



‘Repression’ - A Cognitive Mechanism That Diminishes Despair

Michael Gurevitz

Department of Plant Molecular Biology and Ecology, George S. Wise Faculty of Life Sciences, Tel Aviv University, Ramat Aviv 69978, Tel Aviv, Israel

Numerous elderly people reaching their 80th birthdate refuse to accept the new ‘*alter kaker*’ status, while ignoring the fact that soon they might become dependent or mentally weaker. While a cognitive deterioration is common at this age and is usually accompanied by difficulties to remember details, particularly names, it often creates embarrassing scenarios* that are being accepted with leniency by surrounding attendees. Even more astounding is the unawareness of many elderlies, including those that assist others (family members or friends), to their own forthcoming aging difficulties. Despite the fact that some are on-the-brink prior to an onset of a cognitive breakpoint, they show no sign of concern (‘it won’t happen to me because I am mentally strong’). Whether deliberated or not, such an amazing denial is often followed by ‘Repression’, a psychological mechanism** that unconsciously blocks unpleasant emotions, memories or thoughts. It is widely distributed even at younger age when under stress or worries about an approaching strain. Although the ‘Repression’ mechanism may generate embarrassing moments, it may also relieve pressure and diminish sorrowful reflections leading to anxiety, steep cognitive decline and possible despair. Curiously, there are also many individuals, who do not experience such a pressure, even when nearing death, and in certain instances do not seem to be concerned about their approaching future. Notably, there is a dark side to ‘Repression’, as some individuals may develop neurotic compulsive symptoms or phobia, as well as possible physical symptoms like high blood pressure, decreased immunity and even pain, not to mention possible harm to relationships. Hence, the drastic difference between those inclined to “Repression” and others that show no concern about their forthcoming days, raises the question: ‘is ‘Repression’ good or bad at old age?’ It seems that the answer depends most likely upon inner cognitive factors that are supposed to support the confidence, self-esteem, psychological stability, as well as on a suitable mental preparation. Thus, we may assume that cognitive exercises like studying, reading, writing, solve crosswords or sudokus and built-in creativity might postpone or even avoid an approaching dementia-like situation.

The prodigy of individuals that despite nearing their aging difficulties, volunteer in helping those who turned dependent or lost their communicative potential and even daily activities of reading, writing, listening to music and socializing abilities, is particularly interesting. Not only that these volunteers ignore their own nearing difficulties, they are probably being influenced by the ‘Repression’ mechanism that throws a smoke-screen over their own condition to calm putative worries. Hence, despite being considered a psychological problem, ‘Repression’ has a positive facet by contributing to relief of concerns, as well as conceal disturbing symptoms of putative ‘Dementia’ or ‘Parkinson’. This prodigious behavior of the volunteers enlightens the need of those nearing their final stage of life to hide or ignore their own mental difficulties, and perform regularly as if

everything is just right. Although one day they are highly energetic in assisting others, the other day they might need help themselves, and so 'Repression' helps them in covering momentarily putative worries. Furthermore, not only that 'Repression' affects the cognition and may suppress aggressive feelings and fears, it also calms the families and social surroundings by contributing to a more relaxed atmosphere. Therefore, the psychological problematic issue of 'Repression' should be appreciated in that it helps prior to stepping into a disoriented reality at the third life-stage, to 'play the vivid game', namely, no fears, no sorrow about the loss of energy or unfulfilled aspirations and no negative pondering over the coming days, just self-conviction that nothing has changed. This entire issue dealing with the last stage of human life raises a general question that probably bothers Psychologists and Psychiatrists: Does such estrangement support the sanity of the corresponding elderly, or does it help them to overcome suicidal thoughts?

*This period in life with its complications is well demonstrated in the devastatingly, heartbreakingly movie 'The Father' with Antony Hopkins portraying a demented person whose memory declined, turning him into a disoriented old man, doubting his reality and even his daughter.

**From a psychological perspective 'Repression' is an unconscious defense mechanism in which the mind blocks distressing thoughts, memories, or impulses from conscious awareness. Derived from psychoanalysis, 'Repression' is a survival tactic that shields the ego from immediate psychological overload, while offering an effective short-term relief from despair or anxiety.