

# Steven Hassan

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**Steven Alan Hassan** (born 1954) is an American licensed mental health counselor who has written extensively on the subject of cults.<sup>[2]</sup> He is the author of three books on the subject of destructive cults, and what he describes as their use of mind control, thought reform, and the psychology of influence in order to recruit and retain members.

Hassan is a former member of the Unification Church. He founded Ex-Moon Inc. in 1979<sup>[3]</sup> before assisting with involuntary deprogrammings in association with the Cult Awareness Network,<sup>[4]</sup> developing in 1999 what he describes as his own non-coercive methods for helping members of alleged cults to leave their groups, through his Freedom of Mind company. He has also developed therapeutic approaches for counseling former members in order to help them overcome the purported effects of cult membership.

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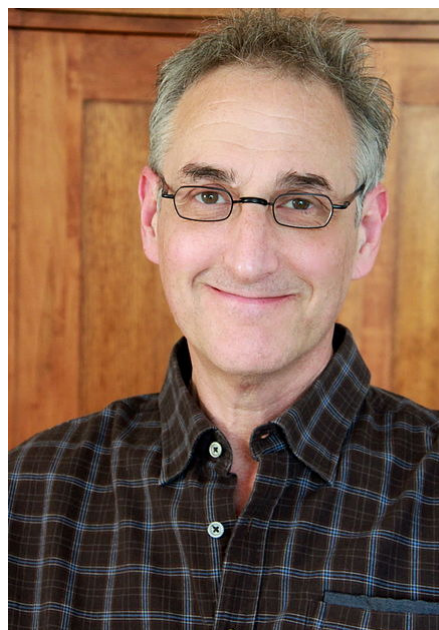
## Education

- M.Ed., Counselling Psychology, Cambridge College, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1985
- Licensed Mental Health Counselor (LMHC) in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1992
- Certified as a Nationally Certified Counselor (NCC) by the National Board for Certified Counselors, 2003

## Background

Hassan became a member of the Unification Church (aka Moonies) in the 1970s, at the age of 19, while studying at Queens College. He describes what he terms as his "recruitment" in his first book, *Combating Cult Mind Control*, asserting that this recruitment was the result of the unethical use of powerful psychological influence techniques by members of the Church.<sup>[5]</sup> He subsequently spent over two years

**Steven Hassan**



Steven Alan Hassan, M.Ed, LMHC

<b>Born</b>	1954 (age 60–61) United States
<b>Occupation</b>	Mental health counselor, specializing in cults <sup>[1]</sup> Author  Director, Freedom of Mind
<b>Nationality</b>	United States
<b>Genre</b>	Non-fiction
<b>Subject</b>	Psychology, cults
<b>Spouse</b>	Misia Landau Ph.D

### Website

www.freedomofmind.com  
(http://www.freedomofmind.com/)

recruiting and indoctrinating new members, as well as performing fundraising and campaigning duties, and ultimately rose to the rank of Assistant Director of the Unification Church at its National Headquarters. In that capacity he met personally with Sun Myung Moon.<sup>[6]</sup>

Hassan has given an account of his leaving the Unification Church in his 1998 book *Combatting Cult Mind Control* and on his personal website: After having been awake for two days as the head of a fundraising team, he caused a traffic accident when he fell asleep at the wheel of the Church's van and drove into the back of a truck. He ended up with a broken leg, surgery and a full-leg cast. During his recuperation he was given permission by his superiors in the Church to visit his parents. His parents contacted former members of the Unification Church who engaged in a deprogramming session with Hassan. Because of his cast he was not able to run or drive away, but he resisted to the point that he states that he had an impulse to "escape by reaching over and snapping my father's neck", rather than to potentially succumb to the deprogramming and betray "The Messiah". His father convinced him to stay for five days and talk to the former Church members who were conducting the deprogramming, after which time Hassan would be free to make the choice to return to the Church. Hassan agreed to this. He subsequently decided to leave the Church.<sup>[7]</sup>

In 1979, following the Jonestown deaths, Hassan founded a non-profit organization called "Ex-Moon Inc.", whose membership consisted of over four hundred former members of the Unification Church.<sup>[6]</sup>

According to his biography, "During the 1977-78 Congressional Subcommittee Investigation into South Korean CIA activities in the United States, he consulted as an expert on the Moon organization and provided information and internal documents regarding Moon's desire to influence politics in his bid to 'take over the world.'"<sup>[6]</sup>

Around 1980, Hassan began investigating methods of persuasion, mind control and indoctrination. He first studied the thought reform theories of Robert Lifton, and was "able to see clearly that the Moon organization uses all eight" of the thought reform methods described by Lifton.<sup>[7]</sup>

