

Mary's story

Mary liked to joke that she had a good, old fashioned Irish temper. She said that it was just a part of who she was, like her fiery red hair and little nose. If people couldn't handle being told the truth, then they just weren't strong enough. They needed to toughen up. The world is a difficult place, she said, and people needed to grow up and face that reality.

It wasn't her fault that her assistant routinely cried once a week when Mary screamed at her about a mistake she had made. It certainly wasn't her problem that her co-workers didn't have enough courage to face her down in a meeting— they just knew they couldn't win. When she fought with her husband, he occasionally needed a good push to remind him that she was just as tough as him. The all-too-frequent times when her kids misbehaved, yelling was the only thing that got through to them.

When the drycleaners ruined one of her dresses, they deserved the words she had hurled at them and the names she called them. The drivers on the highway who drove too slow, they needed to be tailgated— someone had to encourage them to speed up!

When friends confronted her about her frequent episodes of rage, Mary responded— forcefully— that the problem was not hers. If people would only do what they were supposed to do, she wouldn't have to lose her temper. It was their fault, not hers.

Mary received a call one morning from her daughter's preschool, asking her to come inside when she picked Maggie up. The teacher told Mary that Maggie had yelled at and then pushed a classmate. The classmate had broken her wrist as she fell.

Mary was about to give the teacher an earful about sloppy playground supervision, when these words struck her: "Mrs. Smith, Maggie said she learned to yell and push from you."

When we are faced with a situation that we can't handle emotionally or mentally, we find ways to manage. These techniques for making it through are often called "coping mechanisms." Some of the most common are: avoidance (removing yourself, physically or mentally, from a difficult situation), projection (noticing in other people the actions you are not proud of in yourself), repression (pushing down painful thoughts until they are submerged in your subconscious)... and denial.

Denial is broadly defined as a refusal to acknowledge or admit.¹ As a coping mechanism, it is a rejection of the facts when they are too uncomfortable or painful for us to deal with immediately.

It's important to note here that coping mechanisms, including denial, are not a bad thing. They are actually an ingenious way for our minds to handle situations and issues that are too overwhelming for us. As one psychology resource states: "Were we not able to deny certain aspects of our experience, it would be almost impossible to carry on in any kind of serious emergency situation."² By God's design, coping mechanisms are meant to be a temporary emotional "bandaid"— to help get us to the point where we can begin to deal with the reality of the situation.

The problem arises when we rely so strongly on denial that we continue to avoid facing the issue "to protect ourselves against examining the stress that we need to look at in order to be well adjusted in our life and work."² As we discussed in the "secrets" chapter, refusing to admit what is happening doesn't work forever. These types of hidden issues affect us even when we're not acknowledging them consciously, and eventually they can come forcefully, suddenly, and painfully to the surface.

¹ *The New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary* (Naples, FL: Trident Press, 1996).

² Eugene Kennedy and Sara Charles, *On Becoming a Counselor* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1995).