

Stonebriar Psychiatric Services News & Views

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Defense Wins Games... and Helps to Manage Life

Last month we began to look at the topic of psychological defense mechanisms as it relates to our daily emotional functioning and ability to cope with various situations. We saw how defense helped the Mavericks win the recent NBA title, and the same is true for life. We need defense mechanisms to help us function on a daily basis. However, when carried to an extreme, particularly in relying on a single defense mechanism, it can certainly cause problems as well. Last month we were looking at what many have termed "immature" defenses, primarily meaning that they tend to be some of the earliest formed in our emotional development. This month I would like to look at defenses that are formed a bit later and classically have often been termed "neurotic" defenses.

Neurotic Defenses

Although frequently the term "neurotic" is used to describe someone who may be a bit quirky or eccentric, in this context it primarily indicates defense mechanisms that are formed a bit later than the immature defenses, and again if used to excess may present in the classic sense of "neurotic behavior." However, we all use these defenses at one time or another, so let's take a look at them. Keep in mind that defense mechanisms are neither positive nor negative but are ways that we attempt to regulate our own needs, drives, and uncomfortable emotions, such as fear, anxiety, or anger.

Perhaps one of the most common of these defenses might be termed **controlling**. This would represent an attempt to manage situations or individuals in one's life in order to minimize anxiety or to control the emotions associated with one's own inner conflicts. We have all known individuals that we would call controlling as their general way of interacting with others. Although this can be very frustrating and difficult to deal with, it also represents that person's way of trying to deal with their own anxiety about what is going on and particularly the anxiety of dealing with the unknowns of the situation and the effect it may have on him if he is not able to control it. When individuals are in situations that are not controlled by their actions, whether it be manipulation, threats, etc., they may tend to heighten their effort before giving up, at which point their anxiety may rise significantly.

Displacement is when we shift a particular emotion or drive from one object or situation to another that may resemble the original one in some way. The goal of this is that the situation or object to which the emotion is displaced does not tend to be as strongly felt or invested with as much charged emotion as the original situation. One example of displacement might be someone who very strongly wants a particular promotion at work, but for various reasons believes that if they did not get it that it would represent a significant failure and rejection of them. Therefore, instead they apply for perhaps a different position, not as desirable, but more likely to be obtained. They avoid the risk of greater rejection by taking a position that is less desirable. Anger is also frequently displaced from one object to the other. For example, if we become angry at someone who represents a significant threat and with whom the expression of the anger might cause significant negative consequences, then we may take it out on someone who feels safer. Unfortunately this often happens to be people that we are closer to such as friends or family.

Externalization is somewhat related to the defense mechanism of projection, which we talked about last month, although is seen as a more general

term than projection. Externalization is when an individual tends to see in the external world or other people aspects of one's own personality, feelings, or impulses. At times this may be accurate, as frequently we are most tuned in to, or even critical of, aspects of other people that we do not like in ourselves. But at other times our externalizing to others some of our own feelings or wishes may be completely off base and can lead to significant misunderstandings.

The defense mechanism of *inhibition* for many might be seen as a more mature defense, as it represents the process in which we consciously limit some ego functions and desires in order to avoid anxiety that would result from conflict that would come from expressing certain impulses. Where this can become a problem is when it is overused as a defense, we have what people would see as an extremely inhibited individual who is afraid to express any feeling or need for fear of it creating conflict or criticism by others. At times we all need to inhibit certain impulses and desires that we may have, but you don't necessarily want to build your entire life around it.

A very common defense mechanism that we all tend to use is *intellectualization*. This is when we tend to rely excessively on "thinking over feeling" as a way to avoid emotional expression or experiences. Frequently this is used to avoid intimacy with other people and may be characterized by individuals who over think a situation or focus too much on the details and avoid experiencing the associated emotions. A very common example of this can occur in my own profession in the medical field. In medical school one is taught to handle emergency situations through one's knowledge and action. If one is caught up in the emotions of the situation, it may interfere with one's ability to be effective in treating the patient. The same is true regarding the training of policeman, soldiers in combat, EMTs, and anyone else who needs to deal with emergencies. It becomes problematic when this carries over into other areas of one's life where one should be able to feel the emotion of the situation and yet focuses on solving the problem rather than experiencing the feelings. To be emotionally healthy, one needs to find a balance of both in one's life.

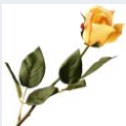
Closely related to intellectualization is the defense of *rationalization*. This is when one attempts to present what seems like rational explanations to others, or even to oneself, to justify actions or beliefs that are otherwise unacceptable by usual standards. In most cases, this is used to justify meeting certain needs or certain instinctual or impulsive behaviors that would otherwise not be acceptable.

The defense of *isolation* does not simply refer to an individual that remains aloof or apart from others, although it can take that form. Isolation is when we tend to separate an idea from the emotion associated with it but is then repressed, which is a way of blocking things out from one's conscious awareness (we will deal with that next month). One extreme form of this relates to what is known in psychological jargon as "splitting." This is an extreme form of seeing things as being all good or all bad, black or white, and it can switch abruptly. There are certain personality disorders, such as with borderline personality disorder, where this can be a hallmark feature. An individual using this mechanism of splitting may see another individual as wonderful, loving, and with absolutely no faults one minute, but if hurt or wronged by this individual they may then go to seeing them as hateful, unlovable, and is often associated with extreme anger and rage. These individuals have a hard time holding on to the positive internal image of this other person, while at the same time perhaps feeling hurt by them or angry toward them. As you can imagine, this can make for very chaotic relationships.

Next month we will pick up our continued exploration of defense mechanisms by looking at the defense known as dissociation. Until then, remember that defenses help us to function, but like most things in life, to be effective they must be balanced and flexible.



Do you have topical requests for future newsletters? Let us know at: NewsletterQuestions@stonebriarps.com



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