

List of Defense Mechanisms

Here we explore a list of defense mechanisms employed by the subconscious mind to ward off anxiety and protect the conscious mind from emotional pain.

The amazing **ability of the subconscious mind to protect the conscious mind** is at the root of many "symptoms" and problem behaviors encountered in counseling, therapy, and personal growth.

Symptoms as Metaphors for Subconscious Conflicts

The subconscious mind is very symbolic and metaphorical. Many professional helpers see symptoms as metaphors...symbolic of the client's internal experience -- usually subconscious solutions to internal conflicts such as those outlined in the list of defense mechanisms below.

For example, when a person would like to do one thing, but instead can't seem to help but do another, it indicates that there's a conflict between the conscious mind and some part of the subconscious mind...



In other words, part-of-me is aware that another part-of-me is doing something of which I don't consciously approve... something that may even interfere with my goals or needs.

A good example of this is when I consciously determine that I'm going to lose weight and yet I repeatedly fail to stick to my nutritional plan (we don't like the word "diet")... I try and try to stick to the plan and feel very upset "with myself" for caving in again!

Another term for such internal conflicts is Cognitive Dissonance -- Two cognition's (elements of knowledge)... usually one conscious and the other subconscious... are in direct conflict with each other.

The two opposing cognition's are located on neural networks in the brain. They create anxiety that steadily intensifies until the subconscious mind employs a solution from its list of defense mechanisms.

List of Defense Mechanisms

Rationalization - Subconscious justifications, excuses or reasoning given to make a behavior seem logical -- "A student fails the final he didn't study for and says... "I couldn't have passed it anyway - that teacher has it in for me."

Rationalization is included at the beginning of any list of defense mechanisms because it's so frequently recognized as "being defensive".

Rationalization is often called the "sour grapes defense." This comes from one of Aesop's fables. The fox wanted some grapes, but could not reach them. This caused him to feel pain, as he could not have what he wanted. He rationalized, "They were probably sour anyway" to turn them into something he didn't really want, and thus couldn't really be upset about not getting. It is an intellectual way to diminish pain or guilt. The old "They're 50% less fat so I can eat twice as many" routine is the same. You make up a "logical" argument to avoid guilt.

Intellectualization -- Related to rationalization, intellectualization involves removing the emotion from emotional experiences, and discussing painful events in detached, uncaring, sterile ways. Someone who intellectualizes becomes very distant from their feelings, and when asked to describe their feelings may find it difficult. They may understand all the words that describe feelings, but have no idea what they really feel.

Projection - Attempts to banish or "disown" unwanted and disliked thoughts, behaviors, and even "parts of self" by projecting or attributing them to someone else.

May be as simple as blaming someone else - "He should have let me off on that ticket but that cop was trying to fill his monthly quota."

Or as complex as seeing and experiencing a repressed or "disowned" part of self in another person - e.g., an excessively passive person marries an excessively angry person - both experience their disowned "part" in the other.

Projection is something we all do. It is the act of taking something of ourselves and placing it outside of us, onto others; sometimes we project positive and sometimes negative aspects of ourselves. Sometimes we project things we don't want to acknowledge about ourselves, and so we turn it around and put it on others (i.e., "It's not that I made a stupid mistake, it's that you are critical of everything I do!"). Sometimes it is simply our experiences (i.e., "My father was a reasonable man when we disagreed, so if I use reason with my boss we can work out our disagreement").

The problem with projecting negative aspects of ourselves is that we still suffer under them. In the above example, instead of feeling inadequate (our true feeling) we suffer with the feeling that everyone is critical of us. While we escape feelings of inadequacy and vulnerability, we nonetheless still suffer and feel uneasy. The more energy you put into avoiding the realization that you have weaknesses, the more difficult it eventually is to face them. This is the main defense mechanism of paranoid and anti-social personalities.

Introjection - The opposite of projection - subconsciously "takes in" to self an imprint (or recording) of another person including all their attitudes, messages, prejudices, expressions, even the sound of their voice, etc.

This is healthy if the imprinted material is helpful advice, warnings, or other lessons from parents and respected others -- unhealthy if shaming messages from parents, hatred, or aggression is turned inward on self.

Identification - An ability available very early in life that children use to attach themselves to certain qualities, emotions, and attitudes of someone else...especially during the modeling period between eight and thirteen.

This helps the child further develop the Adult Ego State and the Parent Ego State.

Isolation - Separation of memory from emotion...can remember and talk about the trauma but feels no emotion -- the Person talks about the incident as if it is someone else's story.

Accomplished by talking Third Perceptual Position.

Sublimation - Redirection of impulses into socially acceptable activities -- normal and healthy, such as when the sexual impulses of adolescence is channeled into sports and competition.

