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Psychological Defenses and Immanuel Approach Emotional Healing

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Especially in childhood, we sometimes encounter situations in which we are unable to handle the full magnitude of the psychological stress/pain involved. My perception is that psychological defenses are tools the Lord gives us to help us get through these overwhelmingly stressful/painful experiences with less damage to our brains, minds, and spirits. Psychological defenses also help us to function in situations with ongoing stress/pain that would otherwise disable us. And again, these phenomena are especially common and dramatic in childhood since the smaller capacities and less developed maturity skills of children are more easily overwhelmed.

As we build capacity, surround ourselves with healthy community, grow in maturity, heal trauma, and build secure attachment with God, God wants to help us progressively surrender/dismantle our defenses as they become obsolete. The Lord wants to help us progressively surrender and dismantle our defenses so that we can be increasingly emotionally connected, so that we can increasingly walk in the light (remembering and acknowledging all of our past experiences), and so that we can increasingly resolve trauma that is deeply buried and heavily defended.

Surrendering and dismantling defenses: The key to surrendering and dismantling psychological defenses is to constantly be leaning into the choice to see them and acknowledge them, and to constantly be leaning into the choice to surrender and dismantle them as you perceive them to be hindering your growth and healing. In the context of the Immanuel Approach, this can be as simple as leaning into the choice to remember, acknowledge, and connect with any issues and/or past experiences that the Lord brings forward.

Immanuel Approach good news: With the Immanuel Approach, a facilitator with only the most basic understanding regarding psychological defenses can coach a recipient through dismantling defenses. To the extent that the recipient can perceive the Lord's Immanuel presence, connect with Him, synchronize with Him, and engage with Him directly, Jesus can help them identify and dismantle their defenses. This process will often move forward very easily and naturally, with the defenses in question never even being named. As just mentioned above, this can be as simple as just leaning into the choice to remember, acknowledge, and connect with any past experiences and/or issues that the Lord brings forward. For example, this scenario might look like the following:¹

Recip: "When we asked Jesus where this issue is coming from, and why it has been so difficult to resolve, some memories from when I was in Jr High came into my mind, just for a moment. But then I felt like I kind of pushed them away." (*Pause*) "I don't really want to look at those memories, and I'm not sure they're important anyway."

¹ A variation on this scenario is that an experienced facilitator can be aware of the intermediate-advanced principles and tools presented in this essay, *but not need to use them*, if the recipient has a strong connection with Jesus. And the session will look just like this natural, easy session facilitated by the beginner. (This is what it now usually looks like when I help recipients to identify and dismantle defenses.)

- Facil: “You’ve been talking about how this particular issues has been really costly for your marriage, and about how you have never been able to make much progress with this particular struggle. Do you really want this to change?”
- Recip: “Yes. Yes, I really do.”
- Facil: “Then I’m thinking we should just keep asking Jesus for help. I think you should focus on Jesus, and ask Him about whether these memories are important. And tell Him that you don’t want to look at them, and then ask Him for help about that. Also, the more clearly you can focus why it is that you don’t want to look at them, the more clearly you can talk to Jesus about your fears, the more clearly you can focus your request for help, and the more help you will get.”
- Recip: “So Jesus, are these memories important? And if they are, can you help me focus what it is I’m afraid of?” *(Pause)* “I feel like Jesus is pointing out, ‘If they’re not important, why do you have so much resistance to looking at them?’ *(Pause)* “I think He’s probably right *(Pause)* “I know He’s right.” *(Pause)* “But I still don’t want to look at them.”
- Facil: “If you still want to keep pressing forward regarding this issue, I would encourage you to ask Jesus for more guidance and help regarding your resistance – regarding your fears. And then observe and report whatever comes into your awareness.”
- Recip: *(Recipient asks for more guidance and help, and then observes and reports)* “Jesus is kind of showing me how I have always kind of pushed those memories away. I’ve always known there were there – it’s not like they were totally blacked out – but I have always kind of pushed them away. I just kind of look away from them if something ever reminds me.” *(Pause)* “They just make me feels stupid.” *(Pause)* “I just feel a lot of shame and regret when I think about them. I feel it would just be too shameful to really look at them and think about them. And I’m afraid you will judge me – I don’t want to talk about them because I feel like you will judge me...and misjudge me.”
- Facil: “If you still really want to press into this, I would encourage you to ask Jesus for help regarding how you look away from these memories, and would I encourage you talk directly to Jesus about the specific fears you just described to me – tell Him about the fears, and ask for more help. And then tell me what happens.”
- Recip: *(Recipient asks Jesus for help regarding the pattern of pushing these memories away and looking away from them, and asks Jesus for help regarding the blocking fears)* “Jesus just pointed out to me that He already knows – He was there when they happened, and He has always known about them.” *(Pause)* “And I can feel that He forgives me, and that He’s not judging me. I can feel that He has compassion for me, instead of judging me. And He’s not disgusted with me – He’s still glad to be with me.” *(Pause)* “This is kind of weird, but I feel like I’m willing to go an look at those memories – I feel like I’m ready to look at them, and think about them, *with Jesus.*”

