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Presentation Transcript
Mental Health and the Bible - Defenses
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January 4, 2018

This is Bill Jacobs for LifeResource Ministries. We're currently working on a series called *Mental Health and the Bible*. The title of today's presentation is *Defenses*. It's the tenth in the series.

Most of us have heard the term *defense mechanism*, but what is a defense mechanism? And what, if anything, does the Bible say about them? Can therapy that works with defense mechanisms help with Christian life? Well, let's look at these three questions, one at a time.

What are defense mechanisms? A defense mechanism is a method that humans use to avoid anxiety. When the sense of self, or physical well-being, is threatened, we feel anxious. So how do we react to that anxiety? Well, imagine a one-celled organism. It's on a slide and you're looking at it with a microscope. What does it do if you expose it to a tiny bit of toxin? Well, it instantly pulls away from it. It tries to defend itself from it. It tries to get away from it. And we all do that when our sense of self is threatened or we have a lot of negative emotions. And our minds then begin to mount a defense against the anxiety that's produced by those things. What does that look like in human life? Well, we can think about internal conflict – ambivalent over right or wrong. “Am I a good boy or a bad boy? Did I go along with my view of who I am, or did I go contrary to it?” Conflict is something that causes anxiety. Or, negative emotion, such as guilt, shame, or self-loathing, result in internal conflict as well sometimes. So that also creates anxiety.

Any time our desired perception of self is threatened, we can go into a defense of self. But what kind of defense do we use? Well, because the human mind is infinitely creative, there's no end of strategies that humans use to defend themselves. But psychology has observed many of them and have categorized the most often used. They divide them up in many different ways, depending on what kind of therapy you're using. Most mental health practitioners that I know believe that most mental illnesses are a form of self-defense. So there's one way you can categorize it. Since the definition of mental illness includes a negative effect on daily living, defenses can cause us no

end of troubles. When a person does psychotherapy, they're trying to get at the true feelings, and they need to go *through* their defenses to do that. The only way to truly protect self is to become vulnerable and to face truth internally. So here are some of the defenses I've seen when I work with people. I'm going to give you some of these so you kind of get a feel for what I'm talking about.

I was talking to a thirteen-year-old girl some time back, who told me she didn't have good eye contact. And I soon learned that her father would take her out to eat every other Friday night and embarrass her at the restaurant. He would go off on her or that wait staff. Since that was affecting her in a negative way, it was affecting *him* in a negative way, so his... whatever defense mechanism that was – probably a discharge of emotion – was causing *him* problems. So we could say, "Quite possibly, he had some sort of disorder." And her mother was an alcoholic. So she wasn't going to do any more relationships – too hurtful. The two most important people in her life let her down constantly. Now, as a small child, that might have worked for her, but now, as a teen, she was quite lonely. So avoiding eye contact is something I see a lot when people don't want to deal with how their feeling about me or someone else.

Another one is smiling or laughing. I see this a lot. So many funny stories, there's no time to do the work. Or, crying, for the same reasons – so much drama there's no time to process anything. Or, you see people, sometimes, sitting with their arms and legs crossed. And that is an unconscious defensive posture that says, "I'm not letting you in" or "I don't want to feel anything toward you." Or, being vague in general: "Hello there." I know that when my clients start calling me by name, they feel more comfortable and closer and they're more in touch with how they're feeling.

Arguing. I have a client right now, who's brilliant, but he feels lonely. He told me that if he has a pool party, everybody will come, but none of the people he invited ever invite him to any of their parties. I learned that he was isolated as a child at school because he was smaller than others. And to make matters even more difficult for him, he was a grade ahead. So he was even smaller yet. And I notice one way that keeps us all at distance, that he uses, is to disagree with almost everything we say to him. He's not aware that he does this, but it's to keep us away. He *wants* closeness, but he's also afraid of it. That's his defense. So he's a prisoner of his own fear – held prisoner by his defense mechanism. And, because he hasn't identified it yet, there's nothing that he can do about it. He probably *will* do something about it, if he can just see past his defense.

Another big one is sarcasm. This is just another way to keep people at arm's length – poking fun at them. Of course, there's a high price to pay when we use that, isn't there?

Or, jumping from one topic to another, so there's no focus on anything difficult. Or, nobody's going to be able to point anything out to us. Or, I often have people that come in for their session, but they can't process because there are so many dramas they have to report. Or, they fill the air with so many details that that moves away from their feelings.

