

When Coping Mechanisms Grow Old

By Mel Schwartz

Coping mechanisms are the adjustments that we make to our personalities, typically in our childhood. We're not usually aware that we're developing them as they assimilate into our being in very subtle ways. We develop them so that we might deal with the challenges, wounds, rejections or other stressors that life brings us. Coping mechanisms are our way of defending against challenges.

Ordinarily, these alterations to our natural state of being are adaptations to the assaults to our emotional and psychological being. Sometimes, these events are clearly injurious or abusive. In such circumstances there might be verbal or physical abuse or neglect, which severely wounds our well-being. In these cases people may develop a wide array of coping skills. They might run the gamut from avoidance of confrontation or varying forms of passivity all the way toward the other extreme of aggressiveness or anger. At other times, we may manipulate our personality in more subtle ways to less obvious offenses. We might be simply compensating for not feeling good enough, popular enough or loved enough. In most cases the temporary defensive formation can be a helpful mechanism. It assists us in getting through a difficult transition. Over time, however, the coping mechanism becomes a fixed and habitual feature of our persona, which tends to limit our growth.

Due to the subtle nature of these coping mechanisms, we lose sight of the fact that we constructed them in the first place. Eventually, they tend to become masks, blocking us from our higher, more authentic self. In therapy, we might become more aware of these masked impediments, yet they may be difficult to move beyond. The coping mechanism tends to become habituated and inveterate over time. As it does, it inclines toward becoming a rigid structure. When this occurs, as it often does, it blocks the developmental progress that people require in their personal evolution.

The coping mechanism, so valuable to us at the time of its origination, eventually becomes a prominent roadblock to our growth. Once we've identified these blocks, loosening their grip can be quite challenging. One of the primary difficulties in achieving this unfettering revolves around our attachment to our identity. Although we clearly see the obstacle to our growth, the loss of this part of our identity is daunting. As counterintuitive as it may sound, the loss of an old and tired feature of our identity may provoke anxiety.

Positive Disintegration

The term, positive disintegration refers to the shedding of the old part of the personality that has outlived its function and no longer serves us. This flaying off of old coping mechanisms which are no longer required is indeed, positive. Yet, the uncertainty of the new terrain often invokes discomfort. Learning to embrace that disquiet is essential in the process of positive disintegration. The unfolding of our self-actualizing requires the death knell of some of the primary coping mechanisms as they give way to higher forms of our self.

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