

Working with Defenses and Overcontrol

Why protective strategies are respected, understood, and gently worked with rather than attacked.

Defenses Are Not the Enemy

In depth-oriented therapy, defenses are not treated as flaws to be broken through. They are understood as protective strategies that developed for understandable reasons. A defense may have helped a person avoid shame, survive chaos, maintain connection, succeed, reduce vulnerability, or keep painful feelings out of awareness.

Common defenses may include intellectualizing, minimizing, pleasing, withdrawing, joking, controlling, performing, staying busy, dissociating, becoming self-critical, or remaining emotionally restrained. These responses may create problems now, but they often began as attempts to protect something vulnerable.

The work is not to shame the defense. The work is to understand what it protects and what it may need in order to soften.

Overcontrol as Protection

Some people are highly overcontrolled. They may rely on discipline, productivity, analysis, emotional restraint, careful self-presentation, perfectionism, or constant self-monitoring. They may appear competent on the outside while feeling tense, lonely, anxious, or disconnected on the inside.

Overcontrol often makes sense. It may have developed in environments where spontaneity was unsafe, emotion was criticized, mistakes were costly, or no one else could be trusted to provide steadiness. Control may have become a way to survive.

But when control becomes rigid, it can narrow life. It may limit play, intimacy, creativity, rest, grief, pleasure, embodied experience, and the capacity to receive support.

When Reflection Becomes Another Defense

Depth-oriented therapy values reflection, but reflection can sometimes become another form of defense. A person may talk insightfully about feelings without actually feeling them. They may explain patterns without contacting grief. They may analyze vulnerability while remaining braced against it.

This is not a failure. It is information. It may mean that the person needs more safety, pacing, emotional tolerance, body awareness, or trust before deeper reflective work can be useful.

In these situations, therapy may gently attend to the defensive process itself. We may notice how the person moves quickly into analysis, performance, self-criticism, or control when vulnerable material appears.

Softening Without Forcing

Defenses usually do not soften because they are criticized. They soften when they are understood and when the person has enough safety to risk a different response.

Helpful questions may include: What is this protecting? What feels dangerous about letting it soften? When did this strategy become necessary? What would need to be true for this part of the person to trust the present moment more?

The pace matters. If therapy moves too quickly, defenses may become stronger. If therapy is too passive, nothing changes. The work is to find a respectful middle path: engaged, honest, compassionate, and paced.

The First Work May Be Preparation

For some people, the first stage of therapy may involve preparing for depth work. This might include building emotional awareness, developing regulation skills, learning to notice bodily cues, practicing vulnerability in small doses, softening self-judgment, and strengthening trust in the therapeutic relationship.

This is not lesser work. It may be the foundation that makes deeper work possible. A person who has lived for years through control, analysis, or emotional restraint may need time to discover that another way of being is possible.

Depth work asks for honesty, but it also asks for enough safety to bear that honesty.

A Closing Reflection

Defenses and overcontrol often began as protection. They deserve respect, even when they now create suffering. Depth-oriented therapy listens to them carefully, not to keep the person stuck, but to help protection become less rigid and life become more spacious.

The question is not, "How do we get rid of this defense?" The deeper question is, "What has this defense been carrying, and what might become possible if it no longer had to work so hard?"