Related to displacement is sublimation, or the healthy redirection of an emotion. Instead of punching your boss when angry with him, instead of taking out your anger on your friends, you go to the gym and punch a punching bag. Other examples include turning the painful loss of a child into a campaign to increase child safety laws, turning a generally high degree of aggression into professional football, and turning the pain and resentment of a physical injury into a drive to overcome a disability.

Displacement - No list of defense mechanisms would be complete without displacement. This defense reduces anxiety or pressure by transferring feelings toward one person to another -- commonly known as "dumping on" someone...e.g., man is mad his boss and kicks the cat when he gets home, or blows up and yells at his family.

One way to avoid the risk associated with feeling unpleasant emotions is to displace them, or put them somewhere other than where they belong. A common example is being angry at your boss. Displaying that anger could cost you your job. You might be afraid that you can not contain it, but also afraid of what will happen if you express it toward your boss. You might instead express it, but redirect it toward some other, safer source, such as your partner or best friend. You yell at them and pick a fight. They will forgive you or ignore it, and then you are able to express your anger but without risking your job.

Repression - Painful, frightening, or threatening emotions, memories, impulses or drives that are **subconsciously** pushed or "stuffed" deep inside.

It takes a lot of energy to keep material "stuffed"...energy that could be used for more productive living. Healthy if the person does not have the psychological resources available to deal with it.

Repression is often thought of as the parent of all defenses. Repression involves putting painful thoughts and memories out of our minds and forgetting them. All defenses do this to some

extent. Traditionally, repression is unconsciously "forgetting," that is, forgetting and not even realizing that you are doing it. You have no conscious memory or knowledge of that which is repressed.

The problem with repression is that the memory, feeling, or insight repressed doesn't go away. It continues to effect us because our unconscious gives it a life of its own. It becomes all the more powerful because we repress it, and it can effect our decisions, reactions, etc... in ways that we don't see but others may.

Suppression - Painful, frightening, or threatening emotions, memories, impulses or drives that are **consciously** pushed or "stuffed" inside.

It takes a lot of energy to keep material "stuffed"...energy that could be used for more productive living.

Suppression is when you consciously forget something, or make the choice to avoid thinking about it.

Conversion - Mental conflict converted to a physical symptom... e.g., a soldier on being deployed into battle is conflicted about his desire to serve his country but believes it is wrong to kill for any reason develops paralysis, blindness, or deafness with no medical cause.

Regression - Giving up current level of development and going back to a prior level... and older child under stress begins wetting the bed or sucking a thumb after a long period without that behavior.

In extreme cases of PTSD an adult could regress into a child-like ego-state and curl up in a fetal position on the floor unable to communicate.

Reaction Formation - Over-compensation for fear of the opposite.

Two conflicting parts of self -- one is strengthened while the other is repressed...e.g., An overly nice and agreeable person may have a lot of repressed hostility and rage of which they are completely unaware on a conscious level.

This is one of the most difficult defenses for some people to understand. When we have a reaction that is too painful or threatening to feel (such as intense hate for someone with power over us), we turn it into the opposite (intense liking for that person). That way, we aren't threatened by the feeling, or even the awareness of the feeling. Like denial and repression, you can begin to do this automatically and as a result never know what your true feelings are.

Denial - Unpleasant facts, emotions, or events are treated as if they are not real or don't exist. -- a person told that their spouse was killed in a motor vehicle accident acts as if he/ or she is still alive. (Not consciously lying)

Denial is the simplest defense to understand. It is simply the refusal to acknowledge what has, is, or will happen. "My partner didn't have an affair, but was simply traveling for work a lot." A related defense is Minimizing. When you minimize you technically accept what happened, but only in a "watered down" form. "Sure, I have been drinking a bit too much lately, but it's only due to stresses at work; I don't really have a drinking problem since this is situational and not an inner weakness or something."

Fantasy - Retreating into a dream world of times past... Can be unhealthy if it happens when action is required instead. Healthy when used to go back and finish unfinished business of the past...or simply for sentiment & nostalgia such exploring high school yearbook or family album.

Fantasy is so commonly experienced that many people forget to include it on their list of defense mechanisms.

Fantasy can be a good or a pathological defense. Fantasizing involves creating an inner world when the real world becomes too painful, difficult, or stressful. Thinking about your upcoming vacation when work gets stressful is a healthy use of fantasy. However, if you don't solve problems, but only daydream about them being solved for you, if you avoid potentially problematic responsibilities and only fantasize about having rewarding challenges and experiences, fantasy becomes too much.

Withdrawal - Withdrawal is a more severe form of defense. It entails removing yourself from events, stimuli, interactions, etc... that could remind you of painful thoughts and feelings. Withdrawal takes several forms, such as silence, running away, and drinking and drug use. Talking to friends could prompt them to ask about painful events, so you avoid them. Television, books, coworkers, etc... can all remind you of unpleasant feelings, so you avoid them. Paired with fantasy, it can be paralyzing. Withdrawal inevitably leads to strong feelings of loneliness and alienation, however, which generally means you feel more pain.