He later attended a seminar on hypnosis with Richard Bandler, which was based on the work that he and transformational grammarian John Grinder had done in developing Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). Hassan felt that this seminar gave him "a handle on techniques of mind control, and how to combat them." He spent "nearly two years studying NLP with everyone involved in its formulation and presentation." During this period, Hassan moved to Santa Cruz, California for an apprenticeship with Grinder. He became concerned about the marketing of NLP as a tool for "power enhancement", left his association with Grinder, and "began to study the works of Milton Erickson M.D., Virginia Satir, and Gregory Bateson, on which NLP is based." His studies gave him the basis for the development of his theories on mind control.<sup>[8]</sup>

Hassan continued to study hypnosis and is a member of the American Society for Clinical Hypnosis and The International Society of Hypnosis.<sup>[9]</sup>

In 1999, Hassan founded the Freedom of Mind Resource Center.<sup>[10]</sup> The centre is registered as a domestic profit corporation in the state of Massachusetts, and Hassan is president and treasurer.<sup>[11]</sup>

In *Combatting Cult Mind Control* Hassan describes his personal experiences with the Unification Church, as well as his theory of the four components of mind control. The sociologist Eileen Barker, who has studied the Unification Church, has commented on the book.<sup>[12]</sup> She expressed several concerns but nevertheless recommended the book. The book has been reviewed in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*,<sup>[13]</sup> and in the *The Lancet*,<sup>[14]</sup> and has been favorably reviewed by Philip Zimbardo<sup>[15]</sup> and Margaret Singer.<sup>[16]</sup>

In his second book, *Releasing the Bonds: Empowering People to Think for Themselves* (2000), Hassan presents what he terms "a much more refined method to help family and friends, called the Strategic Interaction Approach. This non-coercive, completely legal approach is far better than deprogramming, and

even exit counseling"<sup>[17]</sup>

In his third and most recent book, *Freedom of Mind: Helping Loved Ones Leave Controlling People, Cults, and Beliefs* (2012), Hassan demonstrates how his approach has evolved over the last 13 years and offers a more extensive bibliography. In addition, Hassan presents Lifton's and Singer's models alongside his own BITE model. The book has garnered a favorable review from Jerome Siegel, PHD<sup>[18]</sup> who says: "Its weakness is repetitiveness, flatness, and some theorizing that might turn off professional readers. Nonetheless, I recommend it highly for its intended audience." It has also received positive feedback from other professionals.<sup>[19]</sup>

Hassan, who is Jewish and belongs to a Temple that teaches Kabbalah, states that the actions of the Kabbalah Centre have little in common with traditional or even responsible Jewish renewal Kabbalah teachers.<sup>[20]</sup> He describes himself as an "activist who fights to protect people's right to believe whatever they want to believe", and states that his work has the broad support of religious leaders from a variety of spiritual orientations.<sup>[21]</sup> He further states that "many unorthodox religions have expressed their gratitude to me for my books because it clearly shows them NOT to be a destructive cult."<sup>[22]</sup>

His late<sup>[23]</sup> wife Aureet Bar-Yam died in 1991 after falling through ice while trying to save their dog.<sup>[24][25]</sup>

## Public impact

He consulted as an expert on the Unification Church during the 1977-1978 Congressional investigation of Korean-American relations.

He has appeared on 60 Minutes, Nightline, Dateline, Larry King Live, The O'Reilly Factor, CNN and CBS shows, and various documentaries. Since 1976, he has acquired over thirty years of experience with counseling both current and former members of groups he describes as cults.

In his first book, *Combatting Cult Mind Control*, he describes his experiences as a member the Unification Church, and describes the exit counseling methods that he developed based on those experiences, and based on his subsequent studies of psychological influence techniques. In his second book *Releasing the Bonds: Empowering People to Think for Themselves*, which was published twelve years after *Combatting Cult Mind Control*, he describes the evolution of his exit counseling procedures into a more advanced procedure that he calls the "Strategic Interaction Approach." In Steven's third and most recent book, *Freedom of Mind: Helping Loved Ones Leave Controlling People, Cults, and Beliefs*, he presents further refinement of the "Strategic Interaction Approach" and includes a larger bibliography.

In 2009, Steven was invited to the Amber Alert Conference<sup>[26]</sup> by the Department of Justice (DOJ) to explain why victims like Jaycee Dugard and Elizabeth Smart denied being who they were, and failed to use opportunities to ask for help. Law Enforcement officials such as police, FBI, Attorney General staff from many states, as well as other victims of kidnapping attended the conference.

