

Denial and Addiction: Becoming Aware of the Inner Voice that Leads to Self-Destruction

Anyone who has been around 12-Step programs for any length of time has inevitably heard the old saying “Denial is more than a river in Egypt.”

Indeed, when it comes to addictive behaviours of any sort, denial is definitely a whole lot more than a slogan. It is often the underlying dynamic that keeps an addiction active, even when the addict really wants to stop the behaviour.

In this newsletter, I will discuss the role of denial in addiction, and the staggering impact it can have when someone is either engaging in, or trying to recover from, an addiction.

A DEFINITION

One dictionary definition of “denial” is “the refusal to acknowledge or accept what is true.” All of us use the defense mechanism of denial to some degree, in order to ease past trauma or to feel better about the world we live in. In fact, without a healthy dose of self-caring denial, it might be very difficult to live our day-to-day lives without going insane, especially when we hear about all the death and suffering all over our planet due to wars, earthquakes and typhoons.

But when it comes to addiction, the use of denial can take on an even more menacing component – it gets in the way of one’s self-respect, and in some cases it can virtually spell the difference between life and death.

TYPES OF DENIAL

The refusal to accept or acknowledge what is true is a very fitting description of the denial of someone with an addiction. In most cases, addictive behaviours are used to change the way we feel about our lives, or to help us forget those things that make us not feel good about ourselves. If you are struggling with an addictive behaviour, some of the ways you might be using denial might include:

- **RATIONALIZING** – making up excuses for why you can give yourself what you want when you want it. “I deserve a reward after working so hard” or “I can handle doing it just this one time.”
- **BLAMING** (aka Diversion) – shifting the focus of attention onto another situation or person so that you can avoid taking self-responsibility. “It’s your fault that I am the way I am,” otherwise known as the “You’d-Drink-Too-If-You-Had-a-Wife-Like-Mine” lament.

- **MINIMIZING** – discounting the seriousness of your addiction. “So I drink and smoke pot every day, but at least I’m not doing heroin,” or “I know I don’t have much money and I don’t really need it ~ but this was on sale.”
- **ANGER and HOSTILITY** – used to push people away when you don’t want to deal with their questions or concerns. This technique is often used in tandem with other forms of denial. “Don’t you dare tell me how to live my life!” or “Get out of my face and leave me alone!”
- **SELF-DELUSION** – convincing yourself that you don’t really have a problem at all. “I can stop whenever I want to ~ I just don’t want to.”

The denial of addicts can be so strongly rooted that they might even decide to withdraw from their life tasks and loved ones in order to continue “using.” You (or someone you care about) may have chosen to cut ties with friends and family rather than stop your addiction. Perhaps you have embarked on a “geographical cure,” choosing to believe that you will be able to safely continue your addiction if you can live in a different geographical location. Or you might have lost your job, your home, or your children due to an addictive behaviour, but still felt compelled to continue ~ all the while telling yourself that things aren’t really as bad as they seem.

In fact, denial can even be at work when things seem to be going really well in your life, especially if you believe that you don’t deserve to have good things happen to you. This could lead to some very negative self-talk, as you strive to get back into your “comfort zone” of losing everyone and everything that is important to you ~ because of the belief that you never deserved them anyway!

Worst still, you may be watching your health diminish as your addiction robs you of the ability to nourish yourself or obtain the medications you might need in order to be well. This can lead to devastating and potentially life-threatening consequences, which will negatively impact both yourself and the people who love you.

The most difficult part of treating an addictive behaviour, or recovering from one, is that denial is such a strong component of the actual condition of addiction. When you need to suppress your feelings in such self-destructive ways, you will also need to find a way to “explain it” to yourself so that you can live with the often dire consequences of those extremely unhealthy choices.

THE SOLUTION

It is only when you can be aware of your own denial, and how you use it, that you can truly recover from an addictive behaviour.

In addition, another thing to consider is the extent to which you feel powerless in your life. When you can accept and acknowledge that you will simply not be able to control

everything and everyone in your life, you can be more honest with yourself about how you feel about that reality. If you can instead become aware of what you really *can* control and how you can do that, your need for denial and other self-sabotaging addictive behaviours will decrease. You will be able to begin learning how to live life on life's terms.

Awareness is always the first step toward any change ~ if you are not aware of something that is not working for you, how can you change it? And SELF-awareness is what is required in order to outsmart your addiction.

The truth is that, no matter who you are or what has happened to you in the past, you DO deserve to be happy ~ you DO deserve to feel the self-respect of doing the work it takes to change your destructive behaviours and live your best life.

Whenever you find yourself actively engaging in your addictive behaviour, do your best to become aware that you might actually be in the throes of denial at any given moment. You may be minimizing, blaming, pushing loved ones away or telling yourself other "rational lies" so that you can justify your unhealthy behaviours. Developing the willingness to see yourself more clearly can be enough to open your eyes to the truth of your situation. That is when change can really manifest.

REACH OUT FOR HELP

If you know that you are behaving in ways that are self-sabotaging, or that may be hurting someone else, but you are feeling powerless to stop, reach out for help ~ from family and friends, from a reputable support group, or from a skilled professional who can help you make sense of your dysfunctional denial.

Everyone needs help at some point in their lives ~ it is not a sign of weakness, but rather a sign of strength and courage when we admit that we can't do something alone. It shows that you respect both yourself and your loved ones enough to start doing things in healthier ways.

Remember ~ it is never too late to give up your self-defeating patterns and begin to build the life you really want!