

PSYCHOLOGICAL DEFENSE MECHANISM

Counselling and Psychotherapy Tool:

Defense mechanism is based upon a conscious or unconscious primitive and undeveloped nature of the ego. The more primitive a defense mechanism, the less effective it works for a person over the long-term, but usually very effective short-term, and hence are favoured by many people and children especially (when such primitive defense mechanisms are first learned). Adults who do not or will not learn better ways of coping with stress or traumatic events in their lives will often resort to such primitive defense mechanisms as well.

Advanced defense mechanisms are complex in nature and developed from primitive coping strategies that no longer sufficient. It is often distorted and toxic for the body, mind and soul. It is often enmeshed with learned behaviours, neuroticism and other defenses coalesce into a multi-functional coping strategy.

Most defense mechanisms are unconscious – that means most of us do not realize we're using them at the moment.

Primitive Defense Mechanisms

1. Denial

Denial is the self-talk refusal to accept reality or fact, acting as if a painful event, thought or feeling did not exist. It is considered one of the most primitive pathological of the defense mechanisms because it is characteristic of early childhood development. Many people use denial in their everyday lives to avoid dealing with painful feelings and experiences. It is often used as avoidant of ownership of responsibilities. For instance, a person who is a functioning alcoholic will simply deny they have a drinking problem, pointing to how well they function in their job and relationships.

2. Regression

Regression is the reversion to an earlier stage of development in the face of unacceptable thoughts or impulses. These people regressed to premature behaviours because they lack the internal resources to handle the intolerable thoughts or impulses. For example, an adolescent who is overwhelmed with fear, anger and growing sexual desires might become clingy and start exhibiting earlier childhood behaviours long since overcome, such as bedwetting, etc. An adult may regress when under a great deal of stress, refusing to leave their bed and engage in regular, everyday activities.

3. Acting Out

Acting Out is an immature performance of extreme behaviour to express thoughts or feelings the person feels incapable of otherwise expressing. Instead of saying, "I'm angry with you," a person who acts out may instead throw the book at the person, or punch a hole through a wall. When a person acts out, it can act as a pressure release, and often helps the individual feel calmer and peaceful once again. For instance, a child's temper tantrum is a form of

acting out when he or she doesn't get his or her way. Self-injury may also be a form of acting-out, expressing in physical pain what one cannot stand to feel emotional.

4. Dissociation

Dissociation is when a person loses track of time or person, and instead finds another representation of their self to continue at the moment. A person who often dissociates neurotic and loses track of time/day or themselves and their usual thought processes and memories. People who have a history of any kind of childhood abuse often suffer from some form of dissociation. In extreme cases, separation can lead to a person believing they have multiple selves ("multiple personality disorder"). People who use dissociation often have a disconnected view of themselves in their world. Time and their own self-image may not flow continuously, as it does for most people. In this manner, a person who dissociates can "disconnect" from the real world for a time, resorts to internalised their fantasies, and live in a different world that is not cluttered with thoughts, feelings or memories that are unbearable.

5. Compartmentalization

Compartmentalization is a lesser form of dissociation, wherein parts of oneself are separated from awareness of other parts and behaving as if one had separate sets of values. This person will have a different mask on for different persona. This person also organised their thoughts about a person, thing or situation into a 'box'. An example might be an honest person who cheats on their income tax return and keeps their two value systems distinct and un-integrated while remaining unconscious of the cognitive dissonance. This person has a set of values but does not practice what they preach.

6. Projection

Projection is also a pathological defense to misattribution of a person's undesired thoughts, feelings or impulses onto another person who does not have those thoughts, feelings or desires. Projection is used primarily when the opinions are considered unacceptable for the person to express, or they feel completely ill at ease with having them. For example, a spouse may be angry at his significant other for not listening, when, in fact, he is frustrated with his colleagues at work who were not listening. Projection is often the result of a lack of insight and acknowledgement of one's own motivations and feelings.

7. Reaction Formation

Reaction Formation is a neurotic defense mechanism that converts unwanted or dangerous thoughts, feelings or impulses into their opposites. For instance, a woman who is very angry with her boss and would like to quit her job may instead be overly kind and generous toward her boss and express a desire to keep working there forever. She is incapable of expressing the negative emotions of anger and unhappiness with her job and instead becomes overly kind to publicly demonstrate her lack of aggression and sorrow.

8. Isolation

Isolation is a neurotic defense of separating feelings from ideas and events. When a person separates their feelings, they have no emotional reaction or tie to the objects, events or situations. In a toxic way, this person also isolates herself from other people as well as isolating individuals they feel distant with. For example, someone describing a humanitarian crisis from first-hand experiences in graphic details with no emotional responses.

9. Introjection

Introjection is an immature defense mechanism that identifies an object or an idea so intensely and deeply that it becomes a part of that person. It involves taking other's attribute and internalise it, making it ours. We make what is in the external, to become internal. For example, a parent might say to a child 'stop crying', and the child took this idea and internalised what was as fact as their way to behave and stopped crying completely – shutting off their tears.

