

Defeating Denial: Facing the Truth of your Child's Addiction

by Zach Whaley

Denial is a very powerful thing. I'm going to talk about the purpose of denial, the many faces of denial, what it is that we deny, and what are the results of denial. Then I will share seven ideas for defeating denial.

Denial in chemical dependency and codependency is a defense mechanism that protects us from painful realities and consequences. Many authors and professional people view addictive denial as the first stage of the grief process described by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross in her book *Death and Dying*.

As I prepared for this presentation, I became increasingly uncomfortable with that view. I reviewed my 30 years of living with addictions followed by almost 30 years of working professionally in the field of addictions. I know that many people will disagree with what I'm about to say but that is okay. I believe that for the chemically dependent person, denial is not the first step of the grief process. Rather it is a childish and selfish manipulation to get out of trouble. In grief, there is a loss and then denial. In addiction, there is denial and then loss.

Denial is dishonest. It's lying. And dishonesty is a sin. So when we try to sugarcoat addictive denial by calling it the first step in the grief process, "we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us," as the Apostle John tells us in 1 John 1:18. Children try lying as soon as they learn to talk. Lying is in our genes. The Bible says the human heart is deceitful in every way. Deceiving others and ourselves comes naturally. Addicts don't start lying when they get addicted. They start lying about chemical use when they start experimenting with chemical use, before they get addicted. At this time it's still fun and games, hanging out and getting high. They are unaware of the impact on themselves and their loved ones. They have not at this point experienced the loss associated with their chemical use. So this denial is not part of the grief process. They do it to manipulate those who might interfere with their getting what they want when they want it. They refine lying into a complex constellation of skills that we call denial.

The main feature of addiction is loss of control. When this loss occurs, the addicts simply use their already refined dishonesty skills to deny that they have lost control of behavior that is becoming more and more self-destructive. This denial is the first step in the grief process, but the first step in the recovery process is honesty. This honesty shown by admitting that they are powerless and their lives have become unmanageable. Denial serves a dual purpose: one that is internal or personal; the other is external or social.

Internally, denial now helps the addicts maintain the illusion of control. They convince themselves they can quit any time that they want. They believe that they can control the frequency and the amount, but they can't do it consistently. Denial also helps them avoid the reality of self-destruction.

Externally, social denial is still used to manipulate anyone seen as a threat to continued use. They convince themselves that their needs are more important than the needs of those around them. This self-concern then justifies whatever it takes to get the next fix. Whoever is a threat to their continued use becomes an enemy to be defeated or a non-person to be used. I heard an alcoholic say once, "When people hurt me I am deeply hurt; but when I hurt them, I say, 'Oh well. They'll get over it.'" That was his attitude when he was drinking. He was now a sober alcoholic talking, telling his story.

Co-dependent denial is different but it's also the same. The motivation may be different but the process is the same. Wanting to help the addict motivates some co-dependent people. They mistakenly believe that denial helps. Others may be motivated by self-preservation—the need to

protect their status, job or their role esteem. They believe that denial will work. For some, the motivation is to avoid the unpleasantness of the truth. They believe that if they deny it, they won't have to deal with it.

Many, especially Christians, confuse confrontation with judgment and condemnation, which of course the Bible tells us not to do. So they avoid confrontation through denial. They have the mistaken belief that denial is grace. And some codependents are simply unaware of what's going on, because they are so focused on themselves that they don't have a strong enough connection to sufficiently be involved in the addict's life to notice the signs. Or, they're just ignorant of the signs of abuse. One thing I discovered a long time ago is that people who live with an alcoholic can tell when somebody has been drinking. I taught drug and alcohol counselors in Colorado for about 10 years.

I told them, "I can always tell when someone's been drinking. I grew up with an alcoholic father and my first wife was an alcoholic. I can always tell when someone's been drinking. But I can't tell you how I tell. There's just something about their persona that I know. I think it's in the eyes but I'm not sure." For most codependents, denial is the first stage of the grief process.

