

Defence Mechanisms

A defence mechanism is an automatic, unconscious mental process that reduces anxiety, internal conflicts and uncomfortable emotions. Some are generally considered more mature and adaptive, while others can become unhelpful if overused.

Acting Out

Expressing unconscious emotions through actions instead of reflection.

A person copes with hidden emotional conflicts, stress or painful feelings through impulsive actions instead of talking or reflecting.

Altruism

Managing personal distress by helping others.

A person handles emotional conflict, internal stress or personal pain by dedicating themselves to helping others.

Anticipation

Preparing emotionally and practically for future stress.

You deal with future stress, discomfort or challenges by thinking ahead and planning realistic solutions.

Avoidance

Staying away from situations, thoughts or feelings that cause anxiety.

Deliberately or unconsciously staying away from thoughts, feelings, situations, people or experiences that cause anxiety, discomfort, shame or emotional distress.

Compensation

Overachieving in one area to make up for perceived weaknesses in another.

A person overachieves or builds strength in one area to hide or make up for a real or perceived weakness, failure or feeling of inadequacy in another.

Conversion

Expressing psychological conflict as neurological symptoms.

A person turns emotional distress, hidden trauma or severe mental stress into real neurological symptoms. These have no clear medical cause, but the pain or loss of function feels very real to the person experiencing them. Conversion affects voluntary motor or sensory functions. It often has a direct, symbolic link to a specific trauma (e.g., losing your voice when you are too afraid to speak up).

Denial

Refusing to accept painful facts.

A strategy that stops a person from accepting painful facts, real events or heavy stress. It helps the mind block sudden shock or fear to protect emotional stability in the short term.

Devaluation

Attributing exaggerated negative qualities to someone or something.

Assigning exaggeratedly negative, worthless or flawed qualities to themselves, an object or another person. A person dismisses, belittles or reduces the perceived value of a person, relationship, achievement or object in order to protect oneself emotionally. It protects against feelings of vulnerability, rejection, disappointment, shame or inadequacy.

Dissociation

A person disconnects from their thoughts, feelings, body sensations, surroundings, memories or sense of identity. It helps the mind cope with severe stress, pain or trauma by creating emotional distance when a situation feels too overwhelming to handle.

Displacement

Redirecting emotions from the original source to a safer target.

A person redirects uncomfortable or dangerous emotions, most commonly anger or aggression, from the actual source onto a safer, less threatening person or object.

Fantasy

Escaping reality through imagination.

A psychological coping strategy where a person retreats into their imagination, daydreams or an inner world to escape stress, anxiety, painful emotions or unfulfilled real-life needs. It offers temporary emotional relief, but heavy reliance can lead to avoidance of real-world problems.

Humour

Using comedy to cope with difficult emotions.

A person uses jokes, sarcasm or light-heartedness to deflect from painful emotions, anxiety or uncomfortable truths.

Idealization

Seeing someone or something as perfect.

A person attributes exaggeratedly positive or flawless qualities to another person, a group or themselves. It helps protect the ego from difficult emotions like anxiety, fear of abandonment, or feelings of deep personal inadequacy by maintaining an illusion of perfection.

Identification

Internalising qualities of a person or group into your own personality.

A person adopts the characteristics, attitudes, behaviours or values of another individual or group to reduce anxiety, boost self-esteem or cope with a perceived threat.

General Identification

Adopting the style, speech or moral values of a parent, mentor or cultural idol to feel secure.

Identification With The Aggressor

Adopting the traits of a feared person or bully to reduce threat.

Identifying with the powerful person feels safer than remaining in the position of the victim.

Identifying With A Group

Adopting the values, attitudes and traits of a collective.

Provides social identity and belongingness, reduces anxiety and feelings of isolation, increases self-esteem.

Introjection

Internalising the beliefs or values of others.

A person absorbs and adopts the beliefs, values, attitudes or standards of external figures, such as parents, teachers or society without evaluating them.

Isolation of Affect

Separating emotions from thoughts or memories.

A person separates painful or traumatic events from the emotions attached to them. You remember the facts of what happened, but you feel no emotional pain. This strategy helps the mind survive overwhelming stress.

Intellectualization

Focusing on facts and logic to avoid emotional distress.

A person uses excessive logic, facts and abstract reasoning to avoid uncomfortable or distressing emotions.

Passive Aggression

Indirectly expressing anger or resentment.

