of language.

Aza Raskin: Well, and it's not Facebook saying that. They put that in coming from your friends. They'll show you faces of your friends that say, "These people miss you. Come back."

Tristan Harris: This is you're talking specifically about if I go into Facebook and say, "I want to delete my account." As you go through that flow and it says, "Are you sure you want to delete your account?" It will put up the photos of five of the people you've clicked on the most. It calculates which faces of which friends can I put on this screen that are most likely to dissuade you from deleting your Facebook account. They can calculate exactly which people. It would be like when Steve was walking out to his car, which of these five people should we send to surround him? Should we send the Harvard people? Did he respond to them? Did he respond to appeals to authority, and that credibility of the Harvard people? Did you respond to those attractive girls? And so you can play with it, but now social media is doing that to a level of precision and degree that is totally different.

Steven Hassan: To answer your question about BITE, behavior, information, thought, and emotional control I want to first just say I got this idea from Leon Festinger, who is a psychologist who wrote a book, *Prophecy Failed*, in the '50s, and he talked about thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and how humans want congruity, or consistency amongst these three elements of our lives. We don't like dissonance, so we will start reformulating things. If we are asked to do an extreme behavior, we'll rationalize it in order to feel good about it. For me, the misattribution effect, and maybe I'm meant to go this weekend. Now I drive over to the Moonie house. They want me to go in their van. Big mistake. Should have had my own car, but way before cell phones were invented.

Steven Hassan: Now I'm going to a place I have no idea what the destination is. I haven't told my family, or anyone where I am other than I'm going off with some friends being driven into a multimillion dollar estate in Tarrytown, and the guy at the front of the van says, "Oh, this weekend we're having a joint workshop with the Unification Church." To which I said, "Wait a minute, no one told me about a workshop. And what's this thing about a church? I'm Jewish." And then they did the classic cult mind control technique of turning it around on the person that it's their fault. "What's the matter, Steve, are you close-minded? Do you have an issue with Christians?" All of a sudden now Steve is defensive and I'm confused because I thought I was going to have fun and meet friends and have a great

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time for the weekend. And now all of a sudden it's a religious workshop and they told me it wasn't religious. I said, "I want to leave. Drive me back."

Tristan Harris: Actually, I think this is important to double-click on as well, which is how our hesitations actually get weaponized as examples of our lack of belief of the very thing that the cult wants you to do. An example is in a Tony Robbins workshop. One of the experiences is you walk over these burning hot coals and that's meant to show yourself that you are capable of something impossible. There you are. You're afraid of doing something as dangerous as that. And you see these huge flames. I actually did do it. I think it was in Chicago I did a workshop with Tony Robbins and I was actually really afraid of doing it.

Tristan Harris: There are stories of people who have burned their feet walking on these burning hot coals, but, of course, people do it thousands and thousands of times over, and there is a way in which it works. It feels impossible, but if you hesitate, it's used as, well, isn't this how you're hesitating, and not showing up bravely for your life? What I hope we're going to be doing for listeners is showing how whether we're talking about Tony Robbins, or Landmark, or est, or the Moonies, or whatever, they exist in very different parts of the continuum, or coaching, or actual religions, or political tribes. There are these features of your hesitation as examples of something that you need to fix about yourself.

Steven Hassan: The power of certainty most people until they've met a cult recruiter have never experienced someone so confident, and so certain that they know what reality is, and what's going on, and what's best for you. The average person has uncertainty. And so for me, whenever someone comes into my life who's super certain I have warning, warning going off in my head because I want people who aren't that certain, and are willing to change their mind, and detach their ego from their beliefs because I'm willing to change my beliefs if there's evidence that's convincing.

Tristan Harris: So when we criticize, or name any groups here there's going to be people who are going to be offended, say people who believe in various religions, or you said Megastan, or Wilkinson. Everyone believes that they have the way, the one truth. And everyone believes that the other side that we're awake, but it's the rest of the world that's not awake. I saw that at the Conservative Political Action Conference, CPAC. Ted Cruz was speaking and behind him was a big poster that said "Awake, not woke." They're saying that we're the awake ones because woke is the bad thing, but then the woke people on the left believe that they're the ones who are actually awake to the actual history and the roots of oppression that we need to actually correct and fix.