By the way, the grief process starts with denial. There's bargaining, guilt, anger, sadness and finally acceptance and moving on with life. Denial is the first stage and I believe it's a gift of God. The same thing happens with a physical injury.

I was parachuting with a fellow once. When we picked up our chutes in the drop zone and were walking to the meeting point he said, "Zach, my leg is clicking."

I said, "What do you mean it's clicking?"

He said, "Every time I take a step it goes click, click."

We continued to walk about 100 yards. He began saying, "Zach, my leg's starting to hurt." So I said, "You better sit down here. Let's get an ambulance."

He had a broken leg but the body denied the pain. I believe that's a gift of God to enable us to get out of whatever the situation is that hurt us. Like people in an automobile accident, they're able to maybe crawl away and they don't feel the pain until later. This is denial and it's helpful denial. In the grief process, denial is usually the briefest of the various stages. However, many codependent people get stuck in denial for years. They don't progress through the grief process to get to the point of acceptance.

The Many Faces of Denial

Whatever the motivation, the process is the same. Here are some methods of denial that I've seen used by addicts and co-addicts alike.

Lying. Lying is a deliberate attempt to deceive someone by knowingly making a statement that is not true. Many people don't believe a loved one can deceive them. They think they know this person or people in general so well that they can tell whenever a lie is being presented. But for many people, especially in an addictive system, and I emphasize system, lying becomes a way of life. They lie even when they don't need to. You might say, "Well, nobody ever needs to lie." From the addicts' perspective, they need to lie to get out of trouble or to protect themselves. The truth is simply not in them. Unfortunately, many people become so accomplished at lying that even a lie detector test cannot identify the lie.

Simple Denial. Simple denial is pretending that something does not exist and pretending not to notice. Mom is passed out drunk on the living room floor and nobody is talking about it. They just act as if she isn't there. A 15-year-old comes home with bloodshot eyes and smelling of

marijuana and nobody acknowledges noticing. A 13-year-old seldom shows up for meals and nobody asks, "How come?"

Minimizing and Maximizing. This is making the bad look good and the good look better. In minimizing, we acknowledge the possibility of a problem but not the severity of the problem. Like, "Oh it's not that bad yet." Or, "I didn't drink that much." Or, "I'm not doing it that often." Or, "I didn't like working there anyway." In maximizing, we exaggerate the importance of a good thing like bragging about winning \$500 on the slot machines but not mentioning that we put in \$600. "I know he is experimenting with some drugs but he doesn't dress like those druggers and he gets decent grades. I mean, doesn't everybody try it out? It's no big deal." That's minimizing.

Blaming. Blaming is recognizing the problem and maybe even the severity of the problem but blaming someone or something else for the problem. "You made me do that." "I had to do that because of this." For the co-dependent, this could include blaming himself for the addict's problem or for the addict's behavior. Co-dependents are good at blaming themselves and taking responsibility for other people's actions.

Excusing. When we excuse, we offer excuses, explanations, alibis or justifications to make our own or someone else's behavior acceptable. We make comments like, "You have to understand. I'm having a bad day." We act as if that excuses the behavior. Or, "I really didn't have a choice. I had to do that because of what my boss was doing. I had no choice." Or, one that I hear a lot is, "Wouldn't anybody do this in this circumstance?" The reality is, it doesn't make any difference if the whole planet is doing it. If it's wrong, it's wrong. If it's self-destructive it's self-destructive. But excusing is used to deny there's a problem.

Generalizing. This is dealing with problems on a general level, which avoids personal and emotional awareness. Generalizing makes it acceptable and avoids ownership or helps someone else avoid ownership of the problem. One that I see a lot in counseling is using "you" instead of "I" when talking about yourself. "What was it like when you walked in and found out that you were laid off?" And the answer is, "You know, when you face something like that, you really get upset and you begin to wonder about the...." It's much better for them to say, "When I face something like that, I get upset and I begin to have these kinds of thoughts." This person, then, is taking ownership of it. The person who is saying "you" is saying, "Everybody would think that" and they're not taking ownership of it. I call that generalizing.

