

## Repression and Denial

By Ben Benjamin, PhD

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*Author's note:* The following article is adapted from *The Ethics of Touch: The Hands-on Practitioners Guide To Creating a Professional Safe and Enduring Practice*, by Ben Benjamin and Cherie Sohnen-Moe.

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When people have experiences that are too painful to feel or to bear, they use the psychological mechanism of repression to remove them from the awareness of their conscious mind.

For example, the adult who experienced trauma as a child may have no recollection of the incident; instead, the memory exists buried deep in the subconscious. This is frequently the case in sexual abuse cases.

Remembering would be too painful, so the memory is repressed. Repression is a mechanism by which feelings or memories are kept out of the consciousness. It is the process of forgetting, squelching an impulse or feeling, or "to reject painful or disagreeable ideas, memories, feelings or impulses from the conscious mind."<sup>1</sup>

Repression is a subconscious process; it is not a decision made by the conscious mind, but an instinctive reaction to trauma. In some respects, the term "amnesia," rather than repression, is a more useful description of what happens. Hands-on health care practitioners report that it is common for subconscious memories to surface during body therapy sessions. Practitioners must be aware of this phenomenon and know how to handle this situation when it arises. Practitioners should also be aware that they could have unresolved repression issues that may affect their professional behavior.

Kisch states, "Repression may lead bodywork practitioners to seek personal gratification from professional contacts...or attempt to avoid the clients with whom the issue arises, and anxiously hope that they never come back." Repressed awareness does not simply go away. "They are translated into somatic tension lodging in the body tissues, covertly robbing the practitioner of peace of mind and precision in work. In

turn, the tension is somatically transferred to unknowing clients."<sup>2</sup> Unresolved practitioner repression affects both practitioner and client.

## **Denial**

Denial is an active refusal to recognize or acknowledge the full import or "feeling" state of reality. Denial occurs when a person insists on a distorted interpretation of reality that excludes unpleasant realizations. Denial is very similar to repression, but the mechanism of denial requires the collaboration of the conscious mind. The conscious mind goes through many twists and turns to deny the implications of what the person knows to be true.

For example, a person who suffers from addiction often admits to the action in question but is in denial about its magnitude or effects on his or her life and the lives of loved ones; an alcoholic may acknowledge the act of drinking, but if he or she drives drunk and wrecks a car, the person may deny that this event shows his or her drinking is excessive. It is also possible for denial to follow the retrieval of repressed memories. Sexual abuse victims who have recovered memories of traumatic events may, for a time, speak of the events as if they were unimportant, thus denying the affect of the events on their lives.

## *References*

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  2. Kisch, Ronan M. Beyond Technique: "The Hidden Dimensions of Bodywork." Ohio: BLHY Growth Publications, Inc., 1998. 325.
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