Tristan Harris: And then even the matrix is used on both sides. The right has currently co-opted the phrase red-pilling. In the film, The Social Dilemma I said, "How do you wake up from the matrix when you don't know you're in the matrix?" Everyone

believes that the other side is in the matrix. If you're pro-vaccine, you're in a cult of not questioning whether the vaccine is actually safe, but if you're anti-vaccine the people who are pro-vaccine say you're in a cult of questioning the validity of something that's saving lives. So everyone is very certain, and just to ground for listeners the stakes of this conversation is why it's so important. If we don't have ways of waking up from the certainty, one of the basic tools that you need of just recognizing how would I know if I was wrong? If I can't even send my mind there, that's probably proof that I'm captured by something.

Steven Hassan: Yeah, no, you're bringing up a really and critically important point because, ultimately, the cure to blind faith is perspective. Developmentally, if you can't go a level up and look at both sides and the evidence for both sides and apply how did I arrive at this information you're going to be very vulnerable to being sucked into one side or the other, and come back to what are my values? What are my beliefs? And how do I want to live my life? Can I look in the mirror at night and feel good about myself? In my case, I wanted to leave right away. They said, "We're not going back until the morning. Just stay the night." I wanted to leave, but what I should have done is walk out to the street and try to hitchhike in the dark and in the snow, but I didn't feel like it was a threatening, dangerous environment. I just didn't want to be there because they weren't honest with me, et cetera. I didn't sleep. You were asking me about behavior control things. One of the universals is sleep deprivation.

Tristan Harris: Yes, say more about that. Why is sleep deprivation so powerful, and a part of so many cults?

Steven Hassan: Sleep is one of those things that's been so researched by the military, by NASA. It's so central. I'll say Matthew Walker, *Why We Sleep*, is really a great book, important book. We need seven to nine hours of sleep the average person, and if you're sleeping like I was in the Moonies three to four hours a night, seven days a week for 2-1/2 years.

Tristan Harris: And that was suggested by them? They want you to sleep only three to four hours a night, right?

Steven Hassan: Yeah. They literally said, "You should be like father," meaning Sun Myung Moon, who's now deceased. His wife, Hak Ja Han is running the cult. Anyway, they were like, "Father only sleeps three to four hours a night because the world needs saving. The end times are here." I was being told "God has summoned me to save the planet. We're going to save the world. There will be peace on Earth, no conflicts, no wars, no poverty. Everyone would be brothers and sisters." That was the fantasy that the Moonies are given of why they're working so hard, and it's replicated a billion times by a billion other cults, but to answer your question what happens when you're not sleeping properly is your frontal cortex doesn't

function properly. A lot of your limbic system, your emotional, amygdala, et cetera, is running the show instead of you being able to think clearly.

Steven Hassan: And if I may jump ahead of my story for one second on the theme of sleep deprivation. 2-1/2 years into the group, I was elevated given a high position. I was fasting for Nixon on the Capitol stairs, because Moon said, "God wanted him to be president despite Watergate." I did this right-wing fascist stuff that was so opposite who I really was, but how I wound up getting to the point where I could get out of the cult was my leader had told me I was running a fundraising team in Baltimore, Maryland. He wanted everyone on my team to make a minimum of \$100 a night, otherwise, they couldn't sleep. I was trained as a good leader if your members don't sleep, you shouldn't sleep. And so I was up for three days when I'm driving and fall asleep at the wheel of a van on the Baltimore Beltway and drove into the back of a tractor trailer truck at 80 miles an hour.

Steven Hassan: It took the emergency technicians and fire department and police a half an hour to rescue me out of the wreckage because they thought it might blow up. I almost died. I was trapped in this van. They thought it was going to blow up. I was in more pain than I had ever felt in my life, but the important thing that I want to say is that I survived and I was in a hospital away from the cult for two weeks. I slept. They did give me some cassette tapes of some speeches of Moon, but after listening to each one a couple of times I had no influences from cult members. It was in that context that I called my sister, who I was always very close with, my sister, Thea, who had never said I was in a cult, or I was brainwashed. My older sister Steph did, and my parents, so they were satanic, and I was under orders not never to tell them where I was, or to talk to them.

Aza Raskin: You were told they were satanic by the Moonies. They convinced you that your own family was satanic.

Steven Hassan: By the Moonies, exactly. They need to isolate you from the people who have the power to influence you back to reality is what it was. Anyway, I called my sister and she said, "Oh, you have a nephew you haven't met yet. I want him to know his Uncle Stevie. Come home and visit." I'm like, "I have this cast on my leg from my toes to my groin." She's like, "I'll take care of you." And I said, "Don't tell the parents and I can arrange it because I'm a leader." And thank God she told my parents and they had lined up some ex-Moonies and I got to my sister's house. And what do you know? The crutches got taken away, and all these ex-Moonies started coming into my sister's living room and I was like, "Satan, get away, Satan." I was prepared to die or kill on command as I had been trained.

