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Smallville Actress Allison Mack Recruited Women for a Sex Cult—Why Would a Person Do That?

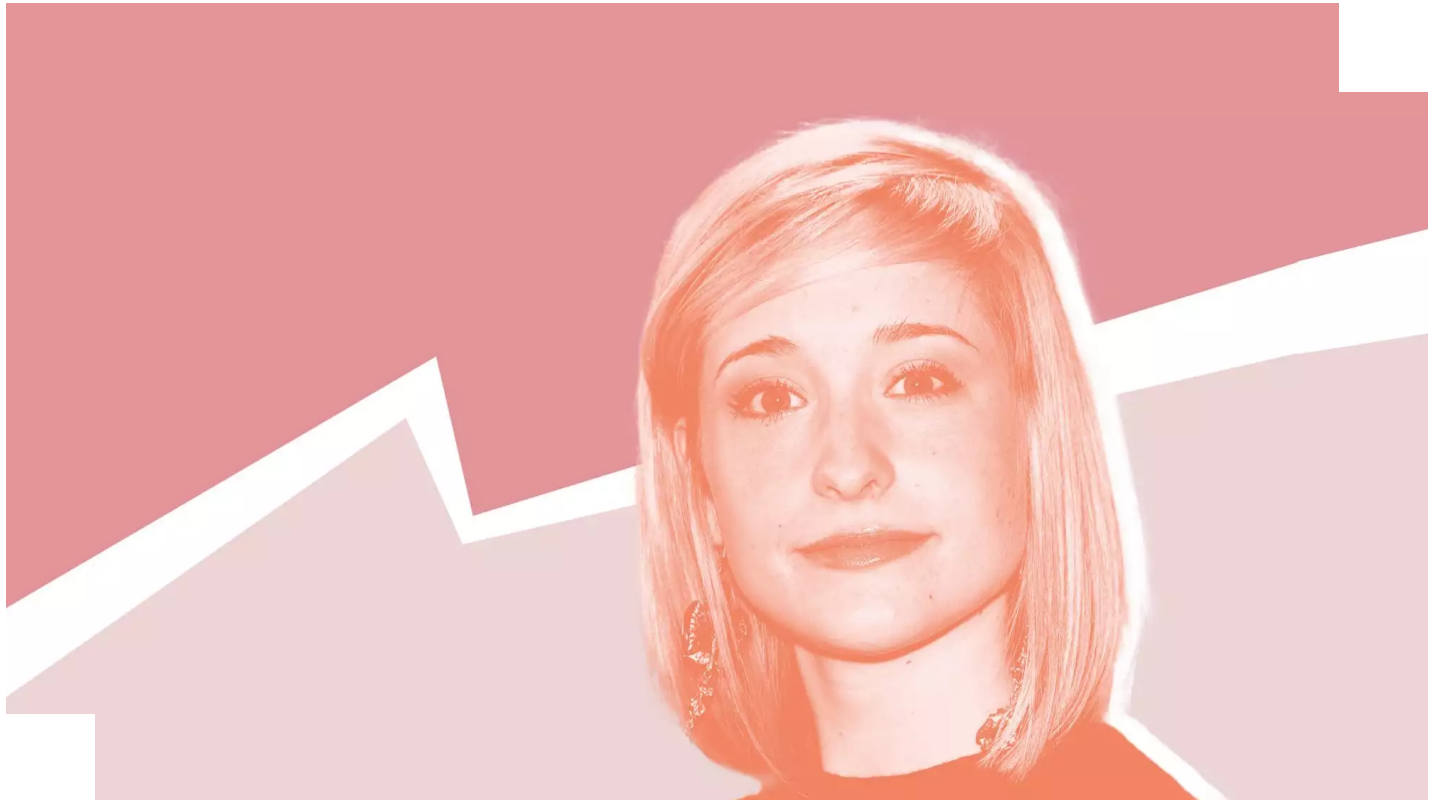
Mack pleaded guilty to charges related to her involvement in a group called Nxivm. We asked a psychologist who studies cults to explain why someone would join such a group.

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Nothing fascinates us quite like cults. Documentaries about them have a, well, cult following, and groups that are rumored to have cult-like characteristics repeatedly make headlines. This week's news, however, is about more than just rumors.

On Monday, *Smallville* actress Allison Mack pleaded guilty to charges related to a group called Nxivm, after she allegedly manipulated and blackmailed women into being "sex slaves" for its leader.

Nxivm is a group based in Albany, New York, that billed itself as a self-help organization. In late 2017, the [New York Times](#) published an article about a disturbing internal society within Nxivm (called D.O.S.) that did horrifying things, such as burn founder Keith Raniere's initials below members' hips with a cauterizing device. The article also alleged that members were told to starve themselves to achieve Raniere's standard of beauty so they could have sexual encounters with him.

