

Defense Mechanisms

Defense Mechanisms occur when our ego cannot meet the demands of reality. They are psychological strategies brought into play by the unconscious mind to manipulate, deny or distort reality so as to maintain a socially acceptable self-image. Healthy people normally use these mechanisms throughout life. It becomes pathological only when its persistent use leads to maladaptive behavior such that the physical and/or mental health of the individual is adversely affected. The purpose of ego defense/coping mechanisms is to protect the mind/self/ego from anxiety and to provide a refuge from a situation with which one cannot currently cope.

⇒ In 1977, psychologist George Vaillant took Freud's theory and built upon it by categorizing them, placing Freud's mechanisms on a continuum related to their psychoanalytical developmental level.



Defense Mechanisms Examples

Level 1: Pathological Defenses

- ↳ Very severe, and permit one to effectively rearrange perceptions to eliminate the need to cope with reality. They may appear irrational or insane to others.
- ✓ Delusional Projection: Delusions usually of a persecutory nature.
- ✓ Conversion: the expression of an intra-psychic conflict as a physical symptom; some examples include blindness, deafness, paralysis, or numbness. This phenomenon is sometimes called hysteria.
- ✓ Denial: Refusal to accept external reality because it is too threatening

Level 2: Immature Defenses

- ↳ These mechanisms lessen distress and anxiety provoked by threatening people or by uncomfortable reality. Excessive use of such defenses come across as socially undesirable, difficult to deal with, and seriously out of touch with reality. Often seen in major depression and personality disorders
- ✓ Idealization: Unconsciously choosing to perceive another individual as having more positive qualities than he or she may actually have.
- ✓ Passive aggression: Aggression towards others expressed indirectly or passively such as using procrastination.
- ✓ Projection: A primitive form of paranoia. Includes attributing one's own unacknowledged unacceptable/unwanted thoughts and emotions to another; includes severe prejudice, severe jealousy, hypervigilance to external danger, and "injustice collecting".

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Level 3: Neurotic Defenses

- ↳ Such defenses have short-term advantages in coping, but can often cause long-term problems in relationships, work and in enjoying life when used as one's primary style of coping with the world. **Fairly common in adults*
- ✓ Displacement: Shifting aggressive impulses to a less threatening target;
 - ↳ For example, a mother may yell at her child because she is angry with her husband.
- ✓ Hypochondriasis: Excessive preoccupation or worry about having a serious illness.
- ✓ Intellectualization: A form of isolation; concentrating on the intellectual components of a situation so as to distance oneself from the associated anxiety-provoking emotions; separation of emotion from ideas
- ✓ Isolation: Separation of feelings from ideas and events.
 - ↳ For example, describing a murder with graphic details with no emotional response.
- ✓ Rationalization: Where a person convinces him or herself that no wrong was done and that all is or was all right through faulty and false reasoning.
- ✓ Regression: Temporary reversion of the ego to an earlier stage of development rather than handling unacceptable impulses in a more adult way.
- ✓ Repression: Burying deep the memory of the event
- ✓ Withdrawal: Removing oneself from events/stimuli/interactions under the fear of being reminded of painful thoughts and feelings.

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Level 4: Mature Defenses

- ↳ These defenses help to integrate conflicting emotions and thoughts, while still remaining effective. They have been adapted through the years in order to optimize success in life and relationships. **These are commonly found among emotionally healthy adults.*
- ✓ Altruism: Constructive service to others that brings contentment and personal satisfaction.
- ✓ Anticipation: Realistic planning for future discomfort.
- ✓ Humor: Overt expression of ideas and feelings which retain a portion of their innate distress, but they are joined with witticism to as to not directly confront the topic of discomfort.
 - ↳ For example: Self-deprecation or positive sarcasm.
- ✓ Identification: The unconscious modeling of one's self upon another person's character and behavior.
- ✓ Sublimation: Transformation of negative emotions or instincts into positive actions, behavior, or emotion.
 - ↳ For example: Playing a heavy contact sport such as football or rugby can transform aggression into a game)