A woman came to me once because she lost her daughter to suicide. And for the first three sessions, she rehearsed the multitude of events and observations – all about the loss of her daughter – but none of which had to do with how she felt. So she’s wasn’t able to get to her feelings yet. And she would fill the air with details.

Or, sometimes my clients explain things in such a way that they’re not to blame. I always remember the Willie Nelson song, *I have a list of real good reasons for all the things I’ve done*. So explaining the situation so that anxiety is reduced or distancing ourselves from the problem.

Or, we minimize the negative effects of the situation. This is when we minimize the importance of an issue, making it unnecessary to do anything about it. “My brother hasn’t spoken to me in fifteen years, but I really don’t care. He’s not a part of my life.” But I notice this keeps coming up.

Or, we shift the negative feelings to a less intense target. This is where anxiety caused by one thing is shifted to something else. We talked a time back about phobias as a fear that replaces another fear that more fearsome or anxiety producing than the conscious fear.

I recall the girl who was terrified of roaches. I’ve mentioned her before. She saw a dark bug cross her leg just after she was attacked by some boys at recess. And it wasn’t until some years later that she developed a fear of roaches. How do I know they’re connected? Because we processed the attack and after that, her fear of roaches declined.

Or, we can feel just the opposite of the real feelings. A seventeen-year-old girl told me once how much she hated her father. He was so terrible. He never paid any attention to her. Later, she told me that they were in their car on a road trip, coming back from her father’s father’s funeral – her grandfather. And her father was talking about *his* father as he was driving, and she told me that she could tell that he was about to break down. And I asked her, “And what were you doing there in the back seat?” And she said, “I was sobbing uncontrollably.” And I said, “And this from the girl who told me for six months how much she hates her father.” So she was avoiding the feelings of grief and for the love unrequited. And the way she did that was by hating him. She really loved him, but she couldn’t find a way to get his attention. And that was intensely painful, so she just hated him instead.

Or, we deny the whole thing. “I’m fine. No, really, I’m fine! I am!” when we’re really not. Have you ever heard anybody do that?

Or, we assign our feelings or motives to someone else – the unfaithful husband who checks his wife phone every day, because he suspects she’s having an affair.

Or, we express in our body how we feel instead of facing it. The most dramatic example I can recall with this one is a ten-year-old little girl, whose mother had become a meth addict. There was a terrible custody battle going on for her. And her mother was out of control with rage and acting completely irresponsible, not taking care of her properly when she had custody. And her father was angry, but mostly terrified that the courts would give his daughter permanently to a meth addict. She would not talk about it to her father or to her therapist. (I wasn't the therapist, by the way. It was someone else. Her father was the one that was coming to see me.) He told me that he became aware that she was constipated. So he took her to the doctor, and when she was examined, the doctor told her father that that her entire abdomen was impacted. She was retaining the feces as well as the anxiety – a way to communicate her feelings about the issue without having to feel or say it.

Another kind of defense mechanism is what's called *acting out*. In many churches that take a strong stand on behavior, we see teenagers becoming promiscuous, doing drugs, resisting going to church, getting poor grades, running away – that sort of thing. They're communicating their feelings by how they act. They're communicating their feelings about being, what seems to them, over-controlled. Sometimes they don't even know why. You talk to them and they're as mystified about it as anybody else. And that's because they've regressed from their feelings. And that's a defense mechanism – so they don't have to feel what their feeling.

Another one is...I call it *discharging pulses*. We might call it *losing it* – you know, domestic violence, road rage, blowing up at the therapist. Better to do that than feel the underlying guilt, shame, sadness, fear, etc.

Or, *numbing*. Sometimes this looks like depression. And depression is a good way to get away from one's feelings. I say, "Good." It's effective. It has terrible end results. I know that when people do EMDR and the process takes them into feelings they can't tolerate, their minds will go blank and find themselves thinking about what's for dinner, or the back and forth of the EMDR – anything but the dreaded feelings.

