

Avoiding High-Pressure Religious Communities and Groups with Controlling Practices: An Educational Resource from the Tufts University Chaplaincy

Everyone is capable of being persuaded to do something that we did not want to do, and that susceptibility is what high-pressure religious communities and groups use to incrementally take over people's lives. High-pressure communities and groups do not start with something dramatic but with incremental efforts to control people's thoughts and lives little by little. New students and others experiencing major life transitions are often especially susceptible to high-pressure groups, which often seem extremely friendly, provide many opportunities for socializing, and seem to create stability in a time of change. For that reason, these groups often try to recruit people in times of transition. However, **unlike healthy spiritual and ethical communities, these groups do not ultimately support students' intellectual freedom and academic success, physical and mental health, and positive relationships with family and friends as part of a healthy, balanced life.**

Tufts University's policies for recognized religious and philosophical communities prohibit behaviors such as deceptiveness, proselytizing (outreach that involves pressure or exploits vulnerabilities), and harassment. Therefore, we strongly encourage students to begin their exploration for religious and philosophical communities with those listed on the University Chaplaincy website (<http://chaplaincy.tufts.edu>). For your protection and that of all members of the Tufts community, if you believe you have encountered a high-pressure community or group with controlling practices on campus, please contact University Chaplain Elyse Nelson Winger at elyse.nelson_winger@tufts.edu or call her at 617-627-6024.

High-pressure religious communities and groups can be hard to recognize at first, and there is a spectrum in the aggressiveness of these groups' tactics. Some high-pressure groups seem to share some of the beliefs or features of mainstream religious 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—spiritually, socially, romantically, financially, and in every way.

Some Characteristics of High-Pressure Religious Communities and Groups with Controlling Practices

1. **LACK OF FORMAL RECOGNITION:** The guidelines that govern recognized religious and philosophical communities at Tufts University are put in place to protect your wellbeing. Groups that are not connected with university structures or that refuse to comply with university policies should raise questions. Tufts' religious and philosophical communities are expected to operate in a mutually respectful and collaborative ecumenical and interfaith way.
2. **DECEPTIVENESS OR MISINFORMATION:** High-pressure groups generally 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.
3. **OUTREACH EXCEEDS YOUR COMFORT LEVEL:** High-pressure groups generally appear very friendly and you may feel like you are instantly friends with everyone. 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.
4. **INAPPROPRIATE ADVISING/MENTORING:** High-pressure 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.

5. **ABSOLUTISM:** High-pressure groups generally discourage doubts, differences of opinion, criticism, research, and exposure. They may present only one right way to think and claim to have all the answers. They may regard disagreement as a sign of weakness or lack of commitment. They may demand rigid loyalty, present issues in terms of black-and-white thinking (e.g., saved or unsaved, pure or impure, with us or against us), and suggest catastrophic consequences for difference or disobedience (such as withdrawal of relationship, or graphic descriptions of eternal suffering).

6. **SEPARATION:** High-pressure 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 or minorities.

7. **MAJOR CHANGES:** High-pressure groups may pressure you to make major life changes, such as cutting off human relationships (family, friends, romantic, etc.), changing courses or 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.

8. **EMOTIONAL DISTRESS:** High-pressure group activities may leave you feeling lower self-esteem, anxiety, depression, unworthiness, shame, fatigued, disempowered, or like you have fewer choices.

9. **DENIAL:** High-pressure groups often deny being so and demonize their critics.

How to Avoid Involvement in High-Pressure Religious Communities and Groups with Controlling Practices

1. Explore Tufts' Religious and Philosophical student organizations and other student groups recognized by the Tufts Community Union (TCU).
2. Report any group on campus you think might be a high-pressure group to the University Chaplain.
3. Talk to people with different worldviews and maintain relationships with people of different perspectives.
4. Explore and stay involved in multiple groups and activities.
5. Educate yourself.

Support Resources

If you, or someone you know, has encountered a high-pressure religious community on campus, please reach out to any of the following offices:

Tufts University Chaplaincy: chaplaincy@tufts.edu or 617-627-3427

Tufts University Department of Public Safety: 617-627-3030

Tufts University Office of Equal Opportunity: oeo@tufts.edu or 617-627-3298