Even so, the principles presented in this essay, and the prayer at the end, can be helpful for situations in which the recipient does *not* have a strong connection with Jesus and/or basic coaching is *not* adequate. If the recipient’s connection with Jesus is weak, so that defenses are not dismantled in the natural flow of the Immanuel Approach process, it can be helpful for the facilitator to be familiar with the material in this essay so that she can provide intermediate/advanced coaching. In these more difficult situations, it can also be helpful for the recipient to be familiar with the principles and examples in this essay – this material will help the recipient to join the facilitator in watching for defenses that are hindering the process, and it will help the recipient to cooperate more efficiently with surrendering and dismantling.

For recipients who are especially struggling with defenses that are especially hindering their growth and healing, the sample prayer at the end of the essay can help with pressing into

surrendering and dismantling.

Gradual process: Clinging to out-dated defenses will hinder growth and healing, so the Lord invites us to release them. However, it is appropriate to release psychological defenses over time. If the person receiving ministry totally surrendered and dismantled all dissociation, repression, denial, and avoidance at her first emotional healing session, she would suddenly be confronted with the full emotional magnitude of all the trauma, dysfunction, and sin in her life. This would be more than she could deal with constructively, and would therefore not be the Lord's best plan. That is, the Lord is *not* asking/demanding that we suddenly renounce and dismantle all of our defenses. Again, the Immanuel Approach good news is that Jesus is wise and skillful, and He perfectly understands our brains, our minds, and our psychological defenses. Jesus will help us to carefully, gradually dismantle our defenses to the extent that we are able to connect with Him, synchronize with Him, and follow Him as the leader for our journey of growth and healing.

For those who are having difficulty maintaining a good connection with Jesus, and who are especially struggling with defenses that are especially hindering their growth and healing, so that they need the sample prayer below to help press into surrendering and dismantling their defenses, I have tried to formulate the sample prayer so that it leaves space for gradual dismantling.

Dissociation: Dissociation is a form of disconnection that a person's mind sometimes uses to protect him from overwhelming pain. The mildest and most common form of dissociation involves disconnection from just the painful emotions, so that the person's ability to feel the painful emotions will be dramatically reduced even though his ability to recall the rest of the content from the memory will be unaffected. For example, there are several painful experiences from my childhood that were always in my conscious awareness—I was always able to recall and describe the details of these experiences without needing any special memory-access tools—but I never felt anything in association with these memories until I worked with special tools to help me connect with the dissociated painful emotions. My assessment is that many (most?) of us have this common, mild form of dissociative phenomena associated with at least a few of our most intense traumatic memories.

Sometimes dissociation will also include amnesic barriers, so that the person has difficulty with bringing other components of the memory into conscious awareness as well. In the most intense forms of dissociation, the person has no normal conscious memory of any content from the overwhelmingly painful experience.