I had a young woman in my office this week who had a terrible time growing up with her mother. And she likes to consider herself the kind of person that is really tough and can just handle anything and very strong. So I explained to her that out there – outside the office – that's what you have to do to appear strong, but in the office, I know that you're courageous when you come to grips with your *feelings*. And I said, "I think what's going on here – because you're mind keeps going blank – is that unconsciously you're blocking the flow of thoughts." And she looked at me kind of startled. And I said, "Now that's not you consciously doing that. You and I are both working to help you feel better, but there's a block there, I think. So, I'm just going to ask you, on a scale from zero to ten, how good would it feel to not have to do this?" And she said, "You mean ten being the best?" And I said, "Yeah." And she said, "Oh, it'd feel really good. It would be a ten." I said, "Okay, just go with that." And we started processing, and pretty soon she started crying, and all this stuff came floating out about she and her mother. And when I

stopped after thirty seconds – like I usually do – she said, “You’re pretty sneaky, aren’t you?” So she understood what was going on then, and we just progressed normally after that.

So sometimes people will even dissociate – sort of float away or feel a sense of being distanced from their feelings or from reality. When that happens I have to go a lot slower.

So those are just some of the examples that I’m talking about when I talk about defense mechanisms. If we think about it, we can all catch ourselves doing things like this, and we can see other people doing them too. It’s just a part of human life, isn’t it? We have to get away from the anxiety. We don’t like it. Even a little bit of anxiety makes us react in some way.

So what does the Bible tell us about this? Well, the term *defense mechanism* is not in the Bible, but I think we can all see these defenses against our own feelings and anxieties are deceptions. They’re deceptions – where we’re deceiving ourselves. And we try to deceive others as well. So the Bible *does* have a lot to say about that.

I want to mention one other thing before we get into the Bible. Sometimes the reason we withdraw from feelings is, because to feel them would throw us into a state of mental breakdown. So sometimes there’s a very good reason for them. And that’s a good one. It’s kind of like going into shock. When we’re seriously wounded physically, sometimes we don’t even feel the pain because the shock blocks it. And, if we didn’t take care of the shock – treat the person for shock – the shock might kill them. When someone is doing EMDR with me, and they tell me they feel like it’s not real, I know to slow way down – maybe do more strengthening of their sense of self before going forward, because *derealization* and *disociation* are very real difficult defenses. So we have to respect them. Although generally defenses hinder the healing process – and that’s because to heal from the hurtful things of our past, we have to feel those feelings, and defenses prevent that. That’s what keeps us stuck. And every one of them is a denial of inward truth.

So let’s look at some scriptures and draw some observations from them about the human habit of defense. Let’s read Psalms 51:6:

Psalms 51:6 – *Behold, You delight in truth in the inward being and You teach me wisdom in the secret heart.*

So defenses are a way to avoid truth. If our defenses are strong, God is not going to use a bulldozer to get through them most of the time. He wants us to do our own hard work. So we usually learn these defenses in childhood, and that may help us to mute the pain of something we can’t do anything about, but as adults, they hinder us, because we could now face them and make helpful changes. But because of defenses, we’re stuck in the wounds that Satan has inflicted upon us. We defend ourselves from the hurts of the past. But, if we can admit or feel them, then we can’t get past them. The defense prevents it. An example would be the man who argued with

everyone to keep distance when he really wanted closeness. He learned to be argumentative as a child.

Notice, too, that God teaches us more effective ways to deal with our problems beside self-deceptive defenses – because they prevent learning His wisdom. The scripture did say, “You teach wisdom in the secret parts.” So God shows us how to deal with our own defenses, to some degree. An example would be to go back to that man that argued with everybody. He doesn’t know how to avoid conflict and defenses become the way he is. But the Bible says, “If your neighbor asks you for your tunic, give him your cloak also.” Just try to limit argument, disagreement and offense. Defenses are strategies we use to avoid dealing with things that make us unhappy. But facing them is better and it’s honest. Dealing with the problem that we have is the best way to deal with it. When he gets ready to deal with the fact of his own loneliness, and that he’s using argument to keep people away, and that there’s a better way to do that, he’ll start feeling better.

Here’s another scripture. I’m not going to read it, because it’s a long one. It’s Genesis, chapters 1 through 4 – you know, Adam and Eve. When we think of defenses, we need to ask, “Why?” Why do we need to defend ourselves? Well, psychology tells us that when internal conflict arises, it causes anxiety. We don’t like how it feels, so we withdraw from our feelings or repress them. The reason conflict causes anxiety is because it’s about protecting the self – good or bad, right or wrong – in the same way we instinctively protect our own body – anything to reduce the conflict and the resultant anxiety.