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Since the investigation into the society began, increasingly alarming details have emerged, especially about Mack's involvement. In April 2018, Mack was arrested by the FBI on charges of sex trafficking, conspiracy to commit sex trafficking, and forced labor. At the time, she pleaded not guilty, but this week, she changed her plea.

As Mack tearfully pleaded guilty to racketeering and racketeering conspiracy, she also admitted to recruiting women into the cult by telling them they were joining a female mentorship program. In addition, she confessed to forcing them to give her damaging personal information, or "collateral," so that she could blackmail them if they didn't follow her or Raniere's orders. Now, Mack faces up to 40 years in prison. She's set to be sentenced in September.

Sounds like it could be straight out of one of those binge-worthy cult documentaries on Netflix, right?

Mack's involvement in this skin-crawling scheme got us thinking: How does an intelligent, successful young woman get caught up in such a twisted dystopian cult? Alexandra Stein, PhD, author of *Terror, Love and Brainwashing: Attachment*

in Cults and Totalitarian Systems, has many thoughts on this, especially because she was once a member of a cult herself.

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First, Stein says people don't *knowingly* join cults. "Someone might go to a yoga class, or to a personal development seminar, or to a church, all for perfectly normal reasons," she says, explaining that cults often have a convincing facade. Nxivm, for example, held so-called professional development seminars. Mack told the judge on Monday that she first joined the group to "find purpose."

Researchers have tried to create a psychological profile of those who are vulnerable to cults, Stein says, but they've found that there's more than one profile. Cults manage to deceive an array of people. "We do find, though, that people might be situationally vulnerable at a particular point in their lives," she says. "If they've had a normal life change, maybe they've moved, changed jobs, or had a breakup, they're more likely to try something new. You may then, by bad luck, run into a dangerous relationship, whether it's with an individual or a group."

Most people aren't taught the warning signs of coercive relationships, she adds, which makes us vulnerable to cult tactics. Members lure new followers by claiming the group will make you empowered, fulfilled, loved, rich, holy, and more. Then, they slowly isolate you. They say your family and friends will only hold you back, or, in some cases, they may keep you so busy with the group that you don't have any time for your old life.

After they've cut off a new member from the outside world, it's rather easy for them to convince that person to do illegal things for the good of the group. "It's very hard for us as humans, as isolated humans, to hang onto our own sense of right without any kind of social support," Stein says. In other words, if every single person around you is telling you breaking the law is right, you'll quickly begin to believe it is.

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A member may know in their gut that what they're doing is wrong, but they've been conditioned to see the group as their one and only source of safety. So if they feel scared or stressed, they turn to the group for comfort, but they don't realize that the group is actually what's causing their stress. That creates a dangerous cycle. This "trauma relationship," as Stein calls it, can also cause people to dissociate, or completely disconnect from their thoughts, feelings, memories, and sense of identity.

New members will also be gradually introduced to the idea of doing illegal things, so by the time they're committing crimes that could put them in jail for life, it doesn't feel like as big of a deal. Plus, there's punishment for saying no, such as the release of the "collateral" that Mack collected.

Those punishments are typically implemented by the leader, who is seen as a god among the cult. Stein compares cult leaders to abusive boyfriends: They manipulate people by pretending to love them, making them dependent on that love by isolating them from the rest of the world, and then controlling them by saying they won't get that love unless they do everything that's asked of them.

Steve Hassan, author of *Combating Cult Mind Control: The #1 Best-selling Guide to Protection, Rescue, and Recovery from Destructive Cults*, also once belonged to a cult. Hassan tells *Health* that, while no one is excusing Mack of her criminal actions, we do need to remember that people don't voluntarily join cults. Mack, along with all other members of Nxivm, was brainwashed by the group she joined. Cult members are victims of the people who found such groups, and unfortunately, some remain victims for their entire lives.

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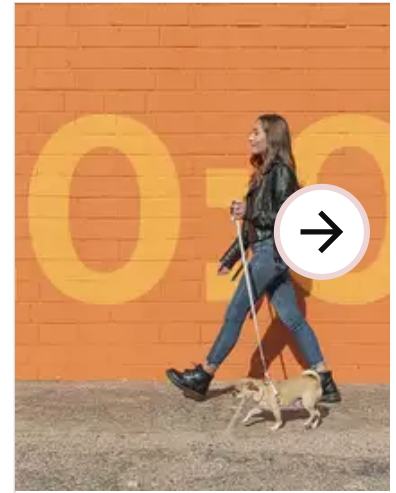
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