

## Mental Mechanisms

These are sub-conscious strategies by which the mind adjusts to the reality of social experiences which have, in some degree, threatened or damaged an individual's self-esteem or confidence, so that they can 'live with themselves better'. There is a range of strategies that have been identified and described, and there are many lists of them. No two lists are identical and the definitions can not be exact, because the mechanisms are initiated at an unconscious level and can only be guessed at from observable individual behaviour. It is agreed that there is a hierarchy in terms of how severe the poor self-image is, that the mechanism is called upon to restore. The following lists a few of the most commonly described mechanisms, starting with the most benign.

### THE NEUROTIC PARADOX

This is elicited when mental mechanisms fail to help someone feel comfortable in social situations where they are being rejected or diminished.

The neurotic paradox is a term that describes a reflex response that occurs when an individual fails to gain approval in a social situation and feels ignored and rejected. This unconscious reflex sets in action a range of behaviours (termed 'attention seeking' or 'difficult' behaviour) that, far from being useful, have the effect of alienating those from whom the individual most needs approval. **The 'paradox' is, that the more a person needs to be liked and approved by the people around, the more they come to see them as threat that has to be countered or avoided.** The more this reflex is called into play, the more extreme the behaviours become, eventually leading, over time, to 'neurotic' disorders. When these disorders are severe enough to warrant treatment, it is understandable that the 'paradox' engenders severe ambivalence for the sufferers in their relationship with the treatment and care team, and equally, for the members of the treatment and care team.

### SOCIAL STIGMA

Stigma is the term that describes negative attitudes and rejecting behaviour that is held by members of a group or community, against others who are perceived to be different, in a way that is disturbing or threatening.

These differences may be 'physical factors', such as deformity, obesity and old age; they may be 'psycho-social' factors, such as being weak-willed, homosexual, mentally ill, or having the 'wrong' dress, manners or accent; and they may be 'tribal factors', in terms of race, nationality or religion.

### PREJUDICE

Prejudice is the feeling of hostility that arouses irritation, anger or rejection in people, by others who are displaying "attention seeking" or "difficult" behavior.