Steven Hassan: I almost snapped my father's neck on the Long Island Expressway when they needed to move me from my sister's house. I snapped into my programming, which was kill your father because it's better to die than lose your connection to

father and God and salvation. Fortunately, I didn't do it because I was so sure I was the ideal member. I was a fanatic, and I didn't think they could break me.

Aza Raskin: Also, I think in your book, you mentioned, because previously you were talking about the way out of blind faith is multiple perspectives that there's something your father said right then that helped you for the first time you said in months start to see through his eyes. I'm curious of you take there before we get into the full story of what are the elements of stepping away from undue influence?

Steven Hassan: Sure. I was sitting in the back seat of the car. My father was turned around from the driver's seat. He looked me in the eye and he started to cry. I saw my father cry once before when my grandmother died. And he said, "How would you feel if it was your son, your only son who met a group of people, got into a controversial group, dropped out of college, quit his job, and disappeared. How would you feel, Steve?" And the force of his tears made me step out of my Moonie identity into the old Steve, who was like, "My dad really loves me. He's really suffering. I know I have the truth. I know I'm following God, but he's really worried about me."

Steven Hassan: I said to him, "I'd probably be doing what you're doing now." Even though I was convinced he was brainwashed by the communist media against the group. And I said, "I'd probably be doing what you're doing now. What do you want from me?" He said, "We just want you to listen for the next few days. And if you want to go back, I'll drive you there myself, but at least your mother and I will be able to sleep at night knowing we did the responsible thing."

Steven Hassan: So what happened was then it was a challenge, a test. I wanted to prove that I wasn't brainwashed and I wasn't in a cult. I thought "I'm useless to the group anyway because of my physical condition, I'll agree." And I agreed. And that was critical to the success of the intervention because I wasn't just reacting against anymore. The former members, one of whom I had recruited into the cult and was my spiritual daughter, air quotes, over time as they were educating me about what is brainwashing, what is mind control, telling me stories of their own experiences I was doing thought stopping, which is a thought controlled technique. I was trained to chant, or pray, or sing if a doubt came into my head to center myself.

Tristan Harris: While they're trying to deprogram you, or challenge your views the cult actually creates an immune system in your mind to be able to resist anything that's a counter-attack. You're just jamming your mind with other thoughts you can't think.

Steven Hassan: Yes, but I want to add a very important variable that we haven't talked about yet, which is the dual identity, or the dissociative model that I'm operating from because there was the old Steve Hassan who wrote poetry and liked women.

And then there was the right-wing, fascist Steve who thought women were objects and needed to take over the world. It was the real me that wanted out, but was trapped by the cult program techniques. Cults program phobias in people's minds so that the irrational fear hijacks your ability to reality-test. I was afraid of my own mind. I was afraid every doubt was some invisible, evil spirit trying to invade me.

Tristan Harris: Right. And so you've got phobias that are consciously used to make deprogramming from the cult harder. You've got reinforced relationships and being embedded constantly in this environment that makes it harder to leave. If we just reground the stakes why are we having this conversation for? Just to reground listeners we're in a really tense moment. It feels like the U.S. could domestically be heading towards escalating conflict. Some might say closer and closer to civil war. Not in the ways that I think the 1800s would recognize, but given those stakes and that part of the thing that would drive us towards that kind of domestic conflict is the certainty with which each different cult coming out of the cult factory over the last 10 years of social media driving us down these more extreme rabbit holes on every side with every niche belief micro targeted to us.

Tristan Harris: I think listeners of this podcast probably have family members who they can think about who've they've lost because they've gone down some rabbit hole, they find it very hard to talk to them. The real trillion dollar question because it's essential for being able to back away from the prospect of a domestic conflict, civil war type scenario is how do we get out of this? And you have something called the strategic interactive approach. I'd love for you to talk about your intuition right now in this moment, feeling into those sticks, what do you think is needed to step away from that and to have each of us deprogram ourselves and each other?

Steven Hassan: How would anyone know, or how would I know if I was brainwashed, or mind controlled, or subjected to undue influence? I found that there is a process of reality-testing that actually works for people. The first step is really just detaching from the constant reinforcing influences. These days it's smartphones and notifications and screens. Take a time out, take a week off, and do the kinds of things you used to love to do that really reflect the real you whether it's playing with your dog, or being in nature, or listening to music, or dancing, or whatever. Reconnect with yourself and detach from the constant bombardment of information that's coming at you.

