

'Defense mechanisms ... how they look and feel in the body, and their relevance to a Asperger's Dance Movement Therapy Group.

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1. Defense Mechanisms Defined

In Freudian psychoanalytic theory, **defense mechanisms** are defined as unconscious psychological strategies brought into play by various entities to cope with reality and to maintain self-image. Healthy persons normally use different defenses throughout life. An ego defense mechanism becomes pathological only when its persistent use leads to maladaptive behavior such that the physical and/or mental health of the individual is adversely affected. The purpose of ego defense mechanisms is to protect the mind/self/ego from anxiety, social sanctions or to provide a refuge from a situation with which one cannot currently cope (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Defense_mechanism).

2. Defense Mechanisms in the Body

Wilhelm Reich (1897 - 1957) was an Austrian psychiatrist and psychoanalyst whom extended Freud's work in defense mechanisms in the body. He is best known for his studies on the link between Human Sexuality and Neuroses. He extended the consequences of psychoanalysis to the body, especially to the muscles and visceral functions. He believed suppressed emotion can be stored in the body as Bioenergetic tension and leads to the

formation of neuro-muscular 'armour' or 'character armour' (Boogaard & Postill, 2011).

Reich broke Freudian taboo against touching the patient and developed techniques of body-work that many therapists are now elaborating upon. He would press hard on their "body armor," his thumb or the palm of his hand pressing on their jaws, necks, chests, backs, or thighs, aiming to dissolve their muscular, and thereby characterological, rigidity. He wanted to see their movements soften, their breathing ease. This dissolution of the "body armor" also brought back the repressed memory of the childhood situation that had caused the repression, he wrote. If the session worked as intended, he wrote that he could see waves of pleasure move through their bodies, a series of spontaneous, involuntary movements. Reich called these the "orgasm reflex."

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/wilhelm_reich#nudity_and_touch_during_session).

3. Working with Defense Mechanisms and DMT

When working with DMT, acceptance of the client is a fundamental component of the work (pers. Com. Ostroburski, 2011). Accepting where they are at in their lives, accepting the strategies (defense

mechanisms) that they employ, and then offering alternative strategies that may be more success for them.

Stanton-Jones (1992), explains that other modalities (eg. employed by Reich and Lowen followers) claim success in their methods, however critics say that these intensive methods smash down the defense of the client too quickly. Critics believe that this may leave them vulnerable to the intensity of their own feelings and without the supportive therapeutic relationships to learn other ways of coping with the strong emotions released through such methods. In contrast Stanton-Jones (1992) explains DMT works on eventually helping the person to develop more helpful ways of defending against anxiety or emotional pains. She explains that this may be achieved by relating to others on a non-verbal level in the group movement, by gently unfolding feelings through symbols, and in the context of a longer-term relationship to the therapist, in which the effects of these changes can be worked through.

4. Sam, a case study

Sam attends an Asperger DMT group on a weekly basis, and has been doing so for over a year. When Sam joined the group he presented with strong body armouring and in many ways, this has

softened over time. Often when he arrives at the session his defences and anxieties are very elevated, however over the space of the two-hour sessions these slowly dissolve away, as he connects in with his body and supportive group environment.

Sam is very strong, and his movements are usually explosive and strongly bound. When he holds hands, he finds it difficult to do this softly, and any soft connection is challenging to achieve. His jaw is usually quite tense, and he often finds it difficult to let his words out. His chest is rigid, and there is little connection between his upper and lower body. Generally speaking he looks like he is holding himself back, or holding himself in.

Reich identified 7 'Rings of Tension' where muscular contraction prevents the free flow of energy including:

- **Ocular** - forehead, eyes, cheekbones, tear duct glands - inability to open eyes wide,
- **Oral** - lips, chin, throat - may find it hard to cry, grin, or grimace,
- **Neck** - holding back of crying, and anger.
- **Chest** - self-control, and restraint - holding back of anger,
- **Diaphragm,**
- **Abdomen,**

- **Pelvis** - pleasure turns into anger - muscular spasms.

Boogaard, B & Postill, P. (2011)

In Sam's case, at different times each of these areas appear to be muscularly contracted. In particular his oral and neck rings of tension are blocked, resulting in him finding it difficult to share verbally with the group. Also there is almost an absence of connection to his pelvis.

