

Defense Mechanisms

Defense mechanisms protect us from being consciously aware of a thought or feeling which we cannot tolerate. The defense only allows the unconscious thought or feeling to be expressed indirectly in a disguised form. Defense mechanisms are our way of distancing ourselves from a full awareness of unpleasant thoughts, feelings and desires. By altering and distorting one's awareness of the original impulse, one makes it more tolerable. However defense mechanisms are used in an attempt to protect one from unpleasant emotions, they often result in equally harmful problems by distorting reality instead of dealing directly with the problem. Each of us uses defense mechanisms to some extent yet they are considered maladaptive when they become the predominant means of coping with stress. They are mainly learned and operate on relatively automatic and habitual levels. Below are some of the more common defense mechanisms.

Compartmentalization is a process of separating parts of the self from awareness of other parts and behaving as if one had separate sets of values. An example might be an honest person who cheats on their income tax return and keeps their two value systems distinct and unintegrated while remaining unconscious of the cognitive dissonance.

Compensation is a process of psychologically counterbalancing perceived weakness by emphasizing strength in other areas. More commonly, there is an attempt to substitute for the defect in some way or to draw attention away from it.

Denial is the refusal to accept reality and to act as if a painful event, thought or feeling did not exist. An attempt to "screen out" disagreeable realities by ignoring or refusing to acknowledge them. It is considered one of the most primitive of the defense mechanisms because it is characteristic of very early childhood development.

Displacement is the redirecting of thoughts feelings and impulses from an object that gives a rise to anxiety to a safer, more acceptable one. Often involves difficult emotions, such as hostility and anxiety. Being angry with the boss and kicking the dog can be an example of displacement.

Emotional Insulation - In this defense mechanism, the individual reduces his emotional involvement in the situations that are viewed as disappointing and hurtful.

Identification - This is a defense mechanism whereby feelings of worth are enhanced and the individual is protected against self-devaluation by the identification with a person or institution of distinguished standing.

Intellectualization - In this defense mechanism, the emotional reaction that would normally accompany a painful event is avoided to be replaced by a rational explanation that divests the event of personal significance and painful feeling. An example might be an individual who when told they had a life threatening disease focuses exclusively on the statistical percentages of recovery and is unable to cope with their fear and sadness.

Projection is the attribution of one's undesired impulse onto another. You think someone else has your thought or feeling. For example, an angry spouse accuses their partner of hostility.

Rationalization - In this defense mechanism, you come up with various explanations to justify the situation (while denying your feelings); basically, an excuse.

Reaction Formation is the converting of wishes or impulses that are perceived to be dangerous into their opposites. A woman who is furious at her child and wishes them harm might become overly concerned and protective of the child's health.

Regression is the reversion to an earlier stage of development in the face of unacceptable impulses. You revert to an old, usually immature behavior to ventilate your feeling. "Let's shoot spitballs at people."

Repression - This defense mechanism exists when threatening or painful thoughts or desires are excluded from consciousness. It affords protection from, sudden traumatic experiences. It may also help the individual to control dangerous and unacceptable desires, and at the same time alleviate the anxiety associated with such desires.

Sublimation - In this defense mechanism, you redirect the feeling into a socially productive activity. "I'm going to write a poem about anger."