Dodging. Dodging is changing the subject to avoid discussing the problem. Someone says, "Mary is surely acting peculiar." We respond, "Yeah, and you know her brother is doing really well on the football team. He plays linebacker and they expect to have an undefeated season." What happened to Mary? The dodging person changed the subject. Dodging is not dealing with that issue by changing the subject.

Attacking. Attacking is becoming angry when the problem is mentioned. That's a form of denial because it pushes people away. Anger is used to warn people not to discuss this problem. Anger threatens some kind of retaliation if the problem is addressed. It pushes people away so they don't get close enough to talk about real issues of the problem. A statement like, "I'd rather be stoned than be uptight like you." These are angry, attacking statements.

Sideswiping. This is the hit and run. It's addressing the problem indirectly as a sideswipe. It's not a head-on collision. It is similar to saying something general to no one in particular but loud enough so the people in the room hear it, particularly the one you want to hear it. It's kind of a sideswipe and it goes something like this: "Gee, this article says that ecstasy is very damaging to the brain. Anyone who risks damaging his brain must be really stupid." That's sideswiping. That's making a comment not directly to the other person that you want to hear it. That way, you don't have to take ownership of your statement. You don't have to get into a discussion but you make your point.

Spiritualizing. Spiritualizing is using the phrase, “God is in control,” to avoid responsibility for taking some kind of action. This is not the same as letting go in order to let God really be in control. This is saying, “God is in control,” as a way of dismissing the problem and not having to deal with it.

These are some of the ways that we exercise denial.

What We Deny

Behavior. We deny behavior. We deny the things that we do. “He did it tonight but I think it will be the last time” is a good example of denying behavior. Or, “I did it tonight but I think it’s the last time. It is not a big deal.” That kind of thing is how we deny behavior.

Emotions. We deny our feelings. When someone confronts our anger, we minimize it by saying through gritted teeth, “No I’m not angry, just a little upset!” Then we say, “Wouldn’t anybody be upset?” We say that as if that then justifies being upset. Or, when someone catches us with tears in our eyes we might say, “Oh, the darn pollution is sure aggravating my allergies.” Sometimes we totally deny our feelings by numbing ourselves in some way. This is part of addiction. We deny ourselves the rich experience of emotions. We deny others the opportunity to get close to us by not sharing our emotions with them. And to protect our own emotions, we often deny other people’s emotions.

A couple of weeks ago I picked up one of my wife’s devotional books for women. I forget what the subject of the first story was, but I don’t think I’ll ever forget how it ended. A friend came to the authoress and said, “I feel totally abandoned by God.” And the response to her friend was, “That’s not true. God never leaves us, never forsakes us.” Did you hear what happened? She totally ignored the person’s feelings and devalued her feelings. Of course, we know God hasn’t abandoned her. But she’s expressing a feeling. It is a feeling of alienation from God. It is a feeling of not being connected to God. And she probably needed to talk about that; but the author of the book cut her off with, “That’s not true. You can’t be feeling abandoned by God. He said He’ll never leave us or forsake us.” We protect our own emotions by denying other people’s emotions, too.

Intellect. God gave us a brain with which to think and to solve problems, yet we deny our intellect by avoiding the truth that we need to solve problems. We sometimes vegetate in some way, maybe in front of a television so we don’t have to think. Instead of taking “every thought captive to the obedience of Christ,” we let our brain obsess about things that we can’t do anything about, while ignoring the things that we can do something about. So in that way we deny our intellect as though we don’t even have one.

Will. We deny that we have choices, thereby denying responsibility for our choices. We deny our intentions saying, “But I didn’t mean to hurt you with that remark.” Or, “Just kidding,” after making a cutting remark or a remark that hurts. Having claimed we have best of intentions, we then insist that we be judged on our intentions not our behavior.

Body. We deny our body proper function by eating, exercising or sleeping too much or too little. This also helps us deny our emotions and our intellect because we don’t have the nutrition to make our brain work well. We don’t have the clarity of feelings to understand what we’re feeling because our body is becoming a mess.

