

Addiction and Recovery: Why Don't They Just Quit?

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Family members are often stymied about how their alcoholic/addicted family member can continue to drink or use in the face of overwhelming evidence that the chemical is destroying their lives. "Why don't they just quit?" is a question that could rightfully top the list of "FAQs by Family Members About Addiction".

While an explanation of "defense mechanisms" does not completely answer the question, it is arguably the biggest piece of the puzzle. "Defense mechanisms" distort the reality of an alcoholic/addict's situation enough to allow the continuation of the drinking/drugging in the face of obvious problems caused by that behavior.

Defense mechanisms are normal processes that organize and attribute meaning to the events in our lives, in such a way, as to reduce the amount of stress, anxiety, and pain, that "undistorted" reality would create. Everyone has defense mechanisms, which they use daily, in order to continue to live their lives unimpeded by fear.

"Denial", "rationalization", "justification", "blaming", "anger and/or hostility", "minimization", "social withdrawal", and "distraction", are common defense mechanisms in addiction. Operating consciously and unconsciously these defenses separate an addict more and more from general consensual reality, which in turn increasingly constricts their worldview. As the addict deploys an increase in the use and scope of these defenses, s/he becomes trapped in a world of his/her own.

These defenses deflect attempts from others to "talk some sense into her", to apply reason and logic to problem solve about stopping the chemical use. No matter how compelling the argument, family members are unable to persuade the addict that the chemical is the problem and "quitting" is the solution. When the addict is countering a family member's list of ways that the drinking or using is ruining his/her life and the lives of other family members, the addict's defense mechanisms allow them to define "the problem" as anything but the drinking/using. They are not necessarily "lying". They believe the explanations that they are telling their loved ones about why the drinking/using is not the problem. The addict believes his/her own unique version of reality. Other peoples' attempts to try to convince him/her that reality is something different is viewed as "control" attempts by others.

The painful realities of addiction require the distortions of defense mechanisms to keep the addict from experiencing the psychologically uncomfortable state of believing two opposing beliefs at the same time. It would be psychologically and emotionally stressful to believe that drinking/drugging is causing great harm to self, while believing that drinking/drugging is the much needed solution to one's problems. If the addict gets enough of a dose of reality, they are forced to consciously choose whether to continue to drink/use. If an addict comes to believe that his/her drinking is destroying the marriage, they have to consciously choose between the marriage and drink/drug. If they can

continue to maintain their denial about addiction being “the problem”, by believing the destruction of their marriage to be due to a step-child’s behavior problems, the in-laws’ disapproval of them, the sabotage from others, the spouse’s menopause or mid-life crisis, or any other theories they may have developed, they can continue to drink/use all the way to divorce court and beyond.

Even if the addict can acknowledge that drinking/using is involved in their negative outcomes, denial is still not necessarily overcome. The drinking/using, although acknowledged as “a problem” is still minimized in its impact so that the addict can justify continuing to drink or use. An example could be the addict who, having lost his wife, family, and job due to addiction, tells himself that drinking may have been part of the problem, but that he cannot quit now in the midst of this loss, that he would go crazy or probably kill himself. The chemical, in the addict’s mind, is still “the solution”. Addiction takes on a life of its own and it defies all reason and logic.

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