

Stonebriar Psychiatric Services News & Views

By Wendy Copeland, MA, LPC, ITC

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**David T. Tharp,
M.D., M.Div.,**

**Board Certified
Psychiatrist**

Medical Director



*Wendy Copeland,
MA, LPC, ITC*

Staff Therapist



Wendy Copeland, MA, LPC, ITC
Verified - Data

**Stonebriar Psychiatric
Services, PA**
3550 Parkwood Blvd.
Suite 705
Frisco, TX 75034

Phone
972-335-2430

E-mail
NewsletterQuestions@
stonebriarps.com

We're on the Web!
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Denial: The Amazing, Incredible & Often Elusive Defense Mechanism

On the topic of denial, American author and often irreverent humorist, Mark Twain quipped, "Denial ain't just a river in Egypt." No, it sure ain't! Like the Nile River, denial can be very powerful. Denial is one of many defense mechanisms used by the mind to handle the challenges of reality. Defense mechanisms are unconscious (unaware) processes. That is, we are generally unaware of them and are not knowingly choosing them.

Defense Mechanisms and Denial

Defense mechanisms are used by an individual to cope with impulses, feelings or ideas which are not acceptable at their conscious (awareness) level. More simply put, defense mechanisms surface to help us deal with our reality about ourselves and the world. Some examples of defense mechanisms include, denying, minimizing, rationalizing, projecting, and fantasizing.

In many ways, defense mechanisms are quite brilliant. They can help us to cope and manage challenging, scary, or even life-threatening circumstances and realities. Defense mechanisms can be adaptive, helping us to function and work through otherwise overwhelming stressors. They can help us adjust to distressing realities in our lives without being paralyzed by environmental threats and powerful feelings.

For example, the defense mechanism of denial is common following first learning of a loved one's death. During this time, the full finality of the loss is not fully comprehended consciously. Denial will help the family to participate in funeral activities, still engage with others, and survive the initial days of bereavement. If grieving continues without complication, shock and denial is replaced with a growing awareness and understanding of the death and loss that has occurred. Families then work through subsequent stages such as anger, bargaining, depression, and (hopefully) acceptance.

The Dark Side of Denial

Although denial, for a short period of time, can be a generally healthy coping mechanism to adjust to a painful or stressful issue, prolonged denial can be extremely problematic. In fact, prolonged denial results in maladaptive functioning. When you avert your eyes from a stress or loss, you avoid direct confrontation by refusing to acknowledge its presence. Burying your head in the sand can have some serious consequences. You can ignore a problem, but that will not make it go away. When you avoid for too long, you can lose out financially, emotionally, physically, relationally, vocationally, or perhaps the most tragic of all ... you can lose life itself.

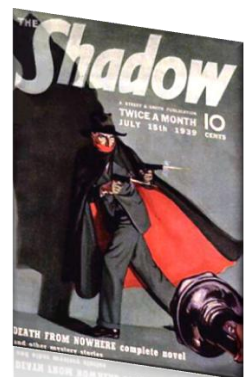
"The Shadow": The Illusive, Confusing Nature of Denial

The problem with Denial, is that he will deny his own existence! Why? Well, because his power is in his illusiveness, his ability to influence and yet remain unidentified. If Denial could be personified, I think that "The Shadow" would fit best. The Shadow was a 1930's pulp magazine, radio drama, and movie character.

The Shadow was a crime-fighting vigilante with psychic powers. He had "the power to cloud men's minds" so they could not see him. The Shadow did not have the ability to become literally invisible. Instead, he influenced the minds of his opponents by making them see him a few feet to the right or left of where he really stood.

This is similar to how Denial works. He causes us to look a few feet to the left or the right of the real issue. He clouds minds with his glorious distractions. We cannot see what is right there before us. We look away instead.