The Holy Spirit. We deny the prompting of the Holy Spirit. We forget that God can speak to us through a jackass, and so those people we consider as jackasses we don’t listen to. We deny God the opportunity to bring about change by trying to control people and situations ourselves. And when we do this we put a wall around the indwelling Holy Spirit and we lose our connection with God.

Reality. We create a fantasy world in our minds and act as if it is real. It's not fantasy in our minds. So basically we deny reality in every part of our being: intellect, emotions, body, will, spirit.
The Results of Denial

Denial prevents change. We have to accept what is, before we can change what is. Denial keeps us from working through the grief process over the loss of a child, dreams, self-respect, prestige, job, control, health, etc. I have heard parents say that when their kids get clean and sober, that they got their child back. To be able to say that meant they acknowledged the loss. They did not deny it. Recognizing they had lost the child preceded their acknowledging their loss.

Denial keeps us from working through the grief process of any loss. The loss could be the loss of self-respect, a job, or the loss of health. As long as we deny it, then we can't work through it. Denial keeps us from working through our grief so that we can't move on with our lives. We're stuck. As it relates to an addicted child, the parent is stuck with the total focus of his life being on this other person and what's happening to him. The result of that is that we don't get to live our life.

Our denial prevents the addict from experiencing the pain of the addiction. This denial eliminates the motivation to change. Addicts do not wake up on a beautiful Sunday morning and say, "Whoa, what a beautiful day. I think I'll quit using today. I think I'll clean up and get sober." It doesn't happen that way. People have to hit bottom. People have to reach the end of their rope. The denial of the parent can keep them from getting there to that point.

Denial feeds addiction because addiction thrives on dishonesty. Dishonesty is fuel for addiction. I believe addiction cannot continue without dishonesty. Denial is the antithesis of recovery because recovery requires honesty. In the *Big Book* of A.A., it says it is rare when someone is found who could not follow the path of sobriety. Chapter 5 in the *Big Book* says, "There are an unfortunate few who simply cannot be honest." So honesty is a foundation and a beginning for recovery. Denial then, is the antithesis of the honesty required for recovery.

Finally, Jesus said, "I am the truth." And truth and lies cannot co-exist any more than light and darkness can co-exist. Denial separates us from Christ "apart from Whom we can do nothing."

Defeating Denial

First, I want stress the importance of defeating denial. Failing to defeat denial can result in a hardened heart toward truth. Ephesians 4:17-9 states,

"So I tell you this and insist on it in the Lord that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity with a continual lust for more."

Paul says they no longer live in the futility of their thinking; they're living in denial. They are separated from God, and this results in a hardened heart. They have lost all sensitivity. They have no conscience, no rationality, and their feelings are limited to lusting for more of the same. If they continue, they're trapped. So defeating denial is very important. Make a commitment to put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, as Ephesians 4:25 says.

1 Corinthians 10:12 says, "So if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall. Don't rely on yourself alone."

We should seal this commitment to put off falsehood and speak truth by developing a support system of gentle and courageous people who are knowledgeable about denial. We can ask them

to confront our denial. We should confess our sins to one another and be healed. We need to become the gentle and courageous person that our addict may need when he decides to confront his denial.

“Take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” and “be renewed in the attitude of your mind.” Remind yourself repeatedly that interfering with the addict’s pain postpones recovery. Listen to yourself talk. Capture the denial statements and correct them. It is helpful to take a sheet of paper and draw a line down the middle. On the left side, write the denial statement. On the right side write an argument against it. You will begin to train your brain to confront automatically your own denial statements. Journal every day. Then look for irrational thoughts. Look for denial. Capture them. Look for the excuses, minimizing, and so on, and take them captive.

