



## **Everyone starts at the beginning.**

The beginning, though, can be so different. For some it may be physically leaving Jehovah's Witnesses first due to something like disfellowshipping. For others it may be waking up mentally and emotionally and choosing to fade away or disassociate. Still others are just legitimately depressed or struggling with anxiety and they may leave without even knowing that's what they're doing as they become inactive and fall off the radar of the local congregation without ever waking up to the realities of what they were involved in.

Then you have the varying circumstances that we find ourselves in when we leave. Some leave as soon as they're legal adults. Others leave with kids and a spouse that are still practicing Jehovah's

Witnesses. Some find themselves near the end of their trips around the sun with the newfound realization that many of those trips were spent in a cult. The young person that leaves with so many years ahead of them has time on their side but not experience or tools. The person leaving later in life may have more experience in life and tools at their disposal. Such is the yin and yang of life, there are both positives and negatives in our circumstances when we leave.

Regardless of how you start waking up, once you do there are certain things you will go through that I've seen in my experience in assisting former Jehovah's Witnesses, as well as in my own life when I woke up and left.

There are three primary stages of recovery, see where you fit in and where you might be on the path to healing and ultimate freedom. Unfortunately the road isn't linear, you may do some backtracking at times as something comes up that is triggering, or you may find out that you missed a step in your personal journey. This list isn't comprehensive, it can't literally cover every possibility, but these are stages that most go through and what they contain may be personal for each individual.



## **Stage 1 – Grief**

According to the Kubler Ross Model there are five stages to grief. These aren't necessarily experienced in any one order, you may or may not experience them all, you may experience them once and then again and again. Grief isn't something where you go through these stages and then you're finished, grief is something you take with you throughout your life and get better at managing.

Acceptance can help to mitigate the other stages but we have to come to understanding of where we've been, why and how we got there, deal with our feelings, and only after processing can we have a chance of finding healthy acceptance.

The five stages of grief:

1. Denial - The cult upbringing didn't really impact me. My family will be different, they won't shun me if I leave. My personal experience isn't that bad, others had it worse, so it's probably not worth looking at. I'm fine.
2. Anger – Rage, hatred, disgust that is consuming. Feeling tricked, lied to, etc. Anger is often an expression of extreme sadness that lies underneath for the wasted time, the pain we endured for nothing, the lost family and other relationships, opportunities missed, etc. Rage and anger often mask that sadness that we are struggling to look at because we feel like it will swallow us whole if we do. Anger can often be a way of escape so that we don't have to look at the realities of our pain.
3. Bargaining – Well maybe I don't have to go be myself, maybe I can live as a JW somehow and be happy. I could just tell my family that I'm depressed, or maybe I don't have to tell them anything. It doesn't have to go like this. I don't have to leave just because I woke up. My family will accept me if I pretend to believe or just don't make waves.
4. Depression – What if you do look at that sadness underneath the anger? Face it may lead to some depression but it is often a stage you need to go through to get to the final stage of acceptance. You

may also feel depressed because of the shame heaped upon them if people know that they are out of the organization, especially if shunning is employed. Shame is the desired effect of shunning and it often works out that way. People walk away feeling like they're bad people, defective, damaged, abnormal, so that eventually you realize you need them and crawl back.

5. Acceptance – Acceptance is letting go of the hope that it could have been different. Once you look at everything without the anger in the way as a distraction you may be sad at first. If you keep searching further for truth and don't get lost in those feelings of sadness but simply experience them you can move on to this stage of acceptance. Why did people around you do what they did? Was it malicious, or did they have good intentions but simply lacked healthy tools? Maybe they were narcissists, maybe they were abusive, we need to give weight to the pain put on us but at the same time, on the other hand, we can balance it with understanding that hurt people often hurt people. Those that led us down this path into a cult were well meaning people that were very hurt and that had very poor tools at their disposal, that were often escaping their own pain by getting so busy in a cult that they had no time to feel it. Acceptance is not approval or endorsement, it is understanding that can balance out some of the feelings we have. Ultimately acceptance can prevent us from remaining stuck in the grieving stage for the rest of our lives.



## **Stage 2 – Survival**

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a great model for both of the next two stages, surviving and then thriving. The basics of his hierarchy are comprised of the survival stage. We'll look at the first three levels consisting of physiological needs, safety, and then love and belonging.

Level 1 – Physiological needs - For many the first thing they may have to do is find a place to live. Some that leave the JW faith may literally be thrown out of their homes by a parent or even a spouse. People need a place to live, food, water, clothing, the basics.

Level 2 – Safety – Stability comes at this level. We might find it in our employment, hopefully we can establish at least the basic physiological needs with some stable work. Once we can eat, we have a place to live, just the basics of life and we aren't constantly worried that the rug is going to get pulled out from underneath us we can move on to level 3.

Level 3 – Love and belonging – Now it's time to great a social support network. A feeling of belonging actually helps us feel that safety as well that level 2 spoke of. Humans are social creatures, and for those of us that lost everyone in our lives to shunning we need to feel like we belong somewhere again. It may start of with making a friend or two at work. Then we may go out with them and meet other people and start to built that network.

Once we have these basics being met, now it's time to start the final stage.....





### **Stage 3 – Thrive**

Continuing with Maslow's work we get to the last two levels.

Level 4 – Esteem - This includes not only self-esteem but respect from others. As you start to find love and belonging and to create new relationships you can get the latter, but what about self-esteem? One of the biggest issues that people face after leaving a cult is not knowing who they are without the cult identity. If I'm not one of Jehovah's Witnesses, then who am I? This is something I coach people around because it often takes an outsider to help someone to work through that. Sometimes we can start to hear from our new friends a view of who we are, if we'll believe them. Often we struggle to take compliments or to believe good things about ourselves. The common refrain from most of us was a feeling of never feeling good enough in our JW life. If we can start to find that feeling for ourselves we can truly thrive. We will develop deeper relationships with others and most importantly, with ourselves.

Level 5 – Self-actualization – If we start to see ourselves more clearly we'll be able to seek growth and take on new opportunities and

challenges in life. This is where we really start moving on. We all have potential that was lost inside the organization but we can find it on the outside and put it to use. This can be a fun stage of exploration.

The point of this is to give you some idea of where you might be in the growth process. There's no shame in being wherever you are. We all have to go through these stages to rebuild our lives and to finally have a chance of finding happiness and fulfillment in the one and only life that we have now.

The bad news about all of this is that your life is now in your hands and it is up to you and you alone to decide what to make out of it. The good news is that your life is now in your hands and it is up to you and you alone what to make out of it.

If you would like help along this journey please reach out at [exjwhelp@gmail.com](mailto:exjwhelp@gmail.com) and let's talk. I am an IACC certified coach specializing in helping former Jehovah's Witnesses get beyond their past so that they can find themselves and then create the life that they actually want, not just the one that they were given. I will work one on one with you to help along the way to become aware of patterns that you may be playing out that hold you back, to be the mirror to help you finally see yourself, and to help you work through all of the possibilities. You don't have to do this alone. - Michael Shemwell