

Section 9 - Omnipotence and Omniscience to Augment Defensive Maneuvers

Introduction and Overview:

As the saying goes about life, everything has its time and place. This is especially true of this topic. Infancy is really hard, what with utter helplessness, not understanding anything, being totally at the mercy of other, etc. A baby needs all the help it can get and magic sure would be a nice addition. Whenever the adults are not measuring up, one can simply rub one's magic lantern, click the heels together of our red shoes, wish upon a star, or as my close friend's four year old daughter once said about being afraid of the dark, "I just turn my magic tooth and then its light".

Finding ways to cope with the pains of infancy is human and hardly seems like a crime. Many of the ways include making oneself feel more in control, more powerful, more knowledgeable, more special, etc. These are often age appropriate and perhaps necessary for survival at a young age. The rub is that they need to be relinquished as time goes on, development proceeds, and the need for proper apprehension of reality becomes overwhelmingly desirable. For most of us that occurs as long as the pains of life are modulated adequately by good parental figures, etc. In other words, magic and unreality have to give way to reality and facing life head on.

But if the pain of life remains too great, if the "good" external parental figures are inadequate to the task, then the need for magic remains excessive. As a patient once said, while starting to cry, "Please don't say there isn't a heaven, because it means I will never see my brother again." (who had died tragically that previous year).

Definitions:

Omnipotence: A state of mind, whipped up in relation to a task at hand, which has the emotional meaning of "I can do this". Its use is in proportion to the degree of unconscious baby level anxiety that the task at hand may not be successfully dealt with adequately.

Note that it does not have the significance of I am all powerful and can do anything, only that I can deal with the task at hand this moment.

Omniscience: A state of mind that is meant to counteract the infant's feeling of helplessness attendant to not knowing or understanding what is happening around them and why. Omniscience arrives at an explanation, no matter how incorrect or unsophisticated, and says now I understand. In parallel to omnipotence, it does not claim to know everything there is to know, but rather that it knows "all that it needs to know"

Relationship to Mental Pain:

The average person in life does not go around daily acting like a know-it-all, grandiose I can do anything type person. Where one sees someone excessively claiming to know everything or be able to do anything, that is invariably a left over remnant of tragically painful childhood that left the person feeling horrible vulnerable and inadequate and they seem to be desperately trying to compensate.

What one does see, in situations of crisis and pain, people resorting to maneuvers that are often unhelpful but are an expression of their baby level anxiety and the need for magical reinforcements. Alcohol and drugs are perhaps the most common magical substances in large emotional situations, with cigarettes perhaps the most common in smaller situations.

I remember a young woman in college who described twice in her life going on weeklong drunken binges, both after breaking up with a boyfriend. I remember thinking it was scarily close to being an alcoholic and a pretty risky way to cope with life.

When one thinks of the pains of guilt at a society level for ruining our environment, our personal health, etc. it is scary to think that as a society we could resort to omnipotent or omniscient magical solutions when we really do not understand what is happening and don't want to face the helplessness or guilt in relationship to the issue.

Conclusion:

In mental health work, we are constantly trying to diminish the grandiose overestimation the patient is making in their problematic approaches to life's pains. That is why we are called "head shrinkers". When we see a patient who excessively relies on whatever maneuvers, we need to remind ourselves that these maneuvers were once all the person had available, and that it will take time for them realize that they are out of time and no longer the only options.