

Self-Deception

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What is self-deception? How can you deceive yourself? Is it like telling yourself a joke and then laughing at it? Well, let's take a look. I suspect deception is about unawareness. Deception wants to be left alone. It hides, even behind a smile. Deception could never read a book on itself, because the book would be about someone else. What else do we know about deception?

- It grows gradually over time and best in isolation.
- It doesn't see its own reflection.
- It views life mainly through the rear view mirror; that way it can always be where it has been.
- Deception is self-defeating. It becomes a flat spot on a round surface of life.
- Deception practices selective listening. It collects data to validate its point. It ignores the life preserver of Truth and reaches for one called denial.
- Breaking free of deception is suicide to its own survival and its survival wiring won't give up without a fight.
- Deception's banner is, "I'm OK, you're nuts;" because it can't afford to be wrong.
- It avoids owning responsibility by focusing on other's faults.
- Its point of view is not open to new input.
- Deception stays below the radar of personal acknowledgement. The death of deception begins with the possibility of its existence.
- You can't convince a deceived person they are deceived unless they want to know the truth.

How do we get "deceived?"

Deception is seldom a conscious choice. Few of us wake up in the morning with the intention of violating our values or boundaries. Few, if any, have ever said to themselves, this is a good day to lie to my friends or family, to become an alcoholic, a drug addict, a child abuser, or have an affair. Yet the truth is some of us do lie, or become alcoholics or drug addicts; some of us have affairs or break our vows; some of us even abuse others.

Many of us do compromise our beliefs and values, often losing track of what is really important. We wake up one morning and wonder how life got a way from us; we question what we truly believe and have a sinking sense that what we say, do and believe may not match one another. We did not arrive at that place overnight; we got there one very small step at a time. Sometimes, but not very often, we can look back and see where we got off track. Most of the time, we do not have a clue; everything looks blurry.

Self-deception is apparently rather common. Perhaps we can discover some steps in the process that can lead us away from self-deception to self-awareness and living a life consistent with our values. Self-deception is not intentional. It is

likely more self-protective and the consequence of many small steps in the wrong direction. Most often it starts with a growing awareness of pain or unhappiness or unmet needs or some other negative feeling that begins the spiral away from God and our deeply held values.

God calls us to a life of pain and struggle but a life full of promise and purpose. He calls us to examine ourselves, to be honest in our estimate of ourselves, to speak the truth in love, to seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, to find our life by losing it, to die to self, to love and serve one another and to not be conformed to this world. God calls us to a life of obedience, of ministry, of suffering, of struggling with profound issues that tear at the very core of our existence. Deception calls us to a life with no pain—but no growth; with no hassles—but no change; with no risk—but no transformation.

Self-deception, then, is the process of bending our values and beliefs to fit our deeply felt needs, our circumstances and our self-assumed weaknesses. Self-deception offers a cure for our weaknesses and fears. Unfortunately, the cure doesn't work, and we are left with numbness. It strikes at the very core of who we are, what we feel, what we want from life. Five elements are involved in the self-deceptive spiral. At one time, our feet seem on solid ground, at another, we wonder how we ever got to the place we are.

Selective obedience

The first step is always to pick and chose those things we will obey. The first deception is found in Gen. 3:1—Satan deceives God's first people and they disobey God. We are perhaps overwhelmed with the pain of childhood abuse, or failures in life or emptiness or the weight of unmet needs. We believe our needs or pain are unresolvable in our present circumstances. Our pride and stubborn will tell us that we should be in charge of our lives, we know what is best, and no one, perhaps not even God really understands. We come to believe our needs are important and deserve to be met. At first, we take only a few steps toward self-protection; a few steps toward meeting our own needs; only a few steps away from community and accountability. Besides, no one is perfect. It's too hard. I'm not committing deliberate sin, just exploring possibilities. The door has just been cracked open. What about my needs and desires? In order to believe even the smallest lie, we must, at some point, stop believing the truth (II Tim. 4:3).

