

FACT SHEET

Defense Mechanisms

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Defense Mechanisms are described in Psychoanalytic Theory as being psychological mechanisms that are unconsciously used to protect oneself from anxiety created by unacceptable thoughts and/or feelings. Some of these mechanisms can be extremely maladaptive and can cause distress, but you can learn to adopt a healthier mechanism instead.

Narcissistic Defense Mechanisms

Projection: attributing own feelings/thoughts onto someone else. E.g., You don't like someone, but you tell others that they do not like you.

Denial: Trying to avoid becoming aware of a painful reality. E.g., You are given a diagnosis at the hospital but instead choose to believe that this is not true.

Splitting: Seeing everything as good or bad or black or white, with no in-between. E.g., All children are disobedient.

Immature Defense Mechanisms

Blocking: A temporary inability to remember something. E.g., Actively choosing not to recall a memory or making no effort to recall it.

Regression: returning to an earlier stage of development. E.g., Childlike behaviours when distressed.

Somatization: Your psychological states become physical. E.g., Symptoms of anxiety may manifest as stomach aches or feeling as though you may vomit.

Introjection: an unconscious adoption or internalisation of the ideas or voices of other people. E.g., hearing your father say: "boys don't cry" and you take this on board throughout your life, even though you may not share this same belief or viewpoint.

Anxiety Based Defense Mechanisms

Displacement: Your negative feeling/emotion would be shifted to someone or something else. E.g., Your boss at work yells at you, so you go home and kick the dog.

Repression: when you try and push down a bad/shameful idea or bad memory, sometimes to the point it becomes unconscious. E.g., repressing childhood abuse

but later on, acting out in ways that are unhealthy or you do not understand.

Isolation of Affect: you seem to accept a reality/situation/experience but there is no emotional response. Can be linked with repression. E.g., having experienced abuse but retelling it with no emotional response.

Intellectualisation: the use of academic processes to avoid affective expression e.g., super rationalising something, using a lot of jargon to detach emotionally.

Acting Out: having an emotional outburst which can cover what you are actually feeling. There is a surface emotion expressed, but an underlying emotion beneath. E.g, expressing anger when actually feeling hurt.

Rationalization: you make excuses and try and rationalize your bad behaviour. E.g., I spoke to you that way because I was really stressed out today.

Reaction Formation: an unacceptable impulse is transformed into the opposite. It goes beyond denial and you behave in a way that is opposite to how they actually feel. This is to avoid anxiety from "unacceptable" feelings/thoughts. Unhealthy as not dealing with the uncomfortable feelings, you are trying to "undo" them. E.g., A pyromaniac becomes a firefighter.

Passive Aggression: you have an unconscious passive hostility, you aren't being assertive or straightforward, but speak in a narky manner. You are not owning your feelings. E.g., sulking, backhanded compliments.

Disassociation: separating yourself from your own experience. E.g., can be as simple as daydreaming but can become quite severe and can even lead to identity issues.

Mature Defense Mechanisms

Humour: express your true feelings or thoughts in a funny way that is positive and transmutes negativity. E.g., feeling lonely #foreveralone

Sublimation: An unacceptable impulse is channelled into an acceptable expression of that impulse. E.g., A pyromaniac begins working with fireworks or demolition.

Suppression: A conscious forgetting. Consciously choosing to not focus on a distressing thought or memory but will think about, introspect or process it in a safe way at an appropriate time. E.g., continuing your day but talking about it later.