10. Narcissism

A narcissistic defense mechanism is another complicated psychologically mature setup to defend against deep-set feelings and beliefs developed in childhood. It is set up to minimise feeling discomfort from self-love. But due to complexity in defenses, intrapsychic energies can be transformed destructive for the individual, resulting in narcissistic personality disorder. For example, a child has learned to use her beauty for personal gain, from childhood conditioning, from the attention that she received from her parents and others, and has learned in adulthood to use her beauty to manipulate people in relationships.

11. Splitting

Splitting is a primitive pathological defense mechanism that is both helpful and harmful impulses are split off and unintegrated, frequently projected onto someone else. The defended individual is segregated into all-good and all-bad, with no room for ambiguity and ambivalence. The black and white thinking does not allow any room to negotiate the grey area in situations. This person has the capability of shutting off their emotions, thoughts or feelings as well as polarising their thoughts and emotions using words such as 'never' and/or 'always'. For example, a wife may complain that her husband does not love her because he never pays her any attention.

12. Withdrawal

Withdrawal is a neurotic and severe form of defense mechanism. It entails disengaging, removing oneself from an event, from the particular person or group, from social interaction and stimuli, so that emotion and painful thoughts are no longer a problem. A depressed person often withdraws from life and living. Someone who lacks self-confidence and self-esteem may shy away from social engagements through fear and neurotic thoughts.

Advanced Defense Mechanisms

1. Anticipation

Anticipation is a conscious future-focused defense mechanism that can cause unnecessary stress. It is potentially harmful to a person to mentally prepare for an unknown or unforeseeable future that has not happen yet or may not occur. The behaviour and action of the person in anticipation is based on unconscious emotional distress, such as fear. The thoughts or behaviour in anticipation involve rehearsing multiple outcomes in the mind where ideas can get stuck in ruminating about what if. For example, a person who is anxious about being late might anticipate many different ways to be late. Hence, she set off and arrived hours earlier than usual so not to be late.

2. Avoidant

Avoidance is the conscious removal or withdraws of oneself from a situation that creates an emotional disturbance. When a person avoids a condition that causes an emotional reaction, it is their only way of managing or reducing their anxiety or distress through escaping the event. This person neglects their emotions through avoidance of the situation or person. For example, a family member avoids confrontation fearing reprimand by avoiding family gatherings.

3. Comparison

Comparison is an irrational defense mechanism that makes a comparison by defensive self-evaluation. It is also known as Upward or Downward Social Comparison. Comparison is often used by parents to discipline a child to motivate the reluctant child. It is an unhealthy strategy as the child learned to compete to gain reward, attention, appreciation or love. It is predominant in groups and siblings rivalry. For example, a sister feels that she has to compete with her sister to gain recognition, acceptance and love from her parents by trying extremely hard at studying.

4. Conversion

Conversion is a pathological defense mechanism that involves an expression of intrapsychic conflict as a physical symptom, includes blindness, deafness, paralysis or numbness, aka hysteria. It is a way of converting unpleasant impulses, feelings or emotions developing into a physical sign or manifestation. For example, a husband develops deafness as a way to cope with the years of his wife incessant moaning.

5. Displacement

Displacement is a neurotic defense mechanism that shifts aggressive or sexual impulses to an acceptable outlet or a less threatening target, by redirecting emotional response or intensity and safely release the feelings into something less offensive and socially acceptable. This person separates real immense distressing emotion from the real object into something less aggressive, less destructive, or frightening. For example, a wife may yell at her children because she is angry with her husband. Or a rejected woman, feeling hurt from a recent break-up, goes out and slept with the first guy she sees.

6. Humility

Humility is a conscious thinking process that lower one's expectation and view of ourselves. It is a defense mechanism most often used by someone with low self-esteem, low self-confidence and low self-worth. This person sacrifices their own sense of self-importance by pacifying others to reduce conflicts in the relationship. The mechanism masked an unconscious needs for love. For example, as you are waiting in a queue, you let someone cut in front of you because this person only had one item to purchase. Another example is that you give credits to a colleague for a successful outcome, even though you have a greater skill set.

7. Humour

The use of humour can be positive and negative. It is a mature defense mechanism that can be used positively to diffuse difficult situations or used negatively for personal gain. Overt expressions, ideas and feelings that give pleasurable experiences to others are also considered positive. Covert phrases that are used as personal gains, such as mischievous intentions like sarcasm and witticism can be a source of discomfort for others. A person who uses humour in conversation when out of context avoid responding, feeling or thinking. For example, a wife was extremely emotional after being made redundant confided to her husband, uses humour to try to cheer her up.

