

# Stonebriar Psychiatric Services

## News & Views

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

**Board Certified  
Psychiatrist**

**Medical Director**

**Stonebriar Psychiatric  
Services, PA**

3550 Parkwood Blvd.  
Suite 705  
Frisco, TX 75034

**Phone**

972-335-2430

**E-mail**

NewsletterQuestions@  
stonebriarps.com

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Adult  
Adolescent  
Children ages 10 & up

### **Your Favorite Sports Team Is Not the Only One That Needs Good Defense**

After Ms. Copeland did such a great job last month in talking about the psychological defense called denial, I felt that it might be helpful to discuss some of the other psychological defenses that we use to function in this world. I must say that I am a bit nervous in attempting this, as we try to keep these newsletters practical as well as informative, so I will try to avoid the theory behind defense mechanisms and focus more on how they might affect us in everyday life.

Generally defense mechanisms are arranged according to different levels, which often correlate with a child's age and the level of psychological development they have obtained. As Wendy stressed, we all tend to use many of these defense mechanisms at one time or another, but they may become problematic when the individual tends to use them exclusively or perhaps inappropriately for the situation. For our purposes, we will class these as being immature defenses, "neurotic" defenses, and mature defenses. In that last month Ms. Copeland already covered the defense of denial, generally considered one of the immature defenses which develops relatively early on psychologically, I will not review that at this time.

#### *Immature Defenses*

A second immature defense is what is known as distortion. With distortion we tend to reshape in our own mind an external reality to suit our own inner needs. At times this could be manifest as thinking a simple comment or complement by a boss means that we will get a promotion. Carried to the extreme, an individual may develop irrational feelings of superiority or entitlement to the point of it representing a delusion, i.e., a belief without a sound basis in reality. At times distortion within reason may have a positive function. An example might be the old, "it's not you, it's me," line for breaking off a relationship when both realize that the truth is probably somewhere in between, but it may ease the pain for both parties.

Projection, although considered an immature defense, is fairly common and particularly among certain personality types. Projection involves our reaction to our own unacceptable inner impulses or feelings and instead seeing these impulses and feelings in those around us. In a psychotic individual, this can again take the form of delusions and frequently may form the basis for actual paranoia. When the individual projects their own hostile or angry feelings onto another, thereby feeling personally threatened, and then acts to defend himself against the perceived threat, the results can be tragic. At other times it may be problematic but with less dramatic consequences. For example, one may dislike a particular individual but instead focus on their own perception that the other individual dislikes them, perhaps is trying to undermine them at work, etc. In essence, it represents trying to deny our own negative feelings and instead seeing them in another person.

"Acting out" is a term frequently used to describe almost any behavior that we do not approve of or accept. In looking at defense mechanisms, acting out represents the expression of an unconscious wish or an impulse expressed through action in order to avoid the accompanying underlying feeling or emotion. The unconscious fantasy or impulse is lived out through the impulsive behavior, which tends to gratify the impulse rather than living with the uncomfortable feeling of the perceived prohibition against that action. If one does not "act out" the impulse, then one must live with the tension that would result. An example would be a young child who wants a toy that another one is playing with. He may have been taught the rule that he cannot just take it away from the other child, but we all certainly have seen the "snatch and grab" maneuver by a toddler. The same may be true of the acting out teenager who goes for a "joyride" in someone else's car and ends up in jail. Perhaps the bottom line function of acting out is avoiding the tension of delayed gratification or no gratification regarding something one wants.

Blocking is when we temporarily inhibit thinking and often may involve various emotions or impulses. We all experience at times moments when we "go blank". Sometimes these may just represent "senior moments", but at other times it may actually serve to temporarily derail a thought or impulse pattern in order to inhibit its expression or a significantly uncomfortable emotion.

Overemphasizing or at times even exaggerating physical symptoms in order to avoid certain responsibilities or to regress and be cared for can be termed hypochondriasis or somatization, not in a clinically diagnostic term but again more descriptive of a defense mechanism. Unacceptable feelings or perhaps even impulses may be turned against oneself resulting in experiencing pain or various somatic complaints. It at times may serve to avoid responsibility, guilt, or at times to avoid certain impulses that might otherwise be prohibited. With this defense mechanism, usually the individual does experience discomfort and a sense that it is external to themselves. Carried to its extreme, and as an ongoing pattern, it may actually present as the diagnosis of a somatization disorder.

Even though an immature defense, introjection is vital to development and represents our internalization of various qualities of other individuals in our life. For toddlers trying to master separation issues, being able to hold an internal representation of the mother or father may help soothe the discomfort of being separated. At other times, the introjection of an abusive or hostile object relationship may help to counter the anxiety felt when one is able to also feel strong and aggressive. This classically has been termed "identification with the aggressor," in which someone who may have been physically abused as a child becomes aggressive and even potentially abusive as an adult. One may also introject being a victim if one closely identifies with one who has been victimized. As you can see, defense mechanisms are necessary for development but are neither good nor bad and may have either positive or negative effects.

Passive aggressive behavior, a well-known term in our society, entails the expression of aggressive feelings toward others indirectly and usually through either passive behavior or at times turning the aggression against oneself. This could be through failure, procrastination, or even at times illnesses or physical symptoms that affect others more than oneself. Let me give you an example. Let's say a husband and wife have an argument, but the wife does not like to deal with negative feelings or conflict, and so it goes unresolved. She is still angry. She has promised previously to iron a shirt that he needs for a business meeting the next morning (assuming some people still iron) but "accidentally" forgets to do so, and so he has no clean, starched, pressed shirt for his meeting. That may represent passive aggressive behavior. She avoids the argument, but expresses the anger indirectly. I'm sure all of you can think of plenty of examples from your own daily experience, as this is one defense that tends to be fairly common.

Regression represents returning to behaviors associated with earlier stages of development in order to avoid conflict or tension, and its primary purpose is to gain some sense of gratification at this less-developed level. We often may see youngsters regress when going through significant change or stress, such as a child who has not wet the bed for some time starting to have accidents after perhaps a significant family stress or move. Many also feel that some level of regression is necessary for engaging in creative activities or even for a relaxation, sleep, and the ability to let go of control enough to have orgasm with sexual intercourse.

Indulging in isolated behaviors and fantasy to resolve conflict or obtain gratification has been termed by some the defense of "schizoid fantasy." This primarily involves fantasy for gratification even though the individual does not believe the fantasy and does not act them out. If frequently used as a defense mechanism, it can result in extreme social isolation, perceived eccentricity of the individual by others, and the general avoidance of intimate relationships with real people.

In our next newsletter we will go on to look at what many would call higher-level defense mechanisms, even though they may classically be termed "neurotic defenses."



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



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