When a person encounters pain that is particularly overwhelming, and especially when this first happens in early childhood, a part of his mind can be split off, disconnected, or dissociated from the rest of his normal consciousness; and the overwhelming pain is then carried in this separate compartment, or dissociated part. Carrying the pain in this separate, dissociated part, or dissociated internal part, enables the person to carry the pain without being overwhelmed or incapacitated. That is, the rest of the person's mind can continue to function fairly normally, since it cannot feel the pain that is disconnected, compartmentalized, and carried by the dissociated part.²

² Note that there is tremendous variability (that is, a striking lack of consensus) with respect to how different mental health professionals and emotional healing ministers use the terms "dissociation," "dissociated," "dissociated parts," and "dissociated internal parts." Being aware of this variability/lack of consensus, and then being careful to clarify how we are using the terms, can help to avoid unnecessary confusion and disagreement. For additional discussion of dissociation, dissociated parts, and dissociated internal parts, see Section II, "Different Types of

Repression: The mind uses repression to cope with traumatic events that are too painful and/or overwhelming to hold in normal memory in their full intensity. The child stays connected through the traumatic experience, but the memory is too painful and/or overwhelming to live with on an ongoing basis. Over time, repression progressively modifies the memory in order to make it less painful. The most painful details of the memory fade, becoming faint, vague, or forgotten completely. Painful implications of the memory are obscured. The most painful emotions are blunted, muted. Sometimes the entire memory is repressed to the point of being “forgotten” (unavailable to the conscious adult mind).

Denial: Denial is choosing to “look away” from the stuff in our lives that we don’t want to deal with. We know it is there. It is accessible to our conscious adult minds – we can see it if we choose to look at it. We just choose not to look. It is like walking around the edge of the living room looking at the walls, vaguely aware that we are avoiding the middle of the room (and the possibility that there could be an elephant there), but choosing not to look at the middle of the room and choosing not to look at the fact that we are avoiding the middle of the room. “I’m not avoiding anything, I’m walking around the edge of the room and looking at the walls so that I can see all of these nice pictures on the walls.”

Avoidance: In some ways, avoidance is especially sneaky because it pretends to acknowledge the full magnitude of a trauma and/or dysfunction (“Oh yes, I can see there is an elephant in the living room. I agree there is an elephant in the living room, and that it is a big problem”), but then very subtly reduces the apparent size by moving the problem into the future (“I’m going to deal with it, but just not right now. Tomorrow – maybe next week – maybe when I have the time and money for more appointments”). There is always a reason to not deal with it right here, right now.

Rationalization: In rationalization, the person uses rational arguments to justify dysfunctional/sinful behavior and/or avoid dealing with traumatic memories. For example, “Everybody steals from the company... I work harder than the other guys so I deserve some extra compensation... anybody in my position would do the same thing,” or “These nightmares (of being raped by my grandfather) don’t mean anything. Everybody has nightmares. They could just be an accidental connection between memories of my grandfather and scenes from some movie I saw.” As mentioned below, rationalization often helps to avoid dealing with traumatic memories by justifying other defenses.

Minimization: Minimization is closely related to rationalization, and directly tries to reduce the apparent size of dysfunction/sin and/or trauma. Most (all?) minimization includes logical distortions. For example, “Dad wasn’t alcoholic or abusive – everybody in our neighborhood got drunk and beat their kids on the weekends” (logical distortion: being common somehow makes it less traumatic); “I don’t think this memory is important – he wasn’t trying to hurt us” (logical distortion: behavior towards us is not traumatic unless there is malicious intent); “My childhood wasn’t that bad – lots of women have been abused way worse than me” (logical distortion: my experiences were not traumatic because others have been hurt worse). Putting them all together: “It’s not like it’s the end of the world to have an elephant in the living room. Lot’s of people have elephants in their living rooms. In fact, I had an uncle who kept an elephant in his living room for years. And the elephant’s not trying to cause problems – he just bumps into things because he is

Traumatic Memory,” in the essay, “Brain Science, Emotional Trauma, and The God Who is With Us, Part VI: Special Subjects & Frequently Asked Questions” (accessed from “Special Subjects/Advanced Topics” section, Resources page, www.immanuelapproach.com).

so big. Just be glad ours is an Indian elephant – the people with the African elephants are the ones who are really in trouble.”

