

From STEP UP TO LOVE
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BREAKING THROUGH DENIAL

*The curious paradox is that
when I accept myself just as I
am, then I can change.*

carl rogers, psychotherapist

We believe that you did not pick up this book and start reading it by accident. There is some Higher Order to what you are doing now and what you can do from this moment on.

As one story goes, a devout man found that the river by his house was starting to overflow its banks and the water was rising toward the house. He prayed for God's intervention. As the water continued to rise, a truck came by on the road behind the house, stopped, and the driver asked if the man needed a lift out because the flood was coming and the road would surely be closed. The man said, "No thanks, God will save me." Soon the water rose over the banks, over the road, and up to the porch roof where the man had retreated. A rescue boat came by and the man was told to evacuate. He again said, "No thanks, God will save me." The water rose even higher until the man was standing on the very peak of the roof with the water just inches from his feet. A rescue helicopter flew over and dropped the rescue basket. The man declined saying, "No, thanks, God will save me." The helicopter left and the man was swept away and drowned. Upon arriving at the gates of Heaven and meeting God, he said, "God, I prayed for you to save me, yet you let me drown. Why, why, why?"

God said to the man, “Your drowning was not My fault. I was The One who sent you a truck, a boat and a helicopter!”

As you are reading this, you may want to consider if these RCA steps could be the truck, the boat, or the helicopter that will rescue your relationship. If there is any inkling that it might be, read on.

What keeps us from doing what is really needed for self-healing and for relationship healing? What keeps us from looking at our relationship problems until they seem almost insurmountable? Perhaps it is denial.

Most of us in the middle of a painful relationship think we know full well what the real problem is: our partner is just not thinking and acting in a manner that promotes peace and provides the loving setting that we’ve all dreamed about (and may even have had in the early stages of the relationship). This is certainly a form of denial.

Denial takes many forms, and we have all used denial in one way or another to lessen the pain we encounter in life. One of the five stages of grief is denial. Denial can be healthy when it allows us to look at catastrophic problems, such as the death of a loved one, a little at a time. But denying relationship issues to avoid pain can only worsen the situation.

It is often difficult to identify denial in oneself because, if we are in denial, we deny we have a problem and are unable or unwilling to admit there is one. There are various ways we avoid issues through denial. And, as you read about them, you may want to write down how these forms of denial slip into your life and relationship. Some of these are **basic denial, minimizing, evading, defending, condemning, attacking, and intellectualizing.**

Basic denial is when we tell ourselves and others that nothing is wrong with us. However, when we see people behaving the same way we do, we feel they “have a problem.” An example is my saying, “I’m not angry” when my body language and my behavior indicate that I am very angry. Often the anger comes out sideways like saying we are not angry when our mate behaves in a certain way but then giving our partner the cold shoulder for a week.

Basic denial is present big-time when both partners in a relationship are involved in addictive behavior such as drinking, drugging, smoking, and overeating as well as many forms of sexual addiction, work addiction, compulsive spending and many others too numerous to list here. As long as we focus on our partner's addictions we can continue to act out in and deny our own. Or, as we practice our own addiction, we can avoid facing the pain and dysfunction that is overwhelming our life. Another type of basic denial can happen when we consciously or unconsciously choose to forget situations that are very painful to face. An example of this would be telling a therapist that you were never abused when your parent used a belt to discipline you and your siblings regularly.

An interesting twist on basic denial is **minimizing**. This is when we tell ourselves that the situation is not serious. My spouse beats me but it's not so bad because I didn't have to go to the hospital. How about when we say that "Our relationship is not perfect, but whose is?" and all the while our partner is obviously in a romantic relationship with someone else. The key here is the implied or spoken phrase, "It isn't so bad."

Another denial technique is **evading**. We become adept at manipulating, throwing up smoke screens, and side-stepping issues whenever we begin to feel uncomfortable. One that we have experienced often is when one partner says that they believe there is a problem that needs to be addressed and the other finds an excuse like a work project or another commitment that really is more important. Working on issues is often avoided by stating, "I'm too tired to talk about it now." Or, "You know that I have that big conference to get ready for next week."

Defending as a denial mechanism is when we offer explanations for the way we are and indicate that these are reasons for being unable to change. "I can't stop judging you because that is the way I was brought up." "I can't deal with that right now because you know I am a recovering alcoholic, and dealing with that will probably trigger a relapse."

A very big chunk of denial in couple dysfunction comes from the use of **condemning**. If we tell ourselves that it is “their” fault then there is nothing we can do about it. When my partner does such and such, it just drives me crazy and I am liable to do almost anything. If my partner just wouldn’t do that, I would be very easy to get along with.

One of the denial systems people frequently use in prerecovery is called **attacking**. This is when we become aggressively angry when uncomfortable or painful issues are brought to our attention. This usually frightens the other person into backing off. An example is pounding on the table and shouting at our partner when an issue is brought to our attention.

The final method on our list for staying in denial is called **intellectualizing**. We have read all the books, know all the answers, and can tell everyone else what’s wrong with us or with them. Yet we never take action on the problems by feeling the feelings we have about the issues or doing the work necessary to make positive changes. An example is going to a therapist regularly but never allowing oneself to feel the pain or deeply examine our childhood. Attending 12-Step meetings, knowing the Steps and promises by heart but never actually working the Steps also qualifies as intellectualizing. It’s a “talking the talk but not walking the walk” mind-set.

Chapter Action Steps

1. Both partners read the chapter material.
2. Read **APPENDIX A** at the back of this book.
3. On paper, separately, make a list of the methods of denial (these words in the text are in bold print) leaving space under each heading to write more.
4. Under each denial heading, list ways that you, yourself, not your partner, use each form of denial and instances in which you used this denial form.

Breaking Through Denial

5. Make an appointment or set a time for sharing your work with your partner.
6. Share what you have written using the format found in **APPENDIX A** of this book.
7. Thank each other for being available to help each of you and the relationship heal.
8. Hold yourself, your partner, and your relationship lovingly in your heart.