8. Identification

Identification is a defense mechanism that unconsciously models oneself upon another person's character and behaviour. It is also consciously model when an individual becomes identified with the role, the profession, the culture, the idol etc. For example, a wife is identified within her position, because she was brought up in a traditionally English religious family, with rigid rules, she is identified to perform her duties as a wife, as a mother, as a housewife, as a cook etc. in accordance with her religious values.

9. Idealisation

Idealisation is a conscious defense mechanism that creates an idealised image, persona, impression of a person, place, object or situation by exaggerating the positive qualities and minimising the negatives, even if it outweighs the positives. The perception is distorting the view of the world and reality when idealised by the different aspect of the idealised object creating a misconception and biased judgement. This seemingly positive defense mechanism only focuses on the positive and eliminating or suppressing the negative qualities of the idealised object. For example,

10. Intellectualisation

Intellectualisation is also a neurotic defense mechanism. It is a form of isolation that concentrate on the intellect and the logic and reasoning of the mind. It is reasoning using intelligence to distance and distract oneself from associated undesired feelings such as anxiety, sadness, loneliness etc. It also separates undesirable behaviours by intellectual justification. For example, A lonely teenager hides her loneliness by studying really hard, concentrating on filling the mind with learning, thus avoiding the emotional disturbances.

11. Resistance

Resistance is psychologically matured defense mechanism that operates from consciousness and unconsciousness level. It affects behaviours, actions, and impulses in a complex system of thoughts, ideas and images. It is ego-bound to serve and keep up the defenses, and it will sabotage any pattern of behaviours. For example, as a person grows up, previously setup defense that were in placed and that has served us, becomes unhelpful, and we adapt and change, but there are parts of us that will prevent the progress of change, causing relapses, such as the case with additions or an addictive personality trait.

12. Passive Aggression

Passive Aggression is a generally used defense mechanism in modern societies that complicatedly inter-twined with underlying fear, mistrust and rejection. It is an automatic response to threats and insecurities. It can be conscious and unconscious, depending on the situation. This defense mechanism works with avoidance to evade problems and communication. It is immature and primitive, often, developed in early childhood. Passive Aggressive behaviours include avoiding direct contact or open-dialogue, making excuses, blaming, backhanded compliments and touches of sarcasm, often hiding anger or hurt and other true feelings. For example, a husband avoids telling his wife that her shoutings are a problem to open communication by blaming the children for shouting. A husband may refuse to recognise signs of infidelity in his wife's behaviour to avoid addressing the issues in the marriage.

13. Rationalisation

Rationalisation is a defense mechanism that is used to minimise painful or intolerable feelings such as rage or rudeness. The distorted cognitive thoughts decrease the fact of reality and make it less threatening. It is a way of justifying unacceptable or uncontrollable behaviours. It is also used as an excuse for another person's unacceptable or harmful conduct or action. For example, a wife may rationalise her beatings, stating that her husband was drunk and did not know what he was doing and that he loves her when he is sober.

14. Self-Serving Bias

This defense mechanism distorted the reality of what is by attributing positive qualities of things, such as skills or talents to their own, neglecting or rejecting negatives qualities of the same things. Self-serving bias is a cognitive or perceptual process that distorted the general perception to maintain and enhanced self-image, self-worth, self-confidence and self-esteem. It is an inflated sense of self to keep up a particular appearance. For example, a student with high expectation of herself may feel that her grade on a test was unfair because she disliked her teacher; therefore, her teacher doesn't give her a good mark.

15. Somatization

Somatization is an unconscious defense mechanism that protect the individual from being emotionally overwhelmed. Somatization concerns with the body being the outlet of the emotional disturbance. It is expressed physically in the soma (in the body). Emotional discomforts may be expressed as physiological pain, weaknesses in the muscles, joints

or as headaches, backaches, shoulder pains as well as, fainting, dizziness and nausea. Problems such as irritable bowel syndrome, diarrhoea, incontinence and constipation are also possible symptoms.

16. Sublimation

Sublimation is a matured and advanced defense mechanism that transforms unhelpful emotions or instincts into healthy actions, behaviours or feelings. For example, a husband is angry at his wife and does not want to display his aggression directly at her, so he takes his attack into his squash game with a work colleague.

17. Suppression

Suppression is a conscious decision to delay paying attention to a thought, emotion or needs to manage reality. It is a way to cope with the present undesirable reality. It is a mature defense mechanism that requires conscious awareness to put off doing what you're doing at the moment. For example, A wife hides her impulsion to spending money by hiding new purchases from her husband fearing that he might get angry for spending money that they do not have.

18. Wishful thinking

Wishful thinking involves cognitive processes and decision making. In this defense mechanism, wishful thinking is an imagined desired with fantasy rather than reasoning, realistically or evidentially. It is a way of disengage from the reality of the situation by believing the desired outcome, which can often be outlandish. It is an exaggeration of reality, and it could be morbid and violent, such as wishing ill or malaise on another, including death wishes.