

THE ROLE OF DEFENSE MECHANISMS
IN ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST

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(1) A community contains many individuals, all of whom have a unique past, present, and future. Each deals with his personal history through a variety of defense mechanisms, yet often these psychological tricks hinder the development of human relationships. In Ken Kesey's novel One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, the residents at the mental hospital invent protective behaviors which put them in conflict with their environment. Precisely because of these many safeguards, they cannot reach out to one another. Before the men on the ward can form a strong community, they need to understand the reasons for their defense mechanisms and then overcome these protective strategies.

(2) Usually people cling ever more tightly to protective measures when they are continually oppressed by an antagonistic influence. The men at the hospital are no different. After being constantly beaten down by Nurse Ratched, the only way they can survive is to build thicker, stronger walls to hide behind.

(3) One of the men, Chief Bromden, shields himself with a barrier of silence. When still a young boy, he had learned that people often disregard those whom they consider unworthy of attention. He also discovered that if people think you cannot hear them, they will readily talk in front of you. Chief, therefore, pretends to be deaf and mute. At the hospital, the staff treats him as if he actually is handicapped. Because their behavior provides him with the chance to overhear many conversations, Chief continues his act. He defends himself also by entering picture worlds, stepping mentally between the frames and becoming part of the painted scenery. In such a tranquil atmosphere, he can relax and be his own boss--at least for a little while. However, these two methods are often not sufficient to help Chief feel completely secure. Frequently, the only way he can deal with life is to drift into a blanket of fog. Once this fog is thick enough, it dulls the impact of his pain, lulling him into a false sense of safety: "Nobody can help. And the more I think about how nothing can be helped, the faster the fog rolls in. And I'm glad when it gets thick enough, you're lost in it and can let go and be safe again" (p. 110). Enveloped in his fog, Chief is cut off from his fellow inmates.

(4) Like Chief, Dale Harding tries to retreat from the world. However, he hides by masking his emotions and fears. Due to previous experiences, Harding has become extremely self-critical. In order to feel worthwhile, he pretends to be a man of sophistication. Using ritzy words and elegant phrases, he cultivates the image of a worldly snob. He carefully adjusts his entire character to fit this illusion. He refuses to act spontaneously, but forces himself to play a part. Constantly afraid that others will

see through his charade and discover him to be a true humbug, he never allows himself to become close to another person.

(5) Of all the ward members, Billy Bibbit uses the most obvious method of self-protection--a severe stutter. Although Billy is legally an adult, emotionally he is still Mama's little boy. Two authority figures, his mother and Big Nurse, dominate Billy's life, adversely affecting everything he does. Overwhelmed by this negative influence, Billy becomes increasingly shy. His stutter and awkward manner makes Billy seem like a meek child afraid to cause trouble. Since he does not act maturely, Billy has difficulty relating with other adults.

(6) These protective measures used by Chief, Harding and Billy retard the growth of true community. However, when a fun-loving con-man named Randle P. McMurphy is admitted to the hospital, the men are forced to break away from their neurotic safeguards. McMurphy, bothered by the fact that the men remain sheltered in their own worlds, encourages them to start taking risks. He never ignores Chief, but continually includes him in various activities. Through McMurphy's influence, Chief slowly realizes that he needs human interaction. Finally Chief pulls himself away from the comforting, undemanding fog and joins the men in a vote against Big Nurse. Although pushed into a conflict with authority, he does not slip back to safety. Instead, he chooses to continue working with McMurphy. Eventually he comes to trust McMurphy enough to break his self-imposed silence and share his fears with his new-found friend. Counting on McMurphy's understanding, Chief explains why he feels so helpless. He tells McMurphy about his father, who had been ruined by "The Combine"--people who seek to control others. As he witnessed his father's ineffectual struggle, Chief felt increasingly alienated from society. He finally withdrew completely and was taken to the mental hospital. After he talks with McMurphy, Chief realizes that with his friend's help he can renew the fight against The Combine.

(7) McMurphy also helps Harding by pointing out to his friend that he cuts others down as often as they ridicule him. In trying to control his sarcasm, Harding finds that he does not have to play a stereotyped role. When he begins to act naturally, Harding discovers that people do poke fun at him. More importantly, he learns the healing power of laughter. Laughter, a real emotion, enables Harding to express himself more openly; it becomes a tool of communication.

(8) Appropriately, Billy recovers his self-esteem when he participates in a caring, adult relationship. After meeting Candy, a friend of McMurphy's, Billy begins to fall in love. Candy provides him with a new image of women, and, because she treats him like a mature person, he acts less like a good little boy and more like a shy adolescent. With a little persuasion from McMurphy, Billy decides to spend the night with Candy. As a result of this experience, Billy no longer acts like an indecisive child.

Once he has behaved in a manner typical for his age, Billy is able to relate with the other men. Yet, this feeling of unity does not last long, for Billy is not strong enough to withstand the consequences of his behavior. When Nurse Ratched confronts him, Billy fails to stand up to her. Instead, he lets go of his newly found self-respect and reaches again for his old security blanket. When Billy regresses to his former state of blind obedience, he betrays his friends. Finally, unable to cope with the situation, he commits suicide. His actions seriously weaken the community and force a devastating conflict between McMurphy and Nurse Ratched.

(9) Unlike Billy, Harding has the will power to hang on to reality. He remains at the Institute a few weeks longer, trying to maintain the precarious relationships that have been established among the ward members. With his support, the men initiate many beneficial changes in hospital policy. Thus Harding discovers that he can make valuable contributions to a group. This realization gives him confidence to leave the hospital and live in the outside world.

(10) Chief is also successful in his fight to maintain his sanity. Instead of returning to his protective shell, he purposely talks and jokes with the ward residents. Even more significantly, Chief gains a firm enough grip on reality to finish the battle against The Combine and Big Nurse, without escaping into the destructive fog. After he has escaped the mental hospital, he proves he is strong enough to survive without the help of inhibitory safeguards. Thus he gains both physical and emotional freedom: "I remember I was taking huge strides as I ran, seeming to stop and float a long way before my next foot struck the earth. I felt like I was flying . . . free . . . I had been away a long time" (pp. 310-311). No longer restrained by barriers of his own building, Chief is finally ready to join society again.

(11) Individuals must battle to resolve their personal problems if they wish to survive in a normal environment. They need to resist the sometimes overwhelming pressures of life without being swallowed up by pain and suffering. If they can find this balance, they will not need binding defense mechanisms. Then, truly, they will be in harmony with themselves as well as with their community.