Twisting reality

To accomplish selective obedience, we must be able to see reality from our own point of view. Through selective perception, we ever so slowly and slightly bend truth to fit our goal. Our goal is to do what we want, when we want, how we want, without feeling guilty or chastised or being noticed. Often our goals are out of our awareness. We just want the pain, guilt, despair, unhappiness, loneliness, etc. to stop. We begin to believe that what we think and feel inside and outside can be slightly different. A split begins between what we present to others and

what we really feel. For many, this involves turning off the shaming voices inside. For others, it seems best to keep things inside. Deception, however, grows best in the dark.

Rationalizing behavior

It doesn't take long to begin to justify our behavior. As we replace truth with lies, our self-directed behavior makes more and more sense. With the split mentioned above, comes a lessening of emotional awareness. As my needs, goals and desires become more important and prominent, yours become less "felt" by me. I become numb to guilt and other emotions, so they no longer direct or correct my behavior. My numbness makes me insensitive to your needs as well as my own pain. I feel distant from God. My self-directed, self-protecting behavior begins to make sense to me. It seems warranted. I am self-focused. The fact that my needs, goals, desires, etc. remain unmet is my biggest reality, my chief obsession. This is the area of "shoulds" and entitlements. "I should have what I want." "I deserve..." "I don't deserve..." "I've been abused so..."

Blaming others

Once my needs are prominent and yours are no longer "felt" by me, than my focus is strictly on having my needs met. You become a "meeter" of my needs, and your value is determined by how well you accomplish this task. Any incorrect behavior on my part is attributed to you; it's your fault. I cannot be blamed because my needs are legitimate. I am no longer responsible for my own behavior. I have erected a variety of defenses and self-protective layers. My needs and your shortcomings are my clearest view. Problems in my life are someone else's fault. I am in such deep denial, that I can't possibly see my role clearly.

Despair

Sooner or later the emptiness of our choices leads to a sense of numbness and eventually despair as we realize the path we've chosen doesn't take us where we want to go. We wanted to eliminate the negative thoughts and feelings, the loneliness and lack of fulfillment; we also hoped to find happiness, peace, perhaps someone to love and appreciate us. Instead we found a spiritual and emotional dead end, far away from God, our loved ones and ourselves. We found the prodigal's pigsty—where we are alone and deeply addicted and deeply depressed. The way back seems long, painful and obscure. We don't realize yet that just knowing we are at a dead end is the beginning of life and restoration. The big questions are "How did I get here and how do I get back".

Solutions: The journey back

When we believe lies, we are not dependent on God. The first step back is to stop and turn the other way—change direction. Fill your mind with God's word—for His word contains words of life. Join others on the journey—know that you are not alone (actually you never were alone). The following are suggestions for the journey.

- Repentance—turning away; changing our minds and behavior, moving toward God with no thought of the outcome.
- Rigorous self-examination—ongoing process of looking inside, examining motives
- Accountability—placing myself in the hands of a few who love me yet dare to challenge and confront my behavior.
- Vulnerability—my willingness to be transparent, to allow others to see the good in me, which means they might see some bad too.
- Community—active involvement with a community of fellow strugglers
- Confession—as with most self-defeating behaviors, deception thrives in the dark
- Clear articulation of values and beliefs—walking the talk; spending time discovering what I really believe; where my true treasure is.
- Clear sense of purpose for life, including business and relationships—discovering my purpose helps channel my energy in positive directions.
- Overwhelming sense of God’s love —understanding that God delights in me, that His purpose is to love me and challenge me to live as His precious child.
- Courage—to actively embrace my pain, my needs, my disappointments, my failures and realize I can “sit with them” and not die or need to act out and move back into the deception spiral.
- Patience—this process takes time and vigilance.
- Embracing the struggle—it never gets easy or perfect.
- Giving grace—now it’s your turn to “gently and humbly restore a fallen one”.