



COMMON LANGUAGE for PSYCHOTHERAPY (clp) PROCEDURES
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INTERPRETING DEFENSES AGAINST UNPLEASANT FEELINGS

Leon HOFFMAN, 167 East 67th Street New York, NY 10065, USA; ph + 1 212 249 1163

Definition: Helping a patient realize that what s/he says or does in a session or in real life may be an attempt to avoid unpleasant feelings.

Elements: Therapists have to be sensitive to a patient's feelings which may be too painful to talk about right away, and work out how to gently help the patient to gradually become aware of and discuss those feelings willingly. A therapist senses patients' defenses against unpleasant feelings when patients spontaneously change the topic under discussion, or children change their play activity, and resist the therapist's attempts to explore the original topic. The patients may deny feeling discomfort or may express opposite feelings. The therapist listens empathically and respectfully, may seek clarification, and points out that not continuing with the original subject may reflect avoidance of an unpleasant feeling e.g. "*it feels better to fight than to feel scared*"; "*it's easier to feel tired and fall asleep than to think about uncomfortable stuff*"

Over time, the patient becomes more comfortable discussing (or the child playing out) discomfiting topics. They may discuss the distress involved more openly, and reveal other awkward events in their life, and tricky transference feelings. This allows them to discuss (or play out) conflicts more adaptively, e.g. by using humor or play-acting aggression rather than being really aggressive towards the therapist/analyst.

Related procedures: analysis of conflicts and defenses; compromise formation (understanding patients' forbidden wishes and defenses to mask those); method of levels; close process monitoring (detecting shifts of material in sessions and querying if those reflect avoidance of certain thoughts and feelings); reducing affect phobia.

Application: In almost any treatment from its start onward.

1st use? Bornstein B (1945)

References:

1. Bornstein B (1945) Clinical notes on child analysis. *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 1, 151-166.
2. Hoffman L (2007) Do children get better when we interpret their defenses against painful feelings? *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 62, 291-313.
3. Hoffman L (1989) The psychoanalytic process and the development of insight in child analysis: A case study. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 58, 63-80
4. Hoffman RS (2002) Practical psychotherapy: working with a patient's defenses in supportive psychotherapy. *Psychiatric Services*, 53, 141-142.

Case illustration: (Hoffman 1989 & 2007)

Leo aged 9, was in four-times-a-week analysis for enuresis, tantrums, and nightmares. Within a few months he became aggressive in sessions, trying to cut the analyst's beard off and intruding into his closet making noises to scare him. Leo alluded to his parents' fierce arguments in their bedroom and said he wet less when he built a fort around his bed. In sessions he built a model fort with blocks and other toys, saying he wanted to play "hit the donkey on the butt." Leo presented his clothed butt to the

analyst, asking him to throw a soft ball at it. Before the analyst could respond, Leo said he was tired, "Never mind, I don't want to play." The analyst said "*maybe you feel tired because you feel uncomfortable.*" Leo ignored this, but said his older half brother could beat anyone because *he* was not afraid, and came close to the analyst's face with a menacing expression. The analyst suggested "*Leo, you're acting tough so you don't have to worry about getting hurt*" and thought to himself that Leo seemed to be provoking him to hurt Leo. Leo's truculence subsided.

A few weeks later Leo missed a couple of sessions because of illness. On returning, he threw lighted matches toward the analyst, and, in an off-hand barely-audible whisper said, "I'm going to the orthodontist right after the session." Leo calmed down when the analyst said, "*It's easier to attack me with matches than to worry about getting hurt by the orthodontist.*" Leo replied he worried *he* (Leo) would get hurt if he didn't attack, and jokingly asked if the analyst thought words could hurt him. Leo took a dictionary and playfully threw it at the analyst, who said "*You get angry and attack when you worry about being hurt.*" Leo became friendlier and demonstrated karate moves saying the analyst could learn how to defend himself if he were mugged. The analyst said "*You're teaching me how to protect myself when you attack me!*" Leo laughed: "I get you angry, don't I?" The analyst replied "*You know how to do that well.*"

In the earlier session above the analyst had pointed out to Leo that he (1) warded off uncomfortable feelings by becoming tired and (2) acted tough to avoid scary feelings. In the later session, the analyst interpreted Leo's defence of turning passive into active in order to avoid painful feelings about the dentist, after which Leo behaved more adaptively.