

Recognising Denial

I used to think that people who went to see psychologists and attended therapy groups were the kind of people who had serious mental illnesses or other adjustment problems. I didn't consider myself to be one of those 'types'. It took me until I was thirty four years old before I realised that I needed therapy myself. I began by attending a weekly Journey support group and meeting with a therapist every other week.

The main reason I believed that I didn't need support was, I believed that all I needed was a "touch from God," a miracle or some dramatic event that would cause me to turn away from unwanted and habitual behaviours. At that time, I did not understand that what God wanted was to bring about change in my life, but only as I would learn to trust other people. Learning to trust and depend on others was an important part of my healing journey.

I had grown-up in a strict religious community, where I developed quite rigid views about how healing would happen. I tended to think of spiritual disciplines like prayer, giving, fasting, Bible study and church activities as the way to receive healing. While these disciplines were good and helpful, they did not in themselves bring about the changes that I hoped for. I had underestimated the importance of things like:

- open and honest sharing with trusted people
- asking for help from those who knew more than I did
- being accountable to someone for my faults
- spending time, patiently working through specific problems
- learning emotional skills and developing relational competencies

These turned out to be essential constituents of my recovery and growth.

Back then, I really thought that I was being open and honest with God in my prayers. I would tell the issues of my life to Him privately. I did not realise, then, that much of this, so called prayer, was private only because I was, actually too afraid to share my weaknesses with anyone else. I was ashamed of the fact that I couldn't control my thoughts and actions at certain times, particularly with my emotions and sexuality. I thought that God was angry with me and that there was something wrong with me. Much of my thinking was distorted. Each time I prayed, I was in reality, only recycling old complaints about my addictive behaviours in His presence. I was not really conversing with God about it, I was simply moaning about it.

Perhaps the strongest reasons I had for avoiding therapists and support groups were that I thought that I could handle my problems myself; I didn't need other people's help; my problems were not so severe and that I would eventually overcome them.

I was a pastor of a newly established church and I was just too proud to admit that I was at the same time struggling with habitual patterns of pornography use and other habitual behaviours. I would much rather that people think of me as the spiritual guy. The kind, compassionate and gifted one. Not as someone with a pornography addiction who needed therapy. I was genuinely ashamed of myself and the double-life that I lived. On the one hand I enjoyed those hidden sexual activities, but on the other hand, I really did not want anyone to know about it. I simply lived as though the problem did not exist.

For me denial was about keeping things hidden and secret. I learned that growth, change and healing begins when we disclose our secrets to trustworthy people and we come out from our denial.

Andy