Let’s look at Adam and Eve with God in the Garden after they ate the forbidden fruit. He tried to project his responsibility onto Eve, and she tried to push it off on the devil. But they *both* took the fruit, and both of them bent their elbows as they put the fruit in their mouths and ate it. Nobody else did that but them. So their attempts to distance themselves from the anxiety...that was a defense mechanism. Why were they anxious? Well, let’s go to Romans 2:14, where Paul explains how humans work. He says:

Romans 2:14-16 – *For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts.* So what he’s saying here is, while they don’t formally have the law, there’s something in every human that helps them understand what the law says – you know, don’t lie, don’t steal, don’t commit adultery. Everybody knows these things. So *they show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.* So we have a conscience. And what does it argue about internally? Well, it argues about whether we’re a good person. And how do we define that? Well, everybody, pretty much, defines it the same way generally – and those are the last six of the Ten Commandments. And he says: *On that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Jesus Christ.* So that’s what the conflict is going to yield.

So, because God put it there, we all know what right and wrong is, even if we don't know that it's written in the Bible. And when we violate that code, we feel conflict. "What kind of a person am I?" Well, if we break the law a lot, we suspect that we're bad. And that makes us feel guilty. And that makes us feel anxious. Every human is like that, because everybody has that law written on their hearts. So psychologists focus on the inner conflict as the cause of anxiety. And here we see Paul focusing on the very same thing.

Adam and Eve *knew* they were blessed by God to live in the Garden with Him. They *knew* He loved them. They knew He had their best interest at the center of His heart. They knew He didn't want them to eat of that fruit, too, but they did it anyway. And this caused them to ask in their hearts, "What kind of person am I?" because it violated their own consciences. And the answer created huge conflict, and then anxiety, in each of them. And so they tried to push away from themselves the responsibility of eating the fruit. So, the Bible tells us how to deal with these things.

Have you ever done something that completely goes against your view of yourself? What do you do? Well, you get anxious because of the conflict, and then you start using defenses to push it away from you. Here's what David said, though.... Remember what he did to Uriah, the Hittite? He wanted Uriah's wife, so he sent Uriah to front lines of the battle, where he knew he would be killed, more than likely. So Psalms 32:3:

Psalms 32:3-5 – *For when I kept silent – for whatever reason – my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night, Your hand was heavy upon me. My strength was dried up by the heat of summer. But then, here's what he did: I acknowledged my sin to You, and I did not cover my iniquity. He stopped defending himself, and he said: I will confess my transgressions to the LORD, and You forgave the iniquity of my sin.*

So David probably made all kinds of excuses for what he did to Uriah, the Hittite, but those excuses created huge conflict and anxiety in spite of it. So he was very on edge and miserable. It must have taken a huge amount of psychic energy to keep that secret – you know, "I'm a conniving murderer" – away from himself. He tells us he was drying up inside. So here is explained the biblical way to deal with our defenses. Give them up! Let go of them! Face the truth. And guess what happens. Well, new, more adaptive, healthy strategies come into view. If we go to God and repent of our evil deeds, then He'll forgive us, and then the way is open to go forward in a better life closer to God, which is really what human life is all about.

The only problem here is that, sometimes these defenses are completely unconscious and we're not aware that we're doing them. That's when therapy can help.

Let's look at Matthew 15, too, and see what Jesus said about this – Matthew 15:17:

Matthew 15:17 – *Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart and this defiles a person. For out of the heart comes evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone.*

So here Jesus is shining the light of awareness for the disciples on the real problem, which is the human heart. In Jeremiah 17:9, we're told that the human heart is incredibly deceitful. So the task is to give up our self-defenses, throw ourselves on God's mercy, and accept God's love and forgiveness.