The truth is, we often do not want to see what is right there before our eyes. A parent does not want to acknowledge that the funny smell drifting from his son's room is a joint; his son is only 14. His son is now getting interested in cocaine. A wife cannot bear the thought that her husband of 20 years is in an affair and attributes his changed behavior and increased absence as simply middle-age crisis. A co-dependent couple cannot acknowledge the toxicity of the marriage, and instead write it off as "that's just the way it is." They are fearful of what would happen if they really address their feelings and



Treatment for

Depression
Anxiety / Panic Attacks
Eating Disorders
Bi-polar Disorder
Obsessive –
Compulsive
Disorder
Compulsive Behaviors
such as sexual
addiction
Post-traumatic Stress
Disorder from past
abuse
Rytional issues
Adjustment to life
changes

Ages Served

Adult
Adolescent
Children ages 10 & up

fears. What if the relationship could not withstand it? A 50-year-old woman cannot acknowledge the pain and incest of her childhood. It seems way too scary for her. She reasons that she has survived this long without ever talking about it. Yet she has a trail of broken relationships with men; she could never really trust them.

Then there is the alcoholic family. Yes, mom arrives home in a drunken stupor on Friday and Saturday nights. Sometimes she doesn't make it home at all. Sometimes they figure maybe that is safer for her because at least she is not out on the road. Dad and the kids reason that she just needs to de-stress... it is not a big deal, really. After all, she never drinks on a weeknight and never alone; she is a hard worker. Still, her two kids really wish she could rouse herself for their weekend soccer games. She won't though; she is too hung-over.

Denial: Vigilante or Villain?

Individuals and families sometimes can view denial like the vigilante, Shadow. After all, he means well. He understands our pain and fear. He won't make us look at those painful and scary realities. With his trusty mind-altering distractions, he keeps us safe with our heads firmly planted in the ground.

And with our heads firmly planted in the ground,

...our sons get higher and higher on drugs that make them sick, distant, and possibly dead

...our marriages stay broken and riddled with tension, hurt, and pain

...our pasts stay tightly locked within us, toxifying us and our relationships

...our spouses stay addicted, putrefying themselves and us

...our families stay wounded, disconnected, missing the connection we long for

We remain sick and broken and miss the healing and new life that could be ours...if only we would pull our heads out of the sand!

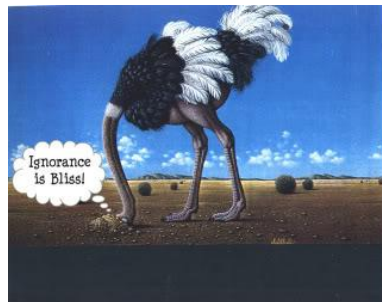
So maybe the great vigilante, Denial, cannot justify the means for the end. After all, we have no control when we cannot look squarely at the problem before us. We need the courage to stay conscious, with head above ground and firmly planted on our shoulders. With good support and the willingness to grow our awareness, we can become solid, grounded and responsible. When we face our reality, we can ultimately find our solution.

After all, like The Shadow, Denial is not really invisible. We can call him out of the shadows and we can take possession of clarity. **And clarity, my friends, is freedom!** Clarity brings the freedom to name the pain, to address the pain, to heal the pain. Clarity brings the freedom to make choices, to recover, and to reclaim things once lost.

If you want to have the kind of clarity that brings freedom to really live, consider the following Denial Defeaters:

- ✚ How does Denial operate in your life? In the lives of your loved ones?
- ✚ Identify some areas of your life where you tend to ignore, minimize, or deflect.
- ✚ Identify what you may permit or perpetuate in your life when you choose to ignore.
- ✚ Name your fears about seeing this more clearly. What might happen?
- ✚ What changes might be needed if you did look at this?
- ✚ How is this change hard for you? What might this require of you or others?
- ✚ List the potential consequences to you and others of inaction.
- ✚ Name the gifts that could be yours if you could face reality.
- ✚ Name the gifts that could be others if you could face reality.
- ✚ Name the types of positive life changes that you could have if you take ownership in these areas.
- ✚ Share your insights about these questions with a trusted person.

There is a reason why we do not like to look directly into the face of reality. It can seem very overwhelming, especially if your head has been buried in the sand for a long time. Choose support from people you trust, a support group or a trained counselor, as you face these issues. As you gain clarity and receive support, fear will lose its grip and hope can take hold!



**“So maybe the great vigilante,
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for the end...”**



Stonebriar Psychiatric Services, PA
3550 Parkwood Blvd. Suite 705 Frisco, TX 75034
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