

REFUSING TO FACE THE FACTS *How Denial Can Impact Your Health*

Denial is a common human response to stressful situations. It can be an important coping and defense mechanism in order to deal with painful times in life. But it can also get in the way of effectively dealing with circumstances that require action and change. Find out how denial can help and how it can be a roadblock to good health.

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Defining denial

In psychological theory, denial is defined as one among many unconscious defense mechanisms a person uses to resolve emotional conflict. In its broadest sense, the term *denial* covers several types of defenses, such as refusing to acknowledge painful or overwhelming external circumstances and avoiding the facts or minimizing their consequences.

Denial may also be described in the context of time. After a traumatic event, such as the diagnosis of a serious illness, you may need several days or weeks to fully process the news. Denying or suppressing the diagnosis or its seriousness may, in the short term, give you the time you need to come to grips with the

challenges ahead. This is referred to as an adaptive response. But if denial persists and prevents you from getting appropriate treatment or leads you to try to escape reality through the use of alcohol or stimulants, then it has become a maladaptive, or harmful, response.

How denial might help

A healthy skepticism can keep you from obsessing over ordinary aches and pains. This isn't a denial of facts, necessarily, but a withholding of judgment until you have all the facts necessary to arrive

at a conclusion. In other words, you don't give in to catastrophic thinking without adequate information. For example, you don't assume that your cough means you have pneumonia until you've been evaluated by your doctor.

And as mentioned above, denial can be protective in times of intense trauma or grief. For some, temporarily suppressing the facts at hand allows them to gradually adjust to major changes, avoid overwhelming anxiety and make better decisions in the long run.

How denial can harm

On the other hand, if denial prevents you from taking positive steps in your life, it can be harmful. If you find a lump in your breast but ignore it, hoping it will go away, and don't seek medical help, you may be missing out on early diagnosis of breast cancer and the best chances for a cure.

Denial of signs and symptoms of a stroke or heart attack — thinking you can tough them out or that these events couldn't happen to you — can prevent you from seeking timely, lifesaving care.

Denying the consequences of smoking, obesity or staying in an abusive relationship can put your long-term health in serious jeopardy.

Finding a healthy balance

When faced with an overwhelming turn of events, it's OK to say, "I just can't think about all of this right now." This can be a way to work through what's happened and allow you to adapt to new circumstances.

But it's also important to realize that denying or avoiding the facts is still a state of mind; it won't change the reality of the situation. When times are rough and you don't seem to be making any progress at dealing with a stressful situation, it may be beneficial to talk to a mental health professional. He or she can help you find healthy ways of coping that will sustain your overall health and well-being. ■

When a Loved One Is in Denial

If someone you know is faced with circumstances he or she isn't readily able to accept, it may help to give that person some time and space to work through the issue at hand, without forcing a confrontation.

At the same time, let the person know that you're open to talking about the subject, even if it makes both of you slightly uncomfortable. Often, people facing major changes fear that those close to them will be unable to cope and thus will abandon them. So, make sure your loved one knows you're available, no matter what happens. Ultimately, this may give him or her the security needed to adapt and move on. ■