After the 2013 Boston Marathon Bombings, Steven was brought in by the media to explain the bombers' mind state and how mind control was involved.<sup>[27][28][29][29][30][31][32]</sup>

## Mind control

Although he does not name it the "BITE model", in his first book *Combatting Cult Mind Control* Hassan describes the "four components of mind control as:<sup>[33]</sup>

- Behavior control
- Information control

- Thought control
- Emotional control

Twelve years later, in *Releasing the Bonds: Empowering People to Think for Themselves*, he developed these same components into a mind-control model, "BITE", which stands for Behavior, Information, Thoughts, and Emotions. Hassan writes that cults recruit members through a three-step process which he refers to as "unfreezing," "changing," and "refreezing," respectively. This involves the use of an extensive array of various techniques, including systematic deception, behavior modification, withholding of information, and emotionally intense persuasion techniques (such as the induction of phobias), which he collectively terms mind control.<sup>[34]</sup>

In the same book he also writes "I suspect that most cult groups use informal hypnotic techniques to induce trance states. They tend to use what are called "naturalistic" hypnotic techniques. Practicing meditation to shut down thinking, chanting a phrase repetitively for hours, or reciting affirmations are all powerful ways to promote spiritual growth. But they can also be used unethically, as methods for mind control indoctrination."<sup>[8]</sup>

He calls groups that employ such psychological influence techniques "destructive cults," a term that he defines by the methods used to recruit and retain members, and by the effect that such methods have on members, rather than by the theological/sociological/moral views the group espouses. He is opposed to the non-consensual deprogramming of cult members, and supports instead counseling them in order that they withdraw voluntarily from the organization. He writes:<sup>[35]</sup>

My mind control model outlines many key elements that need to be controlled: Behavior, Information, Thoughts and Emotions (BITE). If these four components can be controlled, then an individual's identity can be systematically manipulated and changed. Destructive mind control takes the 'locus of control' away from an individual. The person is systematically deceived about the beliefs and practices of the person (or group) and manipulated throughout the recruitment process — unable to make informed choices and exert independent judgment. The person's identity is profoundly influenced through a set of social influence techniques and a "new identity" is created — programmed to be dependent on the leader or group ideology. The person can't think for him or herself, but believes otherwise.

Hassan is a proponent of non-coercive intervention. He refers to his method as the "Strategic Interaction Approach".<sup>[36]</sup>

Twelve years after the last publication of *Combatting Cult Mind Control*, Hassan described his position on deprogramming in *Releasing the Bonds*. He states that "Deprogramming has many drawbacks. I have met dozens of people who were successfully deprogrammed but, to this day, experience psychological trauma as a result of the method. These people were glad to be released from the grip of cult programming but were not happy about the method used to help them." He further states that "A deprogramming triggers the deepest fears of cult members. They have been taken against their will. Family and friends are not to be trusted. The trauma of being thrown into a van by unknown people, driven away, and imprisoned creates mistrust, anger, and resentment." He quotes a person who was involuntarily deprogrammed as saying "What these deprogrammers did was attempt to change my mind through INFORMATION CONTROL — just like the cult did. They did not deal with the CUT-implanted phobias, which remained with me for years — the fear of certain colors, the identification of certain types of music with CUT rituals, the fear of retaliation and probable death should I ever leave this group."<sup>[36]</sup>

## Criticism

In a research paper presented at the 2000 Society for the Scientific Study of Religion conference, Anson Shupe, professor of Sociology at Indiana/Purdue University, and Susan E. Darnell, manager of a credit union, state Hassan had participated two involuntary deprogrammings in 1976 and 1977.<sup>[37][38]</sup> One involving Arthur Roselle who claims that Hassan kidnapped, hit, and forcibly detained him. Hassan acknowledges that he "was involved with the Roselle deprogramming attempt in 1976. But...was never involved in violence of any kind."<sup>[39]</sup>

Hassan states that he spent one year assisting with deprogrammings before turning to less controversial methods (see exit counseling).<sup>[22]</sup> Hassan has spoken out against involuntary deprogramming since 1980,<sup>[9][22][40]</sup> stating, "I did not and do not like the deprogramming method and stopped doing them in 1977!"<sup>[39]</sup> In *Combatting Cult Mind Control*, he stated that "the non-coercive approach will not work in every case, it has proved to be the option most families prefer. Forcible intervention can be kept as a last resort if all other attempts fail."<sup>[41]</sup> Concerned that ministers in Japan [were] encouraged to perform forcible deprogramming because of [his] first book," Hassan wrote a letter (<http://www.religiousfreedom.com/Japan/Hassan.htm>) to Reverend Seishi Kojima stating, "I oppose aggressive, illegal methods."

## See also

- Anti-cult movement

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- *Releasing the Bonds: Empowering People to Think for Themselves*, 2000. ISBN 0-9670688-0-0.
- *Freedom of Mind: Helping Loved Ones Leave Controlling People, Cults, and Beliefs*, 2012. ISBN 978-0-9670688-1-7.

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## External links

- Freedom of Mind Resource Center (<http://www.freedomofmind.com/>), Steven Hassan's website
- The Strategic Interaction Approach* ([http://www.csj.org/infoserv\\_articles/hassan\\_steven\\_strategicinteractionapproach.htm](http://www.csj.org/infoserv_articles/hassan_steven_strategicinteractionapproach.htm)), Steven Hassan



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## Media/News

- Freedom of Mind Media Collection (<http://freedomofmind.com/Media/videos.php>), Steven Hassan in the Media

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