

Denial is an innate and automatic psychological defense mechanism which functions to protect us emotionally. For example, when we receive bad news, our typical initial response is usually “Oh no! That can’t be true!”

Some people will even follow up with protective body language like covering their eyes or their ears.

Others might react with an angry outburst. Most of us have heard the old adage about the king who killed the messenger who brought him bad news.

Our tendency towards denial is so ingrained that I once become angry with emergency room doctors and nurses who were treating me after an accident.

Whenever a new medical worker entered the treatment area, he or she was quickly told “She was hit by a car” and my injuries were summarized.

After hearing this repeatedly, I suddenly screamed “Don’t say that any more! Don’t say that anymore! I don’t want to hear it anymore!”

I even shocked myself at this sudden outburst but I never forgot it as a very vivid and forceful example of the overwhelming power of denial.

On the intellectual level, I knew that I had been seriously injured, but on the emotional level, I was reacting to protect myself from this harsh new reality.

Over the past month, I have noticed that many of us remain in various stages of denial about our economy and how seriously it is affecting us.

On the intellectual level, we all understand that our country is experiencing financial problems right now, but on the emotional level, some of us appear to be insulating ourselves from its implications.

For example, a woman I know has been expressing thoughtful concerns about the economy and realistic insecurities about the stability of her job.

At the same time, however, there appears to be a significant disconnect between her thoughtful intellectual appreciation of our economic realities and her emotional reactions and behavior given that she has also been complaining extensively about her manager, her colleagues, her hours, her duties and even her allotted vacation time.

The individual most likely to survive cutbacks will be the most upbeat, positive and flexible employee, not the one who focuses on complaints.

This woman really needs to update her attitude and change her behavior.

I have also noticed the same disconnect phenomenon in terms of realistic pricing of some retail merchandise and houses.

The companies surviving and even thriving right now are those that lowered prices immediately and substantially, like McDonald's and Wal-Mart.

Some retailers and home sellers appear to me to have their heads in the sand.

Psychological defense mechanisms vary on a continuum from absolute and outright denial to the complete opposite extreme of excessive "awfulizing"

That is, our imaginations can run away with us with respect to evaluating how "awful" things are or could become.

Endless thought loops can start running in our minds which suggest all kinds of disagreeable things that could happen to us, but probably won't happen.

These kinds of thought loops can be very self-limiting and self-defeating.

If our run-away imaginations convince us that situations are worse than they really are, we might not be sufficiently motivated to take effective action.

We can override any tendencies towards denial or towards "awfulizing" by continuously questioning and correcting our initial assumptions so as to assure that we are not over-reacting or under-reacting to a situation or event.

**Bottom line:** Our intellect and our emotions need to work in harmony for effective resolutions of our problems to occur:

- We need to realistically assess our situations, challenging any tendencies towards denial or towards "awfulizing."
- We also need to confirm that our attitudes and behaviors are compatible with and supportive of our intellectual appraisals.