

Defenses

When a person is faced with a fact that is too difficult for them to accept or cope with, the person may reject it instead and may insist that the fact is not true, or make an interpretation of events that are in conflict with the facts and / or other people's observations.

This may even be when there is overwhelming evidence to the contrary. In other words they seek to defend themselves or shift the way they understand or experience the situation.

So what kinds of facts or events are likely to encourage defenses? Mostly they are facts that are uncomfortable for your client to think about or recall. It may be something they did or said that had an impact on other people. Or it may be information about themselves such as a medical diagnosis or other health challenge.

To avoid having to experience their emotions or judgments about their difficult experience they defend their own feelings and decisions.

New information can provoke us to defend ourselves psychologically and / or emotionally against an event or experience.

Often we can begin a process of creating defenses in the planning stage of an event.

It could be that there is something your client wants to do that is going to have some serious impact on other people or on themselves. You may find that they defend this in advance of the event. Usually, although not always, this will be linked in some way to their desire to take a certain course of action.

In most instances there will be a consequence and impact for the client themselves in either the short or long term; however they may minimise or overlook it.

It is important to remember that the person most likely to suffer most in the medium to long term through implementing some kinds of defenses is themselves.

Of course many of us identify with the idea of being defended. We often hear people say “that so-and-so was so defensive”. This points us to the universality of defenses as a way of handling our lives and the consequences of our experiences and our role and actions in and around those experiences.

Having knowledge of how we are defended, what we do with our own particular defenses and the impact of these choices is a topic that we can carry on with all of our lives.

So even when a client is in recovery of their own design, their defensiveness is still part of them and can still be a powerful feature of their day to day lives.

Defenses come in different forms

Here we will summarise the main three within the context of a client who is being challenged by their alcohol use. Please note that these mechanisms also occur in variations across other challenges and contexts.

1. Accepting facts but avoiding their impact.

Examples

DIABETES

Yes, I know that I need to lose some weight to avoid becoming fully diabetic but who's says I will really get diabetes anyway?

ALCOHOL USE

Yes I did shout at my partner when they tried to get me to leave the bar because I wanted to stay and drink some more but they weren't really upset about it as they had their best friend with them

2. Accepting the details and the facts and agreeing to its impact but avoiding taking any responsibility.

Examples

DIABETES

Yes I now know that I am now developing diabetes and I should lose weight but it is not my fault I am overweight. I was never taught how to eat differently.

ALCOHOL USE

Yes I did shout at my partner when they tried to get me to leave the bar and I know they were very upset and hurt; but the barman had just short changed me and they shouldn't have tried to make me leave just then, they chose the wrong moment.

3. Rejecting the facts and impact outright.

Examples

DIABETES

That doctor does not know what they are talking about and anyway I heard these test are not reliable. Anyway I won't get diabetes from being overweight.

ALCOHOL USE

Yes, my partner did ask me to leave the bar but I didn't shout at them and there was no problem

There are a number of reasons why it is helpful for your client to understand and get to know how they use and manage defenses.

1. Defenses can play a key part in managing and moving to recovery so knowing about them now gets your client off to a good start.
2. Learning about and developing skills to understand and manage themselves wisely and well can only assist your client develop and live the life they want. We want them to start that as soon as they can.
3. By becoming aware that they may develop a tendency to use different defenses as a way of coping with what is going on with them, both on the practical level and in how they are feeling assists in developing more self-management for the client.
4. Defenses are part of their coping strategies but with consequences that often make the long term effects ultimately worse than the short term relief. Again the sooner your client understands this, the better.
5. Understanding and managing defenses will help your client stay focused on the decisions they are making around their behaviour and the impact it is having on both them and others. This will hopefully mean less uncomfortable experiences for them and their family and friends.

So what do we do and how do we work with these ideas around defenses with our clients? You can give them a hand-out about this topic. Most people get the concept quickly; it is, after all, a common feature of human behaviour and we have a hand-out you can use as a guide.

Once your client has a grip on it and seems curious about it for themselves then the coach adopts a wait and see approach.

If you spot defenses in your clients' life, actions of processes, you can check it out with them. What they do about it and how they respond is of course up to them.

What we are aiming for though is for your client to develop ways to recognise them for themselves so your ability to recognise them is not as valuable or important as their ability to self-recognise and manage it.