

## Coping Strategies or Defense Mechanisms:

### Are You Using Unhealthy Defenses or Effective Coping Strategies in the Workplace?

By: Belinda M. Preston-Cash, EAP Counselor, LICDC, MS, QMHS, SAP

Apart from personality traits, people also tend to develop habitual modes and methods of managing stress and coping with upsetting emotions. These habitual methods do help people to manage and defuse stressful situations they find themselves in, but they are not all equally efficient at this task. Some work better than others. While some do succeed in helping people to manage upsetting emotions, the lesser quality methods generally end up causing more stress and problems than they solve, have you ever been in this SITUATION?

Perhaps not surprisingly, there is a relationship between people's emotional health and the sort of coping methods they prefer. As coping methods increase in experience and sophistication, they become correspondingly more deliberate and conscious in nature, and tend to be used more proactively, rather than simply reactively.

The study of coping methods has a long history. The topic was originally described by psychodynamic psychotherapists (including Dr. Freud) who called them defense mechanisms.

The most primitive of the defense mechanisms are primitive because they fundamentally rely on blatant misrepresentation or outright ignoring of reality to function. These mechanisms flourish in situations (and minds) **where emotion trumps reason and impulsivity rules the day**. Children use them naturally and normally, but then again, children are emotionally immature and not held to a higher standard as are adults. When adults use these methods on a regular basis, it is an indication that their emotional development is at some level delayed, would that be anyone you might work with? Some things to think about; Some defense mechanism used in the workplace: ***We all might fit in somewhere where are you?***

- **Denial**; an outright refusal or inability to accept some aspect of reality that is troubling. For example: "this thing has not happened" when it has, such as "I don't understand".



- **Projection**; a person's thought or emotion about another person, place or thing is too troubling to admit, and so, that thought or emotion is attributed to originate from that other person, place or thing. For example: "He hates me", when it is the speaker who hates. A variation on the theme of Projection is known as "Externalization". In Externalization, you blame others for your problems rather than owning up to any role you may play in causing them.
- **Passive-aggression**; A thought or feeling is not acceptable enough to a person to be allowed direct expression. Instead, that person behaves in an indirect manner that expresses the thought or emotion. For example: Failing to wash your hands before cooking when you normally would, and happen to be cooking for someone you don't like.
- **Acting out**; an inability to be thoughtful about an impulse. The impulse is expressed directly without any reflection or consideration as to whether it is a good idea to do so. For example: a person attacks another person in a fit of anger without stopping to consider that this could seriously wound or disfigure that other person and/or possibly result in legal problems.

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- **Displacement;** An unacceptable feeling or thought about a person, place or thing is redirected towards a safer target. For example, it may feel unsafe to admit anger towards a parent, but it is perfectly safe to criticize the neighborhood he or she lives in.
- **Rationalization;** where you choose to do something on emotional grounds (because it feels good) but you don't want to admit that, so you make up reasons after the fact to justify your choice.
- **Workaholics;** where you avoid dealing with problems by burying yourself in work. Workaholics could be considered a form of distraction, but distraction is something you choose to do, and many workaholics don't perceive their devotion to the office as a choice so much as a duty.

These are some coping mechanisms and while in the workplace it is imperative to choose the right one to have an effective and safe, healthy work environment!

## Taking Steps to Manage Stress in the workplace

Everyone who has ever held a job has, at some point, felt the pressure of work-related stress. Any job can have stressful elements, even if you love what you do. In the short-term, you may experience pressure to meet a deadline or to fulfill a challenging obligation. But when work stress becomes chronic, it can be overwhelming — and harmful to both physical and emotional health.

Unfortunately, such long-term stress is all too common. In fact, APA's annual *Stress in America* survey has consistently found that work is cited as a significant source of stress by a majority of Americans. You can't always avoid the tensions that occur on the job. Yet you can take steps to manage work-related stress.

- **Track your stressors.** Keep a journal for a week or two to identify which situations create the most stress and how you respond to them. Record your thoughts, feelings and



information about the environment, including the people and circumstances involved, the physical setting and how you reacted.

- **Develop healthy responses.** Instead of attempting to fight stress with fast food or alcohol, do your best to make healthy choices when you feel the tension rise. Exercise is a great stress-buster.
- **Establish boundaries.** In today's digital world, it's easy to feel pressure to be available 24 hours a day. Establish some work-life boundaries for yourself. That might mean making a rule not to check email from home in the evening, or not answering the phone during dinner.
- **Take time to recharge.** To avoid the negative effects of chronic stress and burnout, we need time to replenish and return to our pre-stress level of functioning.
- **Learn how to relax.** Techniques such as meditation, deep breathing exercises and mindfulness (a state in which you actively observe present experiences and thoughts without judging them) can help melt away stress. Start by taking a few minutes each day to focus on a simple activity like breathing, walking or enjoying a meal.
- **Talk to your supervisor.** Employee health has been linked to productivity at work, so your boss has an incentive to create a work environment that promotes employee well-being. Start by having an open conversation with your supervisor.
- **Get some support.** Accepting help from trusted friends and family members can improve your ability to manage stress. Your employer may also have stress management resources available through an employee assistance program (EAP), including online information, available counseling and referral to mental health professionals, if needed. If you continue to feel overwhelmed by work stress, you may want to talk to a psychologist, who can help you better manage stress and change unhealthy behaviors.

If you see or have an employee that may be experiencing any of these stressors, or possibly a self-referral for better workplace outcomes, new methods/coping skills for success within the work environment, please feel free to give us a call at EmployeeCare **208-6626**.