Over the year Sam has given us an insight into his world through movements and discussions. He suffers from depression and is medicated for that. He is struggling with the idea of having Aspergers and talks about his desire for recovery. He has spoken of being bullied, and his attempts to distance himself from that. When he first joined the group he found it difficult to offer a movement (along with his name) for the rest of the group to copy in the opening movement circle. He said that he was worried about "looking silly or strange". I imagine that this has been a significant message that he has received in his life, ie. Don't do anything out of the ordinary or you will be seen as being different, which may result in bullying etc. Over time he has developed a sense of trust within the group and now can provide a movement

with only limited hesitancy. The movement is usually very powerful eg. a step forward and pushing one hand down onto the floor, or running across the space and sliding down onto one side stopping dramatically. This is a significant shift.

Sam has also slowly developed a connection with his upper body. Initially his rigid form allowed limited movement range through his arms and chest. He now often connects into his shoulders and moves them in a circular manner in a cross lateral system, creating a fluid movement across his chest. This is mostly done in a reverse circular motion, so that he often combines this with travelling backwards. He has now added a stumble to this, so this it looks like he may trip and fall but he always knows exactly how to catch himself. Symbolically it looks as if he is struggling with the world and being pushed backwards. I have attempted to work with this movement and see if he can travel forward with it, however that is very challenging to him. This is an area to continue working with.

Sam loves working with material capes, he enjoys hiding beneath it and exploring ways of coming out. However the main movement he connects with is when he holds the cape in front of him twisting and whipping it in various directions. Again the movement is very

strong, however he finds a fluidity in his body as the cape becomes an extension of his arms movement. This fluidity travels cross laterally, as well as up and down, allowing integration of all quadrants of his body. Symbolically it looks like he is releasing a significant amount of energy out of his body as he thrashing the material around his body and down to the floor. At the end of these movement exploration Sam appears relaxed and settled, his jaw appears released, his shoulders slumped, and his belly malleable.

Sam also obtains significant satisfaction when working with a large elastic circle with either 2 or 3 other participants. He particularly enjoys wrapping himself up in knots and then bringing others into his knotted world. I image that he is enjoying the sensory integration of the pressure around his body. (His mother has indicated that he has always been her “cuddly one”). Again when Sam has explored this to great depth, it appears that some intense need has been satisfied and his armouring appears to subside and he relaxes into himself and the space.

During one particular session I worked in a partnership with Sam, when we explored coming and going, connecting and releasing.

Prior to this experiential, Sam had been very distracted and not able to settle into the circle sharing and warm up. Initially our exploration was very intense with significant strength required on my behalf to match his, as we explored pushing and pulling, combined with twisting and traveling across space. We interacted both standing and transferring down to the floor. Over time this intensity was exhausted from his movements, and I was able to offer up lighter, gentler ways of coming together, connecting and then releasing. It was as though the intensity of the energy held in his body needed to be released, before other ways of being in the movement could be explored. In this process his body armouring again shifted, his rigid chest softened, his shouldered relaxed and even his eyes appeared to soften.

When asked “what he gets out of coming to the session”, Sam explains it is his connection to one of the other participants that he really enjoys. His friend Mark also has Aspergers, he is high functioning, is very well spoken, and he enjoys Sam's attention. When they work together there is a non-judgemental acceptance between them (and the rest of the group), they clearly appreciate this and the opportunity to meet each other in movement and laughter. Often times they slip into a game of chasy, with one of

them initiating the connection, through eye contact across the space. An exploration of the very child like play eventually results in them ‘dropping it’ and then being available to work again with the group. Sometimes they need to be asked to ‘drop it’, other times it organically comes to an end. However, after Sam is meet in this way, he is often more present, connected to his body and open chested (his heart appears softened).

When Sam is asked what he gets out of the relationship with Mark, he explains in his own way that it is the ‘connection with another’ that he loves, and the feeling of excitement when they come together. Sam has been able to take this into his own dance, and created what he called his ‘ecstatic-excited dance’, where I imagine that he was able to find that feeling within himself through movement.

After listening to the stories of his life, I image that there is not many other opportunities to explore his world and friendships through movement and laughter... what a gift it is for him. It is the connection to Mark, the rest of the group and the facilitators that helps Sam to soften his defences. This has been achieved through

the framework of DMT and the opportunities it has provided for Sam to explore his own life through movement.

5. References:

Boogaard, B & Postill, P. (2011)

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Personal Communication – Fran Ostroburski (Supervision – May, 2011)