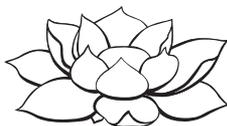


Wellspring of Compassion



## Tell a Story About Denial

Denial, the refusal to acknowledge a painful fact, thought, or feeling, is often judged negatively as a component of resistance. Being “in denial” is thought to be contrary, regressive, and the opposite of healing. We are urged to confront the truth, lose our illusions, and stop running away, all in the name of getting healthier.

**Denial is protective.** In fact, denial’s primary role is protective, a circuit breaker for the psyche. When external events or internal responses overwhelm our resources, denial cuts off the overwhelming input to help us survive and keep us functioning.

Sometimes, one person’s denial affects others around them, for example denial about addiction. The denial serves a protective role, and at the same time, others may need to express boundaries about the behaviors associated with denial. The possible external effects of denial are not addressed here.

**Unawareness.** There are different levels of denial. In the deepest level, there is no awareness that something is being denied. It takes tremendous energy to suppress all awareness of distress, and the information tends to leak out in unintended words, unexplained physical and emotional symptoms, and conflicted attraction around the denied information.

For example, an incest survivor may believe that she had an ideal childhood, but she sometimes surprises herself by

saying negative things about her family, and she feels anxious and nauseated when she visits them. She may also be drawn to other survivors who are more conscious of their histories, without realizing the connection.

As we gather more resources over time, we are able to handle information that was previously overwhelming. We may also be drawn to investigate a denied area by the symptoms that arise.

**Disbelief.** This leads to the next level of denial, the cry of, “No! I don’t believe that!” in response to new information. Now there is awareness of a battle with unpalatable information.

Disbelief slows the onrush of change to a bearable level, allowing us to move between the more familiar state of denial, and the newer informed state. We may move back and forth many times before we make all the adjustments necessary to stay with the new information.

**Question hidden assumptions.** The battle between awareness and denial can be frustrating and exhausting. It is possible that both sides are correct, if the denial is fighting against a hidden assumption that is unacceptable and untrue. For example, an incest survivor may fiercely deny that her family hurt her because the memories carry an associated toxic shame about being a bad person.

**Tell a story.** When you struggle with belief, it helps to explore the hidden assumptions around disputed or denied information. One way to do that is to write or tell a story about a fictional person who has the denied characteristics.

**Set aside some time** when you will not be disturbed. Set a minimum time to write, perhaps 5 minutes, or a length of time that feels right to you. Choose a comfortable location, and paper and writing instruments you like, or use your

computer. You can also speak into a recorder. Bring some attention and energy to getting comfortable as you begin.

**Name your fictional character and the information you are exploring.** You can start with a mild version of the disputed information. For example, "Sometimes Tina's parents were mean to her."

**Write whatever comes to mind** and keep writing (or speaking) for at least the minimum time you set. Repeat, "I can't think of anything else to say," if you run out of ideas. If the words are flowing at the end of your allotted time, keep going until you reach a stopping point.

**Set your story aside** and take a break. Stretch, drink water, or do other activities that help you feel peaceful and centered.

**When you are ready, go over your story** slowly. Pause after each sentence and notice how your body feels. Are you tightening up, or relaxing? Are there any sentences that evoke a particularly strong reaction? Is there anything surprising to you? Do you get distracted or dissociate? The intention is to simply observe, rather than trying to change anything.

Remember to breathe and return to center as you complete the exercise.

In a few days, check in with yourself. How do you feel around the disputed information? You may want to do the story exercise again and notice if anything new arises.

**Slow down change.** Denial helps you heal by slowing down the changes required by new information and giving you time to adjust. Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross named denial as the first of five natural stages of grief in response

to terminal illness or catastrophic loss.\* Denial also protects you from hidden beliefs that are unacceptably damaging. When you embrace denial as a useful survival skill, it smooths some of the struggle from your healing process.

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\* Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss*, Scribner, 2007.