Steven Hassan: Secondly, learn about the BITE model of authoritarian control, which is my model of looking at control of behavior, information, thoughts, and emotions in the context of my influence continuum from ethical to unethical. The more of these that you can tick off, the more authoritarian your situation is.

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Steven Hassan: The next step is deliberately seek out critics and former members and hear why they left, or why they're critical of the group and look at their facts, and take the position that if what you're in is legitimate it will stand up to scrutiny. Then the next step is go back in your mind before you got recruited, what did you think you were getting into? Think about the model of mind control. Think about the information you heard and if you were lied to, if you have lack of informed consent, this is a huge red flag, but go through your experiences. Reflect honestly, and then answer the question if I knew then what I know now would I have ever gotten involved? If the answer is no, time to leave.

Steven Hassan: I think another very important point that we haven't mentioned yet is that it's easier to see it in another group than the one you're in, but it was ultimately the next day, the last day, when they handed me one of Moon's speeches to congressmen and senators and said, "What do you think of this?" I was reading it, and in the context of the whole experience, Moon was lying to the congressmen and senators how much he loves America, and he respects Americans. When I heard him personally say how pathetic Americans were 100 or more times, and I had the first conscious doubt where I said, "He's a liar." And then I started thinking, "Wait a minute. This whole thing is built on the idea he's the Messiah. The greatest man in human history is going to save the planet. If he's a liar, and he's not, the whole thing falls apart." And then I cried for three hours.

Aza Raskin: We're going to take a quick interlude here. Tristan and I are going to talk about something I think is pretty extraordinary, and that is there are already in law definitions of what undue influence is. Let me lay out the Brandle/Heisler/Stiegel model of undue influence, which is based on domestic violence relationships, stalking, and sexual assault. One, the victim is kept unaware. Two, the victim is isolated from others and information. Three, the influencer tries to create fear. The influencer preys on vulnerabilities. The influencer creates dependencies. The influencer makes the victim lose faith in their own beliefs. The influencer induces shame and secrecy. Finally, the influencer performs intermittent acts of kindness.

Aza Raskin: I just want you to stop and think about how this applies in the world of social media. The user was kept unaware and the user is isolated from others and given silent information, or platforms creating the incentives for fear, for preying on human vulnerabilities, for creating dependencies. Finally, do we all get dosed in likes and followers as kinds of intermittent acts of kindness?

Tristan Harris: Well, it's interesting to read that this is a model that's currently taught by the National College of District Attorneys and the National District Attorneys Association for use in criminal prosecutions. And I think the thing, Aza, that you were pointing out to me in this model is that it's really helpful when we already have an existing legal framework for something that we want to say we have to

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draw a line in the sand. One of the challenges of the whole field of persuasive technology manipulation the last 10 years I can't tell you how many conversations people always say, "Well, what's the line between persuasion, manipulation, coercion?" And so what's so helpful about this model is we can say, "Okay, maybe we actually have legal precedent for the fact that this is an undue influence environment. We can apply this undue influence model for what's wrong with today's technology."

Steven Hassan: So over 45 years, what I've evolved to, and especially because the internet changed the whole ball game, what I've come up with is that the people who have the most influence are the family members and friends of the person. In the case of what's happening in this country, so many people have blocked, or muted, or cut off contact with their loved ones who are involved with an authoritarian cultish belief system because they try to talk them out of it rationally. They try to persuade them and it dug deeper in, which is what happens. So my whole coaching is how to help people understand effective ways to interact with their loved one. The single most powerful, important technique is asking a good question respectfully, and waiting for an answer and following up.

Tristan Harris: What's an example of that?

Steven Hassan: Here's a hypothetical I've used in actual cases. I'm talking to a member of a cult and I give them a what if. What if your leader is on stage, you're sitting there, and your leader says, "Hey, listen, everybody. I need to apologize. I've been seeing a therapist. I'm on medication. I realize I'm not the Messiah, and you need to go back and resume your life. Would you believe them?" The person says "No, he would never do that, or she would never say that." And then I say, "What would you do if they did?" And then you just wait because sometimes you even see illusory smoke coming out of their ears because now the thing about someone in a mind control state they can't imagine leaving and being happy and fulfilled. That's the cure to the phobia.

