

Addiction and Its Mechanisms of Defense

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Psychological defenses ('mental defense mechanisms') are normal and universal features of the human mind that operate consciously, half-consciously and unconsciously to protect the ego from awareness of difficult or painful feelings, facts and ideas. It is not the existence of these natural and necessary mental defense mechanisms but their maladaptive application that causes problems for people. Without some means of screening and protection from unpleasant thoughts and experiences no one would be able to remain sane and functional for long. In severe psychiatric illnesses such as schizophrenia there may be a weakness or failure of mental defense mechanisms which grievously impairs the capacity of the individual to cope with life by exposing him to the un-buffered and untamed force of inner and outer stimuli.

Normal defense mechanisms of particular importance in the maintenance of addictive disease include ***denial, paranoid projection, avoidance, isolation of affect, rationalization and intellectualization***. In the psychodynamic hierarchy of mental defense mechanisms denial and paranoid projection are regarded as psychotic defenses because their fundamental character involves a severe disruption of reality testing that causes the afflicted individual to lose touch with consensual reality and to dwell increasingly in a world and reality of his own. Individuals relying heavily upon primitive psychotic mental defense mechanisms such as denial and paranoid projection are relatively or even wholly inaccessible to corrective influences such as logic, data, or the opinions of others. One therefore cannot reason them out of their beliefs or persuade them to change their minds, regardless of how compelling the contrary data and reasons might seem to anyone but the individual 'in denial.'

Denial in this psychodynamic defensive sense must be distinguished from lying, dishonesty and other forms of conscious and deliberate falsification. Though there is obviously a gray zone and sort of 'No man's land' between wholly unconscious defensive psychodynamic denial and half-conscious deliberate distortion and evasion of the truth, the foundations of true denial rest solidly upon a profoundly misconceived and yet firmly and unshakably believed private version of reality that is relatively or absolutely immune to outside influence. In conscious and deliberate deception the individual remains aware of the difference between his own truth claims and what he realizes is the actual truth of the matter; in psychodynamic denial he believes his own deceptions and distortions and therefore regards the contrary opinions of others as false and their efforts to convince him otherwise as misguided at best and malevolent at worst.

Harmful and ultimately painful addictive behaviors require a bodyguard of lies, distortions, and psychotic denial to fend off the natural corrective consequences of cognitive and behavioral dissonance resulting from addiction. Without such an elaborate and often amazingly sophisticated array of mystificatory and obscuring defenses, the addictive process could not survive for long but would melt like a polar iceberg in Mediterranean seas, destroyed by its innate incompatibility with its environment. But when Benjamin Franklin tersely noted that 'Those things that hurt, instruct' he could not have been thinking of addiction: for it is precisely the lack of instruction in the face of cumulative hurt that suggests the operation of an addictive process concealed and protected by mental defense mechanisms that, having become perverted or detached from their natural survival-adaptive function of protection of the host, now operate as defectors and mercenary troops in the service of an addiction that is at best indifferent and at worst inimical to the prosperity and survival of the individual.

Powerful and at times delusional as the unconscious psychotic denial of reality is, most addicted individuals retain a sufficient commerce with social and interpersonal reality to require the augmentation of such primitive defense mechanisms by higher level and less drastic measures such as rationalization, intellectualization, avoidance and procrastination. For while psychotic denial may indeed protect the addicted individual from seeing the proverbial 'elephant in the living room,' he usually will be left with a certain smell and perhaps other reminders of the presence of the elephant that must somehow be accounted for and explained away in an agreeable manner, i.e. in a manner that does not betray the presence of the elephant.

'It's not that bad,' or 'I am definitely going to stop - one day' are classic evasions and rationalizations commonly found in established addictive processes. The addict is frequently quite ingenious in developing personal theories of his behavior that attempt to acknowledge, even if in a minimized and diluted fashion, the destructive consequences of his addictive

behavior, while linking it with a complex, often Byzantine web of justifications, excuses, complaints and explanations, the bottom line of which always seems to be that 'I don't really need to stop just yet' or 'Now is not a good time to stop.' Therapists and others who innocently wander into this dense maze of psychological defenses for behavior that is in many cases self-evidently irrational and harmful not merely to the addict but often to those around him, risk themselves becoming confused and bewildered by a blizzard of words, ideas, and false reasons as the addictive process throws tinfoil into the radar screens of both the addict and his interlocutor to keep them from interfering with its continued hegemony and behavioral expression.

Addiction Constructs Worlds and Selves

But the strategies by which addiction preserves and advances itself are still more complex. Psychological defense mechanisms such as those described above play a significant role in the maintenance of most addictions. In a sense, however, they are merely superficial and secondary aids to the addictive process, which originates and operates at a still deeper level of the mind.

Addiction constructs a self and a world that are congruent with its preservation and progress; and it renders difficult if not impossible the experience of a self and a world that are incongruent with its aims. The addictive process eventually transforms the worldview of the addicted individual and even realigns his sense of himself -his identity- so that they facilitate and do not obstruct the continued expression of the addiction.

The addictive consciousness is progressively organized around and constructed by the aim of the ambition for its own gratification. This is in most cases a gradual and insidious process which is unrecognized by the addicted individual -the "host" for the "parasite" of addiction. The end stage of this transformation is represented by the addict as puppet to the addiction's puppet master. The addict then exists for one purpose only: to carry out the desires and demands of the addiction. Everything human and individual has been suppressed, over-ridden, or shoved to the sidelines by the inexorable and irresistible "push" of the addictive process.

Just as a powerful river finds or creates channels around anything obstructing its flow, so does the addictive process defeat the rational and ethical resistances of the person within which it is active. And in the process of constructing such alternative paths for its discharge, the addiction shapes the reality of the addict's world and his very notion of himself.

The worldview that is created by the addictive process is one that is compatible with and friendly to the interests of the addiction. Worldviews that are inconsistent with the continuation of the addiction are suppressed or eliminated. The process is usually a slow and subtle one progressing invisibly over many years "behind the back" of the unsuspecting addict.

What kind of a world view is compatible with addiction? Almost any philosophy that does not include and will not permit happiness, healthy and balanced behavior, sustaining relationships, rigorous honesty with and about oneself, and some kind of spiritual connection (even though it may not be called that). Addiction thrives best in an atmosphere of unhappiness, resentment, alienation and estrangement, secrecy, mistrust and in most cases, ultimate despair of meaning. And it cannot continue for long in the opposite atmosphere, i.e. one of happiness, emotional well-being, healthy relationships and genuine honesty. Serious addiction, therefore, necessarily points in the direction of an unhappy and dissatisfied world view, and away from the opposite, happier and healthier perspective. A *happy addict* is a contradiction in terms.