Perfectionism: The core of perfectionism is refusing to do something unless I can do it perfectly. Perfectionism tries to protect me from disapproval and rejection. It tries to ensure that others will always be happy with what I do. Perfectionism avoids dealing directly with fear of rejection and disapproval, and the underlying rejection and disapproval wounds and lies. Releasing perfectionism requires me to be willing to make mistakes and requires me to be willing to deal with people being unhappy with me when I do make mistakes. Releasing perfectionism will free me to do the many things the Lord is asking me to do, even though I can’t yet do them perfectly.

Obsessions and compulsions: Our experience is that many obsessions and compulsions are psychological defense mechanisms that help the person feel more in control. They avoid dealing directly with the fear of being out of control and the underlying traumatic memories where the person felt out of control. We have consistently observed that when a person stops using their obsessive-compulsive defenses during prayer for emotional healing sessions, their negative emotions will increase, and then they will begin to connect with the underlying wounds and lies.

Other: There are other psychological defenses in addition to those just discussed above, such as projection, displacement, regression, and sublimation. The defenses discussed here in more detail are the ones I perceive to most directly interfere with growth and healing. If you perceive other defenses to be hindering your growth and healing, all of the same principles apply (for example, the Lord is inviting you to surrender/dismantle them as they become obsolete), and you use the sample prayer below to help you lean into surrendering/dismantling them.

Combination packs: Defenses often come in combination packs. Rationalization goes well with lots of other defenses. For example, avoidance gets past the integrity monitor much more easily if it is accompanied by a good explanation: “I’m not avoiding these issues, I’m just waiting until the right time – I think I will be more able to do this after _____ (I finish this big project, graduation, the wedding, we finish moving, my children finish college, the Lord comes back).” Dissociation, repression, denial, and avoidance often work together. Dissociation cuts out the worst parts of a traumatic memory, repression applies subtle modifications to “downsize” whatever is left, and denial looks away from the awareness that there are holes and modifications in my memory files of the traumatic event. Often there is still a vague awareness that I am pretending everything is okay, but that there is “something wrong with the picture.” Avoidance cleans up these last scraps with “Yeah, something’s not quite right here... I just don’t want to think about it *right now*.”³

Dissociated Internal Parts: With marked dissociation, where internal parts can function almost as separate individuals from the core self, you might encounter defenses that are hindering growth and healing, and work with the person’s core self to surrender and dismantle the defenses. And then weeks/months/years later, you might encounter internal parts that need help with surrendering and dismantling these same defenses.

Spiritual strongholds, demonic infection, and curses: My sense is that there are sometimes spiritual strongholds, demonic spirits, and curses that are connected to/associated with the specific defenses that are being addressed, and therefore lose their protection/anchor when the

³ “Dissociation, Repression, Denial, and Avoidance: ‘Where did kindergarten and first grade go?’” (forthcoming) provides an excellent example of these defenses occurring together.

defenses in question are released. In these situations it is easy and important to finish with commands to deal with the spiritual strongholds, demonic spirits, and curses that have just been exposed.

Common problems: If the recipient seems earnest in wanting to surrender/dismantle a particular defense, I go through the prayer with them while watching (and coaching them to watch) for any indications of resistance. If we encounter resistance, I check for the common problems described below. And then once the hindrance has been addressed, we go through the prayer again.

