**Defense Mechanisms! READ THIS….IT APPLIES TO YOU!**

How do I know?  Because it applies to everyone.  All of us utilize defense mechanisms as a way to cope with emotional pain. By using these defense mechanisms, we protect our inner selves from being overwhelmed by the emotional hurt we’ve experienced in our lives. Generally, defense mechanisms are thought to be unconscious, or beyond our awareness.   This means that even though we all use them, most of the time we don’t know it.  So, to sum it up, when we experience events in life that cause a great deal of emotional pain, our defense mechanisms kick in to protect us from becoming overwhelmed.  So, are they good or bad?

Well, they are good and bad.  Defense mechanisms are good in that they serve a very important purpose; emotional survival.  Unfortunately, once we’ve survived the initially devastating event, our defense mechanisms have a way of hanging around too long and becoming *destructive* rather than *constructive*. Let’s take a look at some commonly used defense mechanisms and how they can be helpful or harmful.  And yes, you should consider if and how any of these are involved in your own life.

**Denial-**Just what it sounds like.  Denial refers to the tendency of people to not acknowledge or recognize the reality of a situation including its destructive nature and potential consequences.  For example, a person continually steals from others fully believing that they won’t ever get caught.  Another example may be a student in high school who has received no credits for three years believing they will eventually graduate without making major changes to their lives. They are both in denial!

**Displacement-** This is the act of directing your emotions from their actual target to another target.  For example, a father who has had a very stressful day at work and is angry at his boss comes home and yells at his kids.  Another example would be a girl who is really angry at her father for leaving the family but doesn’t want to risk further “rejection” by him takes her anger out on her mother instead.

**Detachment-** While there are several meanings for this, here it refers to when a person detaches actual life events from their normal emotional response.  For example, a boy who experiences repeated peer rejection eventually becomes “numb” and what used to hurt no longer causes emotional pain.  A girl who has been yelled at over and over no longer experiences the emotional hurt when people yell at her.

**Rationalization-** When we provide a “logical” reason to explain our (sometimes less than logical or destructive) behaviors.  The intention is to fool oneself, not necessarily others. For example, a man abuses his son and rationalizes the behavior by stating that it’s the only way the boy would learn how to behave.  A woman drinks excessively stating that she “deserves it” because her day was stressful.  In both cases, the person is providing excuses as to why a destructive behavior is acceptable.

**Repression-** This refers to pushing memories and their associated emotions out of consciousness.  A common example is when a traumatized child completely forgets the trauma and emotions that resulted from the trauma. They become locked away in the mind but often continue to have a strong, negative impact upon that person’s behavior.

While each of these psychological defenses has “survival” value, they can be destructive and interfere with emotional and interpersonal growth.

Too much denial or rationalization can cause a person to continue engaging in behaviors that can be harmful to themselves and others as well as have grave consequences legally and physically.  Displacement, particularly displaced anger, can destroy potentially positive relationships in a person’s life and foster negative ones.  The actual target of the anger may never know the person’s true feelings.  Repression of experiences and emotions doesn’t mean the experiences and emotions go away.  They are still there and can cause all sorts of other emotional, behavioral and physical problems.

Detachment is one that I see a great deal these days.  The survival purpose it serves is to allow someone to continue living their lives after experiencing emotionally devastating events (abandonment, emotional abuse, chaotic home life, lack of acceptance by a parent).  These types of events may happen again but the person no longer experiences the pain they used to cause.  The drawback of this defense mechanism is that it also seriously impairs the person’s ability to truly connect with other people.  They tend to react to the rest of the world in the same detached way.  For example, a girl abandoned by her father may not allow herself to be emotionally close to other males and so engages in superficial relationships that are self-destructive.  Or, a boy who grows up in a chaotic home with emotional abuse my simply become “emotionless” or turn to alcohol and drugs to keep the pain at bay.

Awareness of our own set of psychological defense mechanisms is an important step to learning how to better deal with our emotional past.