

# est

Graduates claim myriad benefits — researchers find psychological dangers

BY JOEL GREENBERG

"Ms. F." is a 26-year-old single high school teacher. Two years ago, after her long-term involvement with a man began to deteriorate, she enrolled in est (Erhard Seminars Training) in an effort to salvage the relationship. During est, she came to see herself as being the "victim" in her relationships, a painful insight that shook her self-esteem. She could not share her discomfort with the group because she felt "the leader did not want to hear negative experiences" and the group "would not be supportive."

During the first week of est, Ms. F. began gorging herself and within a month had gained 30 pounds. After completing the program she became "apathetic" and "lost interest" in life. She broke off contact with all friends and intermittently contemplated suicide — she described this period as "the worst time in my whole life."

Ms. F. is one of seven reported cases of persons who experienced psychotic episodes after undergoing est but not before. "The authoritarian est leadership style may mobilize in trainees an overdetermined pathological reliance on identification with the aggressor. Such a mechanism may be central to the production of psychiatric casualties, particularly in individuals with defective ego boundaries," report psychiatrists Michael A. Kirsch of Langley Porter Neuropsychiatric Institute in San Francisco and Leonard L. Glass of McLean Hospital in Belmont, Mass., and Harvard Medical School

The two latest cases of est-related psychotic episodes were detailed by Kirsch and Glass in the November, 1977, *AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PSYCHIATRY*. The announcement earlier last year of their discovery of the five other cases caused a brief furor over possible negative effects of est. In their current report, Kirsch and Glass suggest that the est "approach systematically replicates the leadership style with the greatest known capacity for psy-

chological injury and exposes a virtually unscreened and highly stressed population to it."

Herb Hamsher, a member of est's advisory board and a psychology faculty member at Temple University, says he has "no particular difficulty believing these stories [the Glass and Kirsch case reports] could happen to people... est is something that has an impact on people — it is a powerful experience. And as a powerful experience it cannot avoid contributing to something as major as a psychotic episode... but contributing is not the same as

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precipitating. It is not the case that est is a causal factor" in such episodes, he said.

The warnings of critics contrast sharply with the praises sung by est advocates and "graduates" of the two-weekend course in "personal growth." In the words of est originator Werner Erhard, "It elevates you from being the effect of your circumstances to being the cause of your circumstances.... When you get in touch with yourself — not with your position and not with your ego and not with your point of view, but with yourself... you will experi-

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ence yourself as the creator of your own circumstances."

In one survey of 1,500 est graduates, respondents report that since taking est they have experienced health improvements in everything from allergies, acne and diarrhea to sexual difficulties, fear of doctors and the "meaningfulness of life."

Est has been described as a sort of combination Eastern philosophy and brainwashing. The initial, 60-hour, \$300 course

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(followup "graduate seminars" are also available) consists of an experienced est trainer interacting with a large roomful of people. The training involves many facets and nuances, but according to a National Institute of Mental Health study, est employs some basic techniques designed "to induce instructional control over some aspects of the trainees' behavior":

- The trainer verbally punishes any attempt by the trainees to assert their own personal status. The standard punishment is the labeling of the trainee as an "asshole." (The use of this term is stressed specifically by researchers as a common est strategy.)
- Trainees are repeatedly reminded that they know very little about anything, primarily because what they've always thought of as facts are simply what others have passed on as such — and what they must truly know is their individual selves.
- A mind/self distinction is created, and a

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distrust of reliance on the mind is urged.

- By making the trainees feel ashamed and guilty in a variety of ways, the trainer verbally punishes all attempts to break from the assumptions of est. The trainer often reminds participants of how poor they are at keeping agreements in general and how often they lie to break them.
- Est trainees are physically constricted as well. They sit through a 15-hour day in a cool room (68° to 72° F) and are able to leave their chairs only at the trainer's instruction. "These conditions elicit real discomfort, especially to back, rump and bladder," says the NIMH report. "They [the trainees] may well become scared, increasingly scared, yet not in a way they can readily confess to others and themselves. This discomfort seems to be systematically useful to the induction of instructional control over some of their behavior by the trainer."

Then, through a series of various behavior control techniques of subtle, verbal rewards, as well as punishments, the trainer gradually induces the participants

to internalize the est philosophies. Among the tangible results now is a moderate cult of about 100,000 est graduates who approach life through est maxims and communicate largely in est jargon.

For example, in a letter to Erhard published in est's monthly GRADUATE REVIEW magazine, a graduate depicted his reaction to having his wallet stolen in France, and the subsequent cold reaction of the French people he met. "I finally discovered ... [that] I am absolutely alone ... and I felt a huge rush of relief. ... In the world of form there is no relationship, nobody cares, and there is nothing except exchange, survival,

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looking for the advantage, etc. ... It doesn't matter what forms I create in my life; it's all the same system anyway. And what I'm up to is experiencing loving and being loved, making a contribution, relating, experiencing my experience, etc."

