

Detached protector mode in ministry workers

Detaching and avoiding are both ways of ‘coping’. They are about moving away from pain, hurt or discomfort. When we don’t have other, more healthy coping skills they are used to keep us safe. But when avoidance becomes overused it becomes our default way of dealing with distress (or potential distress). These ways of coping become automatic and often make it hard to even know what distress we are feeling.



Many ministry workers have developed a ministry “persona” or a way of detaching from their emotions. It is like a mask you wear; it could be always smiling, staying super calm, laughing, always “on”, leaving your body, even using ‘spiritualising’ to deal with confronting situations. These are all forms of a “Detached Protector” mode. These ways of being can be very automatic and so much a part of who you feel yourself to be, that you don't recognise it as a protective coating or mask. But over time a Detached Protector mode makes it hard to feel anything, or know when you are distressed. You may

stop feeling joy and feel like you are observing yourself, rather than being “in your body”. Your relationship with God and others will feel very flat as a result.

Often people have learnt their Detached Protector mode early in life, particularly in situations when there wasn’t any healthy way of dealing with a bad situation.

For example, Sam’s dad would frown as his anger built and the smell of alcohol would fill the air and he would become violent. Sam learnt to shut down and leave the room in order to avoid being the target. That’s a really good idea when you are 5 years old and you have an angry father. But now as an adult, people frowning and also the smell of alcohol trigger Sam. He automatically detaches or gets really jokey. He makes excuses to leave staff meetings if anyone gets angry, or even looks like they will get angry.

His detachment was the only thing he could do to keep himself safe when he was younger but now it’s a reaction that is “too big” for staff meetings, where people might get irritated, but don’t get unhelpfully angry. His Detached Protector shuts him down, which feels safe, but actually makes that more vulnerable part of Sam (Vulnerable Child mode) keep feeling in danger.

Detached Protector mode offers safety, but actually keeps you feeling unsafe

Mark has a spiritualising Detached Protector. His role model in ministry always seemed to have the perfect bible verse for any occasion and was great at listening, so over time Mark used that ‘technique’ because it seemed to be what was expected. It also helped him manage his fear that he was an ‘imposter’ as a minister and someone would find him out. So whenever he was faced with a distressing or challenging pastoral situation he would use a ‘go to’ verse or start talking in long biblically accurate sentences until he felt better and the person seemed calm. His Detached Protector, while it looked like ministry, was actually a way of keeping Mark from facing his fears of inadequacy. It worked in the moment, but was actually quite unhelpful to others, to the point where people started to ask Mark whether he was cut out for ministry (reinforcing his fears of defectiveness).



Detached Protector mode makes you look like a ‘good minister’, but actually stops you from being honest with people and with God.

Detached Self Soother mode is a variation on Detached Protector. It shuts out distress by 'escaping' into something that soothes, like alcohol, drugs, overwork, pornography, or daydreaming.



For example, When Sila was upset about something growing up, but there was no one in her house who had time to help her. She used to fantasize, building elaborate worlds in her imagination to take her mind off her distress. She also masturbated as a release (both ways of using a Detached Self Soother mode). As an adult now, when she feels like ministry isn't going as well as she hoped or she feels let down by her ministry leader she feels panicky and agitated. She can only calm down after going home and masturbating.

Sila learnt early on that no one will really care for you, so you have to escape to a place where you feel safe and cared for (a Detached self soother mode). But for Sila that mode now results in her feeling really guilty and angry at herself for masturbating (her Critic mode gets activated) and so she feels alone with that distress (Vulnerable Child mode) and the cycle starts again.

Tick any ways you avoid or detach:

- Shut off all emotions
- disconnect from others
- reject help
- use a 'wall of anger' to block feelings or people out
- function in an almost robotic manner
- watch yourself from outside your body
- feel empty or numb
- Use drugs or alcohol
- Binge food or 'emotional eating'
- Self-mutilation, cutting, hurting yourself
- "Blank" or "Foggy" feeling
- Spiritualising - using stock phrases and verses rather than 'being with' the person
- Laugh and joke in order to 'lighten the mood' whenever things are stressful



- Workaholism
- Gambling
- Dangerous sports
- Promiscuous sex/ 'compulsive' masturbation
- Playing computer games
- Watching television to "wind down"
- Fantasize/daydream

Beside each of these behaviours above write down where and when you learnt that coping response (if you are aware of those origins).

Write about a situation recently where your coping mode (Detached Protector or Detached Self Soother) happened.

1. Situation and triggers:

2. Coping Mode (what did I think, say and do?):

3. What does the critic mode say before or after I went into the Detached mode

4. What does Vulnerable Child need in that moment?
 - Safety
 - Care
 - Protection
 - Being seen and heard
 - Validation
 - Encouragement
 - Nurture
 - To feel powerful
 - Fun
 - Relaxation
 - Other needs _____
5. Does the Detached mode meet those needs?

6. Do you have any ideas about how you could meet those needs?