Experience and express your feelings. Learn a feeling vocabulary. I find that for a lot of people it just hasn’t been part of their life to talk about feelings. They don’t even have a feeling vocabulary. So learn a feeling vocabulary. Learn to identify feeling words. Look for feelings in your body. Become aware of aches, tenseness, weakness and numbness and ask yourself what feelings are causing them? What is causing this knot in my stomach? Read your journal looking for signs of sadness, anger, fear, guilt, shame and joy and when you find them, allow yourself to experience the feeling. Then “count it all joy.” “Counting it all joy” does not mean to disown your feelings. It means to experience the feelings and then “count it joy,” knowing that it will produce in you perseverance.

Stop doing things that support self-destructive behavior for yourself and others. Start practicing recovery. Attend to your physical health. Proper nutrition, exercise, rest, grooming. Do it, but don’t over do it. Stop any behavior that gives you a quick fix whether it be a drug, drink, eating, gambling, sexual fantasies, etc. Anything that gives you a quick fix, stop it, because that will become an addiction. Instead, Paul tells the Ephesians, “Be filled with the Spirit.” Are you constantly on the go? Ask yourself “what will catch me if I stop running?” Then deal with that. Stop reacting automatically and start responding by making conscience choices.

Saying, “Someone pushed my buttons” is denial of responsibility for our actions. Angry, critical, condemning outbursts cannot be excused, but they can be forgiven when we acknowledge our responsibility for them. We can change by making conscious choices about how to respond to hurt and threat. What happens typically is that we develop a habitual way of responding or reacting whenever we feel threatened or hurt by someone, and that becomes automatic. Very often those ways are destructive of the relationship; so we need to put off those automatic, old habits and put on conscious choices. We think consciously, “How am I going to respond to this?” instead of just letting it go.

“Let go and let God.” Give Him your addiction or give Him your addict. Jesus said, “Come to Me, you who are heavily burdened and I will give you rest.” Give Him your burden and receive His rest. Improve your conscious contact with God. Become more aware of His presence more often and in more places. Connect with God through prayer, meditation and quiet listening. I sometimes think that we talk too much in prayer and we need to spend some time just listening quietly. I recommend trying to pray in pictures instead of words. Picture what you are praying about. Get to know God through His Word. Seek Him in every situation. Do what the kids do. Ask yourself, “What would Jesus do?” When in conflict with yourself or others, seek His “peace that passes all understanding.” Peace does not mean that we should ignore unacceptable behavior. It means dealing with it gently without hostility.

Twelve Steps to Defeating Denial

Step One: Admit that you are powerless over your addict and that your life has become unmanageable.

Step Two: Believe that God can restore you to sanity. Insanity is doing the same thing over and over each time expecting a different result. Denial is insanity because it is delusional thinking. It is irrational and it denies reality. And those are symptoms of psychosis.

Step Three: Turn your life and your will over to the care of God. You cannot do this and continue in denial because God is truth. Whenever you relapse back into denial, you will need to do steps one, two and three again to begin recovery. You may have to do those three steps ten times today or 100 times tomorrow.

Step Four: Take an honest look at yourself and don't deny what you see. Identify the denial methods that you have used to lie to yourself and others in this step.

Step Five: Confess to God and to one another.

Steps Six through Twelve: Involve cleaning up your messes. Keep working on self-improvement. Improve your conscious contact with God on a daily basis and reach out to others who are hurting. Why is this so important? Hebrews 3:12-14 says,

“See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God but encourage one another daily as long as it is called today so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly to the end the confidence we had at first.”

The unbelieving heart turned away from God is a heart in denial, turned away from truth. Instead, Hebrews says to encourage one another daily. In other words, don't go it alone. Take one day at a time. A heart hardened by deceitfulness means you're no longer open to the truth. You can be in denial so much that pretty soon you're no longer open to the truth. The author knew that we would be tempted to give up hope. So he says, “Hold firmly to the end.” But it doesn't say what the end is. In addition, the end is either recovery or death. But you have to hold firmly to the end. We have become experts at using denial to make reality more tolerable. It makes the intolerable tolerable, the unacceptable acceptable. We have learned well how to stop the pain exposed by reality, not by changing our circumstances but by pretending our circumstances are something other than what they are. Now is the time to find courage and face the truth.

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