1. ***Specific trauma getting triggered by the discussion of defenses:*** For example, some people have memories of a perpetrator hurting them, and then telling them that it is their fault that they have been hurt. This kind of memory can sometimes get triggered when the recipient is working on a trauma, and the facilitator brings up the possibility that the healing process might be stuck because the recipient has defenses that are in the way. With this history, the recipient might perceive that they are being told that there is a problem that is “their fault,” and triggered implicit content from the underlying trauma can result then result in defensiveness and resistance.
2. ***Guardian lies:*** We often find guardian lies hindering the release of defenses. For example, “I will go crazy if I remember,” “I will die if I feel these emotions,” and “I can’t handle these memories” will hinder prayer to release dissociation, repression, and denial.
3. ***Vows:*** Defenses are often reinforced by vows. For example, “I will not remember” and “I will not feel” will reinforce dissociation, repression, and denial; “I won’t think about it” will reinforce avoidance; “I will never make another mistake” will protect perfectionism. Finding and releasing corresponding vows will make it much easier to release the defenses.
4. ***Demonic interference:*** Any demonic spirits associated with the defense(s) in question will try to block the person and/or internal parts from participating in the prayer. When I am dealing with possible demonic interference hindering release of psychological defenses, I will address my commands to “any demonic spirits associated with _____ (*defenses in question*) in any way.”
5. ***Internal parts choosing to not cooperate:*** If there are one or more internal parts involved with the specific context in which you have encountered the defense(s) that are hindering the process, then these parts must be in agreement with surrendering and dismantling the defense(s) in question, and they must stay connected and participate in the prayer.

Continue to observe: When the way forward is hindered by defenses, recipients will choose to surrender and dismantle some of their defenses so that they can take the next steps forward, but they will never release all of their defenses at once. (As describe above, releasing defenses is always a gradual process). So both the facilitator and recipient will want to continue to observe as they go forward, and press into another round of surrendering and dismantling each time they encounter defenses that are hindering growth and healing. And again, identifying and dismantling defenses will unfold naturally and easily to the extent that the recipient is connected to Jesus, synchronized with Jesus, and allowing Jesus to lead the process.

Reduce or expand the target words to facilitate connection: One of the most important goals for our sample prayers is to help the person receiving ministry to connect experientially/emotionally with the core concepts, and to stay connected throughout the prayer – to stay emotionally connected to the meaning of the prayer as they go through it. Use fewer target words if a longer list is hindering emotional connection by becoming distracting or confusing (for example, just “denial”). Include additional target words if doing so seems to help make and maintain experiential/emotional connection (for example, “denial, avoidance, self-deception, and voluntary blindness”).

Psychological Defenses: Sample Prayers and Commands

If the recipient has any sense of resistance or lack of internal unity as they go through the prayer, look for the possible problems described above (interfering triggers, guardian lies, vows, demonic interference, and internal parts that are not ready to release the defense(s)). And then go through the prayer again once the hindering problems have been resolved.

“Lord Jesus, I thank You for giving me psychological defenses to help me manage the trauma and pain in my life without being overwhelmed and unable to function. But I also acknowledge that they can get in the way of growth and healing. I ask that You would reveal to me every point at which my psychological defenses are getting in the way of the growth and healing You want for me.

Lord Jesus, give me Your repentance – give me Your mind and heart regarding my _____ (*the defense(s) being addressed*).

“Help me to progressively dismantle and surrender my _____ as I build the capacity, the community support, the emotional maturity skills, and the connection with You that will enable me to look at difficult issues, to remember and acknowledge past traumatic experience, and to connect emotionally with without being overwhelmed.

If you feel lead to do so, you can tear down spiritual strongholds (2 Cor. 10), deal with demonic spirits, and break curses:

“In the name of Jesus, we command that all spiritual strongholds connected to or associated with my _____ (*the defense(s) being addressed*) be torn down now.”

“In the name of Jesus, we now command all spirits connected to or associated with my _____ (*the defense(s) being addressed*) go immediately and directly to the feet of the true Lord Jesus Christ. You will go bound. You will not touch or harm anything or anyone on the way. You will never return and you will never send anything in your place. He will deal with you as He sees fit.”

“In the name of Jesus, we command that all curses in any way connected to or associated with my _____ (*the defense(s) being addressed*) be broken and rendered powerless, null, and void.”