
Defense Mechanisms During a Crisis

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When a crisis or trauma occurs, it is common for many people to reduce their anxiety and stress by employing defense mechanisms. Paul states in the letter to the Philippians, be anxious about nothing but in everything (all circumstances) be in prayer, presenting your requests to God. He assures the reader that the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds (Philippians 4:6-7). God promises release from anxious thoughts and worry. Is this anxiety decline in a person God-given or a personal defense mechanism at work?

Can you recognize defense mechanisms during a crisis?

Denial

Denial is refusing to admit the existence of reality. The person in denial seems unable to face reality or admit an obvious truth. It is an outright refusal to admit or recognize that something has occurred or is currently occurring. Some victims of traumatic events may deny that the event ever occurred.

Displacement

Displacement is experiencing emotions or acting-out behaviors directed toward one person when a different person provokes him. After a bad day at work, a person comes home and lashes-out at the family, instead of discussing the problem with the person at work that upset him.

Intellectualization

A person who is intellectualizing deals with the highly emotional situation in an unusual cool rational manner. This mechanism works to reduce anxiety by thinking about the emotional event in a cold clinical way. It allows the person to avoid thinking about the stressful and emotional aspects of the situation. The focus is only on the intellectual component. An example could be a person with a terminal illness focusing on learning an excessive amount of medical information about his illness. This allows him to avoid the distress, remaining aloof from the reality of his terminal illness.

Passive Aggressive Behavior

This defense behavior is an indirect (subtle) way of expressing anger without confronting it directly. An example is a person constantly arriving late or forgetting to give someone an important message. It is a common behavior in adolescent development.

Projection

The person using projection will attributes his own personal feelings or thoughts on to another person. "I am not angry at my spouse, she is the hostile one."

Repression

A person may consciously or unconsciously bury and forget the unpleasant event. These buried memories continue to influence the person's behavior subconsciously.

Rationalization

This person explains unacceptable behavior or feelings in a logical manner. It is an avoidance of the true reasons for the behavior. They make excuses for the problem. An example is the student who blames the instructor for the poor grade rather than his lack of preparation. This mechanism prevents anxiety and protects self-esteem and self-concept. It blames others or outside forces instead of owning his own part.

Reaction Formation

This person will substitute the opposite emotion for the unacceptable one he is experiencing. An example is treating an adversary in an excessively friendly manner. He hides his true feelings by behaving in the exact opposite manner.

Substance Abuse

A person may use a substance (drugs, alcohol, etc.) to reduce anxiety and stress. The substance provides pain relief, and a certain amount of pleasure for a short period. This behavior overtime may create addiction.

Sublimation

This mechanism allows a person to act out a socially unacceptable impulse by converting this behavior into a more socially acceptable form. For example, a person experiencing extreme anger may take up boxing or a contact sport as a means of venting frustration.

These defense mechanisms help limit the reality and severity of the event. They provide temporary relief from the negative impact of the crisis. These mechanisms can be adaptive allowing people to function normally in stressful situations, but with overuse, they may become unhealthy behaviors employed to avoid dealing with the problem.

It is important to help others to recognize these behaviors in themselves, but the helper needs to recognize them in himself also. Every person can only maintain an emotional well-balanced healthy life in the context of relationships. There is a potential to employ defense mechanisms at any stressful time. A person must realize he cannot rely on his ideas and actions as always correct. Proverbs states, "Listen to advice and accept discipline, and at the end you will be counted among the wise. (19:20). "Listen and be wise, and set your heart on the right path (23:19). These verses help us realize we cannot identify or eliminate negative behaviors alone. Connection with trusted others for insight and accountability is an important key to resolving the issues. Every person needs to develop accountability relationships that provide feedback and insight into his life.