An individual expresses negative feelings, hostility or anger indirectly rather than openly. People use this strategy to handle uncomfortable emotions or avoid the risks of direct conflict, often stemming from early environments where open anger was unsafe.

Projection

A person unconsciously attributes their own unacceptable thoughts, feelings or traits to someone else. By projecting these unwanted thoughts, feelings or traits outward, the ego protects itself from internal anxiety, guilt or shame.

Projective Identification

A person unconsciously projects unacceptable emotions or parts of themselves onto someone else, and subtly manipulates the other person to actually feel and behave in that exact way. The recipient unconsciously absorbs, internalises, feels and acts out the disowned emotion forced upon them.

Rationalization

Creating logical explanations to justify behaviour or feelings.

A person invents logical, reassuring excuses to justify unacceptable behaviours, failures or painful feelings.

Reaction Formation

Behaving in a way opposite to one's true feelings.

A person deals with unacceptable desires or anxiety by adopting an exaggerated, opposite behaviour, such as showing extreme friendliness toward someone you secretly dislike

Regression

Reverting to behaviours typical of an earlier developmental stage.

A person reverts to an earlier, less mature stage of development when faced with severe stress, anxiety or trauma. Instead of handling difficult emotions with adult coping skills, the mind utilises an old survival strategy.

Repression

Unconsciously blocking distressing thoughts or memories.

Blocking painful memories, difficult emotions or unacceptable impulses from conscious awareness. Unlike intentional hiding, this process happens automatically to protect a person from anxiety and guilt.

Somatization

Experiencing emotional distress as physical symptoms.

Mental distress, emotional pain or stress turns into real physical body symptoms. Instead of feeling sadness, anger, or anxiety in the mind, a person feels pain, fatigue or stomach upset.

Splitting

Viewing people or situations as all good or all bad, with little middle ground.

A person views self, others or situations in strict black-and-white extremes, categorising them as entirely 'all good' or all 'bad'. It eliminates nuance and middle ground, serving as an unconscious way to cope with overwhelming, conflicting emotions.

Sublimation

Channelling unacceptable impulses into socially acceptable activities.

Socially unacceptable impulses, aggressive drives or sexual desires are safely redirected into constructive, creative or socially valued behaviours.

Suppression

Consciously choosing to push unwanted thoughts, feelings or impulses out of awareness.

It lets you stay calm and productive during high-stress moments like tests, work tasks or social events. It helps a person delay dealing with a stressful issue until a safer or more practical time.

Undoing

Attempting to 'cancel out' an unacceptable thought or action through another behaviour.

A person tries to 'make un-happened' an unacceptable thought, impulse or action by engaging in a contrary behaviour. It acts as an unconscious attempt to erase guilt or anxiety through symbolic repair. For example: Having an angry thought about a friend, then acting overly sweet and generous toward them. Lying to someone, then offering endless favours to erase the dishonesty. Performing repetitive actions to counteract a bad or intrusive thought.

Withdrawal

Pulling back from stressful people or situations.

A person emotionally or physically distances themselves from a situation, person or source of stress to protect themselves from uncomfortable feelings and emotional overwhelm.

Types of Defences**Mature Defences**

Mature defences optimise adaptation to stress, turning difficult emotions into positive outcomes or constructive solutions. Some of these include: Sublimation, Humour, Altruism, Anticipation, Suppression.

Neurotic Defences

Neurotic defences help manage anxiety and block bad feelings, but they often distort reality or strain relationships over time. Some of these include: Repression, Rationalisation, Displacement, Reaction Formation, Intellectualisation, Undoing.

Immature defences

Immature defences are primitive and impulsive. Frequent use often leads to social, personal or reality-testing problems. Some of these include: Denial, Projection, Regression, Splitting, Passive-Aggression, Acting Out, Fantasy, Idealisation, Devaluation, Dissociation.

Summary

Defence mechanisms are psychological coping processes that protect an individual from anxiety, difficult emotions and internal conflicts. They can be useful in helping people cope with stress, but excessive reliance on certain defence mechanisms may interfere with healthy emotional processing, relationships and problem-solving. Defence mechanisms are a normal part of human psychology. Everyone uses them at times, and whether they're helpful depends on the situation, frequency and how much they interfere with daily functioning. They become potentially problematic when they are used excessively, rigidly or in ways that prevent a person from recognising reality or dealing with problems constructively.

johngallagher.online
strath.academia.edu/JohnGallagher