



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VIEWS

Coping Strategies


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While on a drive with friends on a bumpy, almost non-existent, road we nearly met with an accident. Including the friend who was driving, there were four of us in the vehicle. As soon as we sensed danger, we shut our eyes instinctively to avoid seeing the car ram into a stationary truck. My friend at the wheel cried aloud, "Don't panic, nothing is going to happen". It was a frightening moment, but nothing really happened.

What kept haunting me whenever I recollected the incident was my friend's instinctive reaction to make him and us safe by repeating, "nothing is going to happen." It was a defence mechanism; his mind was trying to protect him from a perceived danger, making him feel "safe". That's what our defence mechanism does for us – it makes us feel safe in physical and emotional situations that are perceived as threatening.

All Is Well

Defence mechanisms are basically coping strategies, a subconscious process that we use to protect ourselves from perceived painful and anxiety-producing outcomes. They are mainly used to cope with reality. The reality in the above situation was that we could have been badly hurt. When the defence mechanism came into play, it altered the perception of reality for that moment and led my friend who was driving to believe that nothing wrong could happen. Since his defence mechanism was strong, he also started reassuring us. Eventually, it helped us remain calm in a situation that could otherwise have been very stressful and difficult to deal with.

We use various forms of defence mechanisms everyday in our life without realising it. They exist in our subconscious mind.

Have you ever found yourself venting your anger on a soft target, rather than the person you are angry with? This is another form of defence mechanism. It's called "displacement". Here we displace our feelings and direct them to a different target, which the mind perceives as easy to manage.

Often, we forget the details of an event or happening that is stressful for us. Sometimes we find that certain phases of our life become hazy or difficult to recall. Here again, the mind is trying to protect us from what is painful. It is using its defence mechanism of repression and suppression. Repression is when without any conscious awareness we push away certain memories in order to forget them, since remembrance causes pain. Repression keeps these memories out of conscious awareness. Suppression is the same process, but it is done consciously in order to avoid anxiety or pain.

State Of Denial

One of the most common defence mechanisms we use is denial. In denial, we are not realistic about something that has happened in our life, something that is obvious to others, but which we refuse to accept because in the short term, denial works as a good coping mechanism, as in the case of my friend who refused to accept that we were heading towards an accident. In this case, the defence mechanism of denial worked and he was able to avert the accident. But if denial continues for long, it hinders the coping mechanism, like addicts, who use denial to feel comfortable and safe. Every time someone brings up the topic of their addiction, they say, "I can control it if I want to".

Blame It On Others

Denial is also often the first reaction when we lose something or someone dear. Many people remain in a state of denial of their loved one's death. They continue to keep the deceased's belongings and room, exactly as it was when he was living. They might even lay the table for them at meal times and include them in many such activities that make them believe that the deceased might come back.

Another thing we very commonly do is to blame others for our mistakes and shortcomings. We like to believe that whatever is happening is because of someone else's doings. Situations where we know we are to be blamed, we blame on someone else and feel free of guilt and anxiety. This is called projection.

There are several other defence mechanisms we use in our everyday life to maintain the self-image that we have created for ourselves. These mechanisms help us in protecting the image that we have created in our minds for ourselves. But this image is not a true image; it is a false or desired image that is hampering our inner growth. Only if we can identify our defence mechanism and stop functioning from it, will we be able to understand reality and further our emotional and spiritual growth.

