

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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Exploring Defense Mechanisms (conclusion)

Over the past several months we have been looking at the concept of psychological defense mechanisms and their function and usefulness in our daily lives. We have classified these in terms of the developmental period of time during which they begin to take shape in the individual. You may recall that the earliest were termed immature defenses, such as denial, distortion, projection, acting out, blocking, hypochondriasis, introjection, passive aggressive behavior, regression, and schizoid fantasy, perhaps better termed isolating fantasies. The next higher level were termed neurotic defenses and include controlling, displacement, externalization, inhibition, intellectualization, isolation, rationalization, dissociation, reaction formation, and repression. In our last newsletter we began to look at the later developing defense mechanisms, termed mature defenses, including altruism and anticipation. Now let us look at some of the remaining defense mechanisms that are considered the "mature defenses."

Asceticism, although considered a mature defense, is like all of the other defense mechanisms in that if used to the extreme it can become pathological and emotionally unhealthy. Asceticism is when one tends to eliminate the pleasurable aspects of experiences in one's life and often with some moral implications being assigned to the specific pleasures. Gratification is then often achieved from the denial of the pleasure, and asceticism in its purest form is often directed against all basic pleasurable activities or experiences of which one is aware. This has occurred in some religious sects where almost any form of pleasure, whether it be physical pleasure through sexual intimacy, emotional pleasure through the use of music or other physical activities, or even at times to certain intellectual activities that may be pleasurable but are seen as wrong and therefore to be denied to oneself. Extremes have at times occurred when individuals thought that it was morally purifying to even deny oneself food and water on extended fasts or at times in the past when individuals would live in very uncomfortable conditions, such as perched on the top of a pole or in a tree. One of the primary goals of this defense mechanism is to defend oneself against the potential for giving in to or becoming overly involved in sensual or pleasurable activities.

Humor can frequently be a very effective coping mechanism for a variety of situations. With humor one is frequently able to express feelings and thoughts without discomfort to the one expressing them, but also frequently minimizing the unpleasant effects it may have on others around them, particularly if they are negative emotions or messages. It often allows an individual to tolerate and yet be able to focus on situations that otherwise would be too difficult or traumatic. This is where the idea of "black humor" may occur among those that work in highly stressful conditions such as emergency medical situations, combat, or any activity that repeatedly exposes an individual to emotionally difficult or traumatic situations. It frequently helps the individual to detach themselves emotionally from the situation in order to function and do their job or needed task.

Sublimation is perhaps one of the most generally useful of these later developing defense mechanisms. It helps to achieve some impulse gratification and the achievement of certain goals but alters what might be a socially unacceptable goal or desire for one that is socially acceptable. It allows instincts to be channeled in a positive way, rather than denied or completely blocked out in terms of their expression. The feelings are acknowledged but modified and directed toward a more acceptable object or goal so at least some instinctual gratification may occur. An example might be an individual who has a tremendous amount of energy and perhaps also aggressive tendencies. He could get into fights on the playground, or he might be able to channel it into becoming a Golden Gloves champion in the boxing ring. The same is true for many sports, and don't fool yourself into thinking that it only applies to the male gender. By nature, females also may have a number of aggressive impulses that may utilize sublimation. I've seen women play soccer, volleyball, roller derby, as well as football, and they can play rough! Sublimation also does not have to be quite so direct a connection with regard to the physical expression of aggression. At times that competitive urge can also be channeled into intellectual or professional competition and achievement.

The last defense mechanism that I would like to address is that of **suppression**. Remember that we talked about repression which is the unconscious withholding of ideas, memories, or feelings from consciousness and which generally cannot easily be made conscious simply by willfully trying to do so. Suppression, on the other hand, is consciously, or at times semiconsciously, delaying attention to a conscious impulse, conflict, or emotion. Dealing with a particular issue or emotion may be consciously ignored or at least temporarily avoided. Discomfort is generally felt in doing so but minimized. There is one major problem that often occurs because of this and which is frequently seen in the therapist's office and in the lives of individuals. The problem is that you can only suppress, or "stuff," feelings for so long before they begin to trickle out in other ways or find themselves expressed in situations totally unrelated to what is actually causing the feeling. It's kind of like trying to fill a water barrel, but you can only fill it so much before it starts to overflow. The problem is that when these feelings start to overflow, they often do not seem to make sense in light of the actual circumstances occurring. Counseling is often helpful in finding ways of appropriately expressing these feelings, and even at a deeper level beginning to better understand those that were actually repressed and not just suppressed.

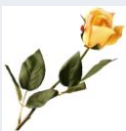
As I mentioned when we first started this series on defense mechanisms, all of us use most of these defense mechanisms to one degree or another. They help us to function efficiently and to manage our emotions more appropriately. But when one uses one or more of these defense mechanisms to the extreme without balancing it out with the others, then it frequently can present problems psychologically and relationally with others. We frequently don't even recognize that were doing it, and those around us do not understand why we do it. This is where seeing a therapist can often be a benefit. It doesn't mean you're crazy... it just means you're human.



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