

Examining Defense Mechanisms Boundless

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Mental defense mechanisms were proposed by Freud and were thought to help an individual cope with reality and maintain self-image.



1.

fig. 1 illustrates regression as understood by today's mental health professionals

Stressors can cause people to regress (to begin acting like the once did at an earlier developmental stage).

- Repression is when one suppresses anxiety-provoking memories, thoughts, etc.
- Regression is a defense mechanism in which one retreats to an earlier developmental stage.
- Reaction formation is when one acts in way that is directly opposite to what one is actually feeling.
- Projection is when one attributes their own unacceptable thoughts, motivations, wishes, etc. to others.
- Rationalization is when one creates logical reasons for one's actions that are not the true reasons why one is engaging in a particular behavior.
- Displacement is when one thrusts sexual or aggressive desires or behaviors onto a substitute object or person that is safer to have these feelings towards than the original object or person that elicited the feelings.
- Denial refers to acting as though something has not occurred to protect oneself from reality of a situation.
- **Defense Mechanism:** A psychological strategy used unconsciously by people to cope with harmful or stressful situations.
- **Displacement:** An unconscious defense mechanism whereby the mind redirects effects from an object felt to be dangerous or unacceptable to an object felt to be safe or acceptable

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- **Reaction Formation:** A defensive process (defense mechanism) in which anxiety-producing or unacceptable emotions and impulses are mastered by exaggeration (hypertrophy) of the directly opposing tendency
- Repression refers to an inability to consciously recognizing the existence of a desire. Denial is the conscious downplaying of an unpleasant truth.

Defense mechanisms are the method by which the ego can solve the conflicts between the super-ego and the id. The use of defense mechanisms is helpful if moderately used. The use of defense mechanisms may attenuate the conflict between the id and super-ego, but their overuse or reuse rather than confrontation can lead to either anxiety or guilt, which may result in psychological disorders such as depression. Healthy individuals normally use different defenses throughout life. An ego defense mechanism 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 various defense mechanisms include 1) repression (originally known as suppression), 2) regression, 3) reaction formation, 4) projection, 5) rationalization, 6) displacement, and 7) denial. Repression is the psychological attempt by an individual to suppress one's own desires and impulses towards pleasurable instincts. The repression is caused when an external force puts itself in contrast with the desire, threatening to cause suffering if the desire is satisfied. The repressive response to the threat is to exclude the desire from one's consciousness and hold or subdue it in the unconscious. According to Freud, repression plays a major role in both mental illness and in the psyche of average people.

Regression is a defense mechanism leading to the temporary or long-term reversion of the ego to an earlier stage of development rather than the handling of unacceptable impulses in a more adult way. The defense mechanism of regression, in psychoanalytic theory, occurs when thoughts are pushed back out of our consciousness and into our unconscious. Behaviors associated with regression can vary greatly depending upon which stage the person is fixated at. An individual fixated at the oral stage might begin eating or smoking excessively. A fixation at the anal stage might result in excessive tidiness or messiness.

Reaction formation takes place when a person does the opposite of what they really want. An example of reaction formation would be if a man who is overly aroused by pornographic material were to take on an attitude of extreme criticism toward the topic. He may even develop an obsessional personality above and beyond the defense mechanism.

Psychological projection occurs when a person "projects" his or her own undesirable thoughts, motivations, desires, feelings onto someone or something else. As an example of the process, a person might have thoughts of infidelity with respect to a spouse or other partner. Instead of dealing with these undesirable thoughts consciously, the subject unconsciously projects these feelings onto the other person, and begins to think that the other may be having an affair.

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Rationalization involves constructing a logical justification for a decision that was originally arrived at through a different mental process. For example, Jim may have bought a tape player to listen to self-help tapes, but he tells his friends he bought it so that he can listen to classic rock mixes for fear of his actual reason being rejected. According to the DSM-IV, rationalization

occurs "when the individual deals with emotional conflict or internal or external stressors by concealing the true motivations for his or her own thoughts, actions, or feelings through the elaboration of reassuring or self serving but incorrect explanations."

Displacement takes place when someone redirects emotion from a "dangerous" object to a "safe" one, such as punching a pillow to avoid hitting someone who could possibly hit you in return. Displacement operates in the mind unconsciously and involves emotions, ideas, or wishes being transferred from their original object to a more acceptable substitute. It is most often used to allay anxiety; and can refer to the displacement of aggressive impulses or to the displacement of sexual impulses.

Denial occurs when someone fends off awareness of an unpleasant truth or of a reality that is a threat to the ego. For example, a student may have received a bad grade on a report card but tells himself that grades don't matter. Denial is a defense mechanism in which a person is faced with a fact that is too uncomfortable to accept and rejects it instead. There are several forms denial can take. There is simple denial, which is to deny the reality of the unpleasant fact altogether. The minimizing approach to denial occurs when an individual denies how serious something is. The projection approach to denial involves admitting both the fact and seriousness of a situation but denying responsibility. Denial is one of the most controversial defense mechanisms, since it can be easily used to create unfalsifiable theories. That means that anything the subject says or does that appears to disprove the interpreter's theory is explained, not as evidence that the interpreter's theory is wrong, but as the subject's being "in denial".