Repression and Denial

By Ben Benjamin, PhD

Author's note: The following article is adapted from The Ethics of Touch: The Hands-on Practitioners Guide To Creating a Professional Safe and Enduring Practice, by Ben Benjamin and Cherie Sohnen-Moe.

When people have experiences that are too painful to feel or to bear, they use the psychological mechanism of repression to remove them from the awareness of their conscious mind. For example, the adult who experienced trauma as a child may have no recollection of the incident; instead, the memory exists buried deep in the subconscious. This is frequently the case in sexual abuse cases. Remembering would be too painful, so the memory is repressed. Repression is a mechanism by which feelings or memories are kept out of the consciousness. It is the process of forgetting, squelching an impulse or feeling, or "to reject painful or disagreeable ideas, memories, feelings or impulses from the conscious mind." ¹

Repression is a subconscious process; it is not a decision made by the conscious mind, but an instinctive reaction to trauma. In some respects, the term "amnesia," rather than repression, is a more useful description of what happens.

Kisch states, "Repression may lead bodywork practitioners to seek personal gratification from professional contacts... or attempt to avoid the clients with whom the issue arises, and anxiously deny that this event shows his or her drinking is excessive. It is also possible for denial to follow the awareness does not simply go away. "They are translated into somatic tension lodging in the body tissues, covertly robbing the practitioner of peace of mind and precision in work. In turn, the tension is somatically transferred to unknowing clients." ² Unresolved practitioner repression affects both practitioner and client.

Denial

Denial is an active refusal to recognize or acknowledge the full import or "feeling" state of reality. Denial occurs when a person insists on a distorted interpretation of reality that excludes unpleasant realizations. Denial is very similar to repression, but the mechanism of denial requires the collaboration of the conscious mind. The conscious mind goes through many twists and turns to deny the implications of what the person knows to be true.

For example, a person who suffers from addiction often admits to the action in question but is in denial about its magnitude or effects on his or her life and the lives of loved ones; an alcoholic may deny that this event shows his or her drinking is excessive. It is also possible for denial to follow the retrieval of repressed memories. Sexual abuse victims who have recovered memories of traumatic events may, for a time, speak of the events as if they were unimportant, thus denying the affect of the events on their lives.

References

What factors contributed to you wanting to become a massage therapist?

- Personal experience with massage
- Experience of a friend/family member
- Belief in natural health/wellness
- Wanted to help people

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