Steven Hassan: Phobia indoctrination makes you generate only negative fearful scenarios in your mind, but thinking about possibilities and a future, and that's why former members are also so powerful. I'm happy I'm out of the Moonies. I've traveled the world. I've been married. I have a kid. I go scuba diving. Yay. That's a contradiction in the indoctrination because I'm supposed to be a drug addict who goes to prostitutes and is selfish.

Aza Raskin: I suppose this is actually another technique which is causing somebody to imagine to make real in their mind something which they couldn't before.

Steven Hassan: 100%. The imagination is what helps us be creative and evolve, but it can be used against us in a weaponized way by basically bad actors who are

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authoritarians, who deliberately want to stir conflict. Now what needs to happen on a meta scale, and we need high-tech wisdom and technology to figure out how to do this. And I'll add that there are millions of former cult members like me that are walking around, but are stigmatized not to share their stories. We need to have a high-tech platform that can help people to reality-test in a non-threatening way where they're empowered, but we also need to destigmatize the whole issue of a mind control cult.

Aza Raskin: You mentioned many, many things to dig into here, but one of them is the power of former members. The stories of formers. In fact, Stephanie Lepp, our executive producer of this podcast had a podcast called Reckonings that was all about people having a reckoning with their former worldview, and how powerful it is to hear and spread those stories. Now, if we actually apply this in a solution's mindset to the way technology is designed. Let's imagine that Facebook could take all the people that it knew were formers of every group, so wouldn't it be interesting if you're inside of Megastan to see, well, who are all the people who left that world? If you were inside of the Moonies to see all the people who left the Moonie land. If you were someone who was really extreme, far left Antifa, and who left Antifa, or something like that.

Aza Raskin: And then you could actually imagine news feeds that are designed to rank those voices higher. That would be almost a different pro-liberation version of social media because you're trying to liberate people from whatever it was, was the previous developmental stage that they were at the things that had captured them and making it easier to find that information, which now it's the opposite. Right now the current incentive is to show you more of the extreme stuff within the echo chambers and extreme groups that you're already a part of.

Steven Hassan: The good news with social media is there are lots of former members to network with. I'm involved with a group of former members. We're doing a project called #iGotOut to try to de-stigmatize the fact that, hey, good people, intelligent people can be lied to, their minds can get hacked, and they can get sucked into an authoritarian situation, and there's life after cult.

Aza Raskin: I wonder what is the one action our listeners can take?

Steven Hassan: Well, I would ask everybody to consider, do they believe that their mind is un-malleable? Do you really think that you've never believed the lie, or were tricked to buy something that you didn't need or want, or fall in love with someone who is a pathological liar, or narcissist? Reflect honestly over your life. I would ask people to consider are they afraid of making a change in their life? And if so, what's the worst fear? That people will say "I told you so. Steve, I told you it was a cult." And that's what I got when I left and I'm like, "I wish I had listened to you. I'm so sorry." The thing is so what? Everybody is human. No one's perfect. So get over your fear. Ask yourself, is this a rational fear? Will

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there actually be danger, or is this just an irrational fear that will hurt my ego, or that somebody might try to shame me, but if you understand mind control and how ubiquitous it is and how millions and millions of people have been co-opted, join the human race, educate yourself.

Aza Raskin: Steven, I feel like we have barely even begun to scout the territory of where these conversations can go. It's incredibly important work, increasingly important. I just really thank you for coming onto Your Undivided Attention.

Steven Hassan: It's been an honor and I look forward to being together again.

Aza Raskin: Dr. Steven Hassan is an author, educator, and mental health counselor specializing in destructive cults. He holds two master's degrees and a PhD with a dissertation that did the first quantitative study on a tool to evaluate undue influence in the law. His models have been used in the fields of labor and sex trafficking as well as counter extremism. Dr. Hassan's organization, the Freedom of Mind Resource Center provides resources and training to help individuals think freely and recover from undue influence.

Aza Raskin: Your Undivided Attention is produced by the Center for Humane Technology, a nonprofit organization working to catalyze a humane future. Our executive producer is Stephanie Lepp. Our senior producer is Julia Scott. Mixing on this episode by Jeff Sudakin. Original music and sound design Ryan and Hays Holladay. And a special thanks to the whole Center for Humane Technology team for making this podcast possible. You can find show notes, transcripts, and much more at humanetech.com. A very special thanks goes to our generous lead supporters, including the Omidyar Network, Craig Newmark Philanthropies, and the Evolve Foundation, among many others. And if you've made it all the way here, let me just give one more thank you to you for giving us your undivided attention.