

# Stonebriar Psychiatric Services News & Views

**School starts soon - for our ADHD students who are not yet scheduled to be seen before school starts, we have limited availability. Call NOW to reserve your appointment so you are ready to begin your new school year.**

AUGUST, 2011

VOLUME 7, NUMBER 8



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#### **Services We Offer**

Individual Therapy  
Marital / Couple's  
Family Therapy  
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Group Therapy  
Medication Management  
Speaking  
Seminars

#### **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  
Relational issues  
Adjustment to life  
changes

#### **Ages Served**

Adult  
Adolescent  
Children ages 10 & up

## Exploring Our Defenses

In the last two newsletters we have been exploring defense mechanisms, which are those psychological mechanisms that we all use to help manage our emotions and situations that we encounter in life. In the last newsletter we were looking at what have been termed by many "neurotic defenses," which tend to develop relatively early in childhood. We left off with that defense mechanism known as dissociation.

**Dissociation** is when one temporarily modifies one's sense of personal identity to avoid emotional distress. It should be stressed that defense mechanisms are generally unconscious mechanisms and not something that one is intentionally doing, faking, or carrying out as an act of manipulation. Examples of dissociation can be fugue states, which is where one may take on a new identity and at that point in time be unaware of their old identity. They may continue to interact with others or travel to various places, but afterward when they return to their true identity be unaware of these actions. An example occurs with what is known as dissociative identity disorder, more popularly termed multiple personality disorder. Another example of dissociation can occur with hysterical conversion reactions. These can be quite dramatic and frequently mimic physical symptoms that cannot be explained by physiologic causes. An example that I remember from when I was in residency was a man that had sudden paralysis of his right arm, occurring just before he was about to hit his father during an argument they were having. The desire to get his father was strong, but the emotional prohibition against it was equally strong. The solution was the "paralysis" that he experienced in his arm which prevented him from carrying out the unacceptable action.

**Reaction formation** occurs when one changes an unacceptable impulse or action into its opposite. Again this generally occurs unconsciously, but at times may develop intentionally. For example, an individual who perhaps has had a lifelong fear of dogs because of being bitten at an early age may decide to be a veterinarian. Another example is a child who may tend to be rather messy in not picking up her room or tends to make messes around the house for which she is severely disciplined may counteract this by becoming a "neat freak" later in life or develop obsessive compulsive personality traits marked by an extreme need for organization and cleanliness.

**Repression** is the unconscious defense mechanism by which one keeps from consciousness certain ideas or feelings that are emotionally unacceptable. Primary repression refers to the blocking of ideas or feelings before they have ever been in conscious awareness, whereas secondary repression blocks from awareness those experiences that were once conscious. The idea or experience that is repressed is not actually forgotten and is often indirectly expressed through behaviors that either reenact the repressed experience or try to counteract it in some way. Repression differs from suppression (to be addressed later) in that suppression tends to be a more conscious mental action while repression is not. Let me give you an example which unfortunately is not that uncommon. Imagine a child who has been physically or sexually abused. It is not unusual that later in life as they get older they may find themselves either acting out sexually in situations in which they feel in control or at times repeating situations in which

they again may find themselves abused.

In that repression is a relatively common defense mechanism as a way of dealing with past traumatic or unpleasant situations, I want to elaborate a bit on the above example. Even though the adult may not remember the original trauma or abuse, they may still find themselves reenacting the situation symbolically. For example, I have worked with women who have either been engaged in prostitution or exotic dancing and who may or may not remember initially the experience of having been abused as a child, but they do know that their adult activities give them a sense of control, which they did not have as a child. Another way in which this often occurs is in situations which have been termed "repetition compulsion." It is not unusual for individuals who perhaps grew up in abusive situations or perhaps with an alcoholic parent to end up marrying or being involved in relationships with individuals that repeat the childhood situation. When an individual who grew up in an alcoholic family and "never wants to be around alcohol again" ends up getting married four times to alcoholics, you suspect it has to be more than just coincidental. One of the important goals in therapy is frequently to learn to recognize some of these negative patterns and the repressed issues that may be playing a role in their repetition. This is frequently helpful in stopping the self-destructive patterns of behavior.

### Mature Defense Mechanisms

Let's now begin to look at what some have termed "mature defenses," again understanding that this means that they tend to develop at a slightly later time as one developmentally matures relative to the previously discussed defense mechanisms.

*Altruism* represents using constructive as well as gratifying service to others in order to undergo an experience that is rewarding, at times by actually experiencing the activity vicariously. In many ways, one could say that it represents a constructive form of reaction formation that we previously discussed. An example of this might be an individual giving comfort and support to another, when perhaps they have often not received it themselves in the past when needed. There is another form of altruism, at times termed "altruistic surrender," in which one sacrifices meeting his or her own needs or desires in favor of fulfilling those of another person and often even to the detriment of the individual. In this case the satisfaction can only be enjoyed vicariously, and, if this becomes an ongoing pattern in relationships, it can represent a problem for the long-term health of the relationship. Frequently the individual that is consistently doing the sacrificing of their own needs may become resentful and eventually want to leave the relationship, whether or not the partner ever recognizes that there were problems.

*Anticipation* is when one realistically is looking forward to or making realistic plans for dealing with what will likely be a difficult situation creating emotional discomfort. This defense mechanism tends to be adaptive and goal directed and generally is accompanied by planning or preparing oneself for a difficult situation. An example would be the preparatory grieving that can occur when a loved one has a serious long-term terminal illness as one emotionally tries to prepare for their eventual loss. However, this can also have negative consequences if one is always anticipating the worst outcome and obsessively worrying about it, even though that outcome is unlikely to occur. At times this may be called "catastrophizing" where one is always expecting the worst to occur, and it may actually be a way of life for many people. It usually just leads to unnecessary anxiety and worry.

Next month we will conclude this series on defense mechanisms as we continue to look at ways we psychologically and emotionally deal with our daily lives through psychological defense mechanisms.



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



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