

Handout

Defences, what are they?

Hi there! As we have now started including and talking about some of the issues you have been or are experiencing around misusing substances and or behaviours this is a good moment to introduce you briefly to the topic of defences.

We all have them; it is part of who we humans are so it is not as if those of us who have issues like these are singled out. Defences are present to some degree or other and can develop in anyone in a variety of situations so please know that this is not something that only you or people with substance use issues experience.

Coaches note: By framing the issue of defences here as something that is not only particular to people with substance misuse / and or addictive behaviours we are letting our client know that they are not the only ones who defend themselves in these ways; which is of course the truth. Why this matters is, due to the tendency of these clients to experience lowering esteem, we want to encourage them to not feel 'different'; as there is a tendency to 'isolation' driven by the 'hidden' client.

What do we mean by defences?

When a person is faced with a fact that is too difficult for them to accept or cope with the person rejects 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, put another, shift the way they understand or experience the situation.

What kinds of facts or events are likely to encourage defences?

Mostly they are facts that uncomfortable for you to think about or remember. It may be something you did or said that had an impact on other people in a way that was difficult for them. To avoid having to accept your part in their difficult experience we can defend our own feelings and decisions.

Coaches' note: Give examples here but keep it light.

Do defences always occur after something has happened?

No. Often we can begin a process of creating defences in the planning stage of an event. It could be that there is something you want to do around using that is going to have some serious impact on those close to you. You may find that you defend this in advance of the event. Usually, although not always, this will be linked in some way to your desire to misuse a behaviour or substance etc.

Coaches' note: It is important to remember that defences are not only primarily mechanisms to manage the past but a way to shape and manage future events.

Is it always about my impact on other people?

No. Sometimes it can be true that something you want to do will have an impact on you. This impact may be hard and have some challenging consequences for you either in the short or long term; however you may minimise your or deny these consequences as they will apply to yourself.

It is important to remember that the person most likely to suffer in the medium to long term through continuing substance or behaviour use is YOU!

Coaches' note: This is key. Clients can get really out of balance around the issue of impact and it helps to keep the impact arena as open and spacious as possible. Most likely it is the client themselves who will pay the highest price for not making the changes and recovery they are looking for. A client with these issues can be overly focussed on damage and impact to others without realising that the main cost is born by themselves. The hidden client will often try strategies to shrug off possible impacts on the client, a kind of indifferent, "it doesn't matter what happens to me" position.

Do defences come in different forms?

Yes, these are the key 3.

- Accepting facts but avoiding their impact. *(e.g. 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)*
- Accepting the details and the facts and agreeing to its impact but avoiding taking any responsibility. *(e.g. 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.)*
- Rejecting the facts and impact outright. *(e.g. Yes, my partner did ask me to leave the bar but I didn't shout at them and there was no problem)*

Coaches' note: Use your own examples here to illustrate the different presentations of defences. Keep it light as the above examples are. The above scenario is common to many many people, not of course all. Avoid examples that most people are unlikely to identify with. Relationships are good areas to find examples.

Why is it important that I get to know about defences now?

- The better equipped you are when tackling an issues like the ones you are looking at now, well, the better.
- Defences can get in the way of recovery so knowing about them now gets you off to a good start.
- Learning about and developing skills to understand and manage yourself wisely and well can only help you develop and live the life you want. We want to start that as soon as we can.
- Becoming aware that you may develop a tendency to use different defences as a way of coping with what is going on with you both on the practical level and in how your feeling is the best way to cope with it. Getting started now gets you there sooner!
- Defences are part of your coping strategies but with consequences that make long term effects ultimately worse than the possible short term relief. Again the sooner you understand and manage them the better for you.
- Understanding and managing your defences will help you stay focussed on the decisions you are making around your Recovery and the impact it is having on both you and others. This will hopefully mean less uncomfortable experiences for you and your family and friends.
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Coaches' note: This list is long for a reason. Here we are inviting the client to spend some time on why this is important at this point. Most likely this handout is going to the client at a point where you are still fairly new to each other and still working on your coach – client agreement. This is the start point, and the purpose here is to give the client as much space and time to absorb the idea that knowing about defences will give them a great tool to work with.

Will you, my coach, bring this topic up in our coaching sessions?

Yes, if I notice them and you don't; however what you do in response will always be up to you.

Coaches' note: It's a coach's job to notice and articulate what may be, or is, going on. Your clients need to know you will be their ally in the managing of defences. By stating that the client is always free to respond as they wish you are reinforcing the partnership and alliance that you will have.

Will you, my coach, always be able to tell if I am using a defence tactic about something?

No, not always. What we are aiming for though is for you to develop ways to recognise them for yourself so my ability to recognise it is not as valuable or important as your ability to self recognise and manage it.

That's about it. If you have any further questions or wish to talk about this further, please tell me at any time in our sessions and we can dig into this topic further.

Coaches' note: Well you are a human being so you may well not spot the defences. And why would you always be able to? So again we are keeping the power around this with the client. They will get to manage it and that's the intention.