After examining disturbed est graduates, Kirsch and Glass caution that the est vocabulary alone can confuse and bewilder trainees who are in a precarious emotional state. After hearing the trainer spout such statements as, "Let it be okay not to be something before you can be it," and "Talking in the back of my head," a 24-year-old woman said her "thinking went wild." In the midst of the course she became delusional, thinking she was the Virgin Mary, that the trainer loved her and that Erhard was inside her. Within three months she isolated herself from her family and began staring into space and hearing voices. She was convinced Erhard was inside her and that she was in communication with him.

The two researchers single out the "authoritarian," "confrontational" and "highly charismatic" character of the typical est trainer as the primary instrument of danger to susceptible trainees. And they add that est's screening and follow-up procedures are inadequate to identify such persons-at-risk.

Hamsher (of est) concedes that screening for est isn't foolproof. Under current policy, persons are not accepted for training if they have been institutionalized; if in therapy, they must obtain their therapist's permission. "Screening is really a psychiatric and psychological function," says Hamsher. "And since est is not either, it is inappropriate for est to do [professional screening]. We're continually looking at the issue ... there may be ways to get improvement." Hamsher adds that the training is not truly authoritarian in nature, because trainees voluntarily sign

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agreements to undergo seminar conditions beforehand.

Not all assessments of est are negative, however. Indeed, some researchers have depicted the training as one of the most mentally and physically healthful movements in existence today.

In an est-funded survey of 1,465 graduates, a study team headed by University of California research psychologist Robert Ornstein says that people report post-est health improvements of a scope that even Erhard himself may not have envisioned. They report positive effects in "general physical health; mental health; missing work due to illness, headache, migraine and hypertension; sleep difficulties; drug usage, including pain medication, sleeping medication, tranquilizers and psychoactive drugs; alcohol consumption; energy level; satisfaction with work; relationships with significant others; meaningfulness of life; allergies, acne, weight problems, colds, sore throats and sinus problems, ulcers, colitis, indigestion, diarrhea, constipation and gas; back, neck and shoulder pain; genito-urinary complaints; cigarette and marijuana smoking; nervous habits; memory problems; sexual difficulties; and fear of doctors."

Only six respondents (two of whom were hospitalized) "could be characterized as worse overall" psychologically, Ornstein and his colleagues report. However, 8.1 percent of the graduates showed at least one sign of worsening psychological health. About 6 percent reported a de-

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cline in physical health and well-being.

Ornstein and his colleagues make no attempt to comprehensively explain the overwhelming variety of glowing self reports, but they do suggest that a psychological "placebo effect" may be at work. "A combination of the participants' expectations, seminar leaders' expectations and activity in the seminar program renders a greater part of the individual's psychosomatic process under voluntary or homeostatic self-regulation.

"Physicians have long recognized that whenever a new drug or treatment ap-

pears, excitement and expectancy cause effects of greater magnitude and wider-reaching target problems than the procedure will show once it has become more commonplace," they say. Nevertheless, the researchers report, "the length of effect ... seems not to fall off with time in our data."

Stephanie B. Stolz and Donald M. Baer, who conducted the NIMH descriptive study of est, caution that "the testimony of increased satisfaction does not in itself testify to ... the desirability of the method that produced the testimony ... The only persons who can know whether satisfaction potentially derived from est has occurred are the individual trainees. And there is no point in asking them, because some of them lie (like some of us)," say Baer of the University of Kansas and Stolz of NIMH's Kansas City branch.

However, the Stolz-Baer report is generally favorable toward est. "Est in fact allows, undependably, unpredictably and variably across trainees, the establishment of a new repertoire, specifiable only as an increased awareness of their experience of shift in personal epistemology or context — one component of which may be an increased skill in recognizing the behavior-controlling contingencies under which they have been living," say the researchers. "Est graduates may be to that extent in better control of their lives or in better harmony with the current control."

But est does not work for everyone, they acknowledge, and is capable of producing negative consequences. The "worst possible" outcome, according to Stolz and Baer, "is that est establishes no new repertoire of self-analysis skills nor heightened awareness nor shift in epistemology of its graduates. It simply scares them badly and impresses them with inscrutable Eastern philosophy that cannot be analyzed by them, considering their state during training."

In negative experiences, trainees have been known to walk out on the seminars. Others approach est as "only a new entertainment or a new peer group," say the researchers. "Sometimes, previously lonely graduates act as if they had learned nothing but a small new vocabulary which is their pass into an exciting and stimulating group of new friends," they suggest. Others may adopt all the words and trappings of an est graduate, but undergo no real change — "it is much like pagans deciding henceforth to wear crucifixes and cross themselves, for no better reason than that they have come to like some Catholics." Finally, est for some is "nothing but an uncomfortable pair of weekends, by virtue of which they are able to play 'one up' with their non-est peers more effectively than before," they say.

Stolz and Baer conclude that est "as an intervention ... is possibly unusually effective ... We offer no explanation of this aspect of est here, because we do not understand it." □