I want to read you another thing that Jesus said – Luke 18:10:

Luke 18:10 – *Two men went up into the temple to pray – one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. Now, in their society, a Pharisee was supposed to be the epitome of spirituality – not in Jesus' eyes, but in their own – and tax collectors were considered the lowest form of life. Sometimes, you know, things don't change at all. It's kind of like that today. Nobody likes the IRS. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: "God, I thank You that I am not like other men – extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this miserable tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get." What does that sound like to you? Notice that he has created an image of himself as doing good works. Nothing there about his heart. He's defending himself from the state of it. But the tax collector, standing afar off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" So, by comparison, this man characterized himself as a sinner. It was who he was. There was no defense there. He wasn't making any excuses. And Jesus said – about these two guys: *I tell you, this man – the tax collector – went down to his house justified rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.* You know, sometimes it's rather humbling to face our faults and our anxiety. So this puts us in awareness of one of the great spiritual paradoxes. To be strong, we must first be weak. To be righteous, we must first see our sin.*

So, can therapy help in Christian life? Well, how do I attempt to help people, since I'm a therapist? Well, I try to help people get past their defenses, see the truth, the conflicts, and face the anxiety. And then I help them develop new ways of dealing with the hurts and losses. I'll give you an example:

There was a man who came to me once. He told me he was a Christian. He went to the biggest mega-church in town. And then he told me that he drank way too much, and he smoked a lot of weed, and he had a wife and two girlfriends. I found out later that neither his wife, nor the two girlfriends knew about the other two. So he was very deceitful. And he was eaten up with guilt about this – huge conflict. He wanted to be a Christian, but he knew he wasn't living a Christian life. It's also interesting to note that he was a martial arts student, and that his behavior even conflicted with the values he learned there – of honesty and respect and so on. So it seems that

even there, the law is written in the heart. He believed he was defective spiritually. He spent his whole life running away from his feelings. He could not even pray.

Do you remember the last example – the man who could not lift up his eyes to heaven? Well, that was this guy. He *knew* he was wrong. He knew he needed to change, but he didn't find a way to do it. He was still in the grip of his defenses. He didn't understand why he had three women and needed to smoke weed and drink a lot. We discovered that he had been neglected and abandoned in early childhood and felt alone all of his young life. When he healed *that* hurt, it was no longer necessary to defend himself from the shame of defectiveness. He could see more clearly that absent defectiveness, it would be possible to change. And as he realized there was really nothing wrong with him, and the problem came from what others did to him instead, he was now free, no longer a prisoner to his bad habits, and began to forge plans to overcome drinking, and weed, and adultery.

It's interesting, as we got to that juncture – just about the time he was ready to face all of that – his wife and his two girlfriends all found out about each other at the same time. It wasn't long before he found himself completely alone. That was really traumatic for him. It's almost too much of a coincidence. I kind of think that God might be working with him. Go figure – just at the right time, his work of separation is done by them and not him. After that, he started acting out that plan that he had told me about did he begin to feel empty. And I said, "Nothing to do, now that you're not cheating, smoking and drinking?" And he laughed, and he began to think about how he could change his life. And within the coming weeks, he began to think about how he could be a better father to his two college-aged sons and help them with the life they were starting. He took the one great skill he had in his life – martial arts – and decided to use that skill to teach children Christian values. Just the thought of it brought him to tears. So I think he's going to be okay. This man was already a Christian when he showed up by profession. And so I really didn't have to do too much work there. He was very happy that it was easier for him to act like a Christian.

But let's think about the man who argued. He wasn't a Christian. Which way did his therapy move him? Well, even though EMDR does not focus on a client's defenses, I do. I think it helps the therapy and it helps them become acquainted with their capacity for self-deception. So that's a way to help move them away from self-deceit and toward internal honesty. And that's never a bad thing. So I think once he sees he is defending himself from the very thing he wants, perhaps he will let go of his defense, face the wounds of childhood, and be free of his argumentative nature. Maybe there won't be anything to argue about. Who knows? Maybe even at some future time, when he and God are both ready, he will be able to say, "I am a sinner."

We can't repent until we see what to repent of, can we? So, that's another thing that our defenses hide from us. It's what we do wrong. You can't repent of what you're not aware of. So, to my way of thinking, psychotherapy – if it helps us see our defenses – can help us be more honest Christians and do what I have called *the heart work*. And Jesus has admonished us all to do that.

Okay, that concludes the tenth presentation in our ongoing series on *Mental Health and the Bible*. If you want to hear the others completed so far, you can go to our Website, liferesource.org and search for *Mental Health and the Bible*, and they'll all pop up for you. Also, if you have questions or comments, you can email us at bjacobs@liferesource.org. We'd like to hear from you. Also, if you're benefiting from these presentations – or this one – please share it with a friend. From our site, it's really easy to share by email, Facebook or Twitter. And we hope you will.

Until next time, this is Bill Jacobs for LifeResource Ministries, serving children, families and the Church of God.