

Habitual Reactions

Habits in General

One of the useful things about being human is that we can learn things, then repeat the learned process with almost no effort. We learn to stand, walk, run, drive a car, write, type, check emails and do other useful things. We also learn some habits that are not so useful, like chewing our fingernails when nervous, grinding our teeth when angry, and eating chocolate or drinking alcohol when we don't feel so good. These sorts of habits can turn into so-called bad habits or even addictions.

Habitual Emotional Reactions

We can also develop habitual emotional reactions to certain situations. These can be hidden from our own awareness, but they can be very clear to others. They usually cut in when we feel under stress or pressure. Consider a situation where you are suddenly under threat. Some people would experience the impulse to flee, where others may turn and fight. A person not under stress would be able to face the situation with more presence, and evaluate options rather than impulsively react using a learned reaction.

Being in the Present

It is not easy to be fully present in every situation. Life is complex, and it is not always possible to respond to each moment with all your attention, experience and maturity. By the time we reach adulthood we each carry a huge range of learned reactions, and are usually unaware of when we play them. They just feel like 'normal' (or even 'good') behaviour. A classic example is transference - a person might in some way remind me of my mother, and in subtle ways I find myself reacting to her as though she was my mother.

Character Defences

In psychological literature these subtle habitual responses are called character defenses. Most of us know and use all the common ones, and many others besides, but we tend to develop favourites, and become very good at a few of them. Knowing our personal favourites helps us to see them when they sneak up on us, and with awareness we can slowly start to reduce their impact in our lives.

The five common character defences are (after Wilhelm Reich):

Schizoid	Running away as much as possible, leaving the scene, not staying present, denying
Oral	Extreme neediness, clinginess, acting as though there isn't enough, stuffing
Masochistic	Feels guilty for everything, even if it's not your fault, sulking, imposed upon
Psychopathic	Reacts with anger, aggression, insistence, needs to be the dominant figure, star
Rigid	The impulse to make everything nice and perfect, maintain appearances

In Relationships

Here's where it gets interesting. If one person reacts to a situation by dropping into a defence, the other person is likely to drop into a counter-defence. Neither person is really acting from their core authentic adult self, but neither can get out of the situation either, because each person feels that he or she is doing the best they can under the circumstances.

The Healing Response

Just as it is possible to become aware of when we are in defence (reverting to an old habitual response), it is also possible to learn how to act when someone else is in a defensive state, and so neutralise the defence. These responses are called healing responses, and can be learned and used consciously to neutralise most defences.