

# Defense mechanisms essay sample

[Life](#), [Emotions](#)



In some areas of psychology (especially in psychodynamic theory), psychologists talk about “ defense mechanisms,” or manners in which we behave or think in certain ways to better protect or “ defend” ourselves. Defense mechanisms are one way of looking at how people distance themselves from a full awareness of unpleasant thoughts, feelings and behaviors. Psychologists have categorized defense mechanisms based upon how primitive they are. The more primitive a defense mechanism, the less effective it works for a person over the long-term. However, more primitive defense mechanisms are usually very effective short-term, and hence are favored by many people and children especially (when such primitive defense mechanisms are first learned). Adults who don’t learn better ways of coping with stress or traumatic events in their lives will often resort to such primitive defense mechanisms as well. Most defense mechanisms are fairly unconscious – that means most of us don’t realize we’re using them in the moment. Some types of psychotherapy can help a person become aware of what defense mechanisms they are using, how effective they are, and how to use less primitive and more effective mechanisms in the future. Primitive Defense Mechanisms

### 1. Denial

Denial is the 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 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 or areas of their life they don’t wish to admit. For instance, a person who is a functioning alcoholic will often 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. For an example an adolescent who is overwhelmed with fear, anger and growing sexual impulses might become clingy and start exhibiting earlier childhood behaviors he has long since overcome, such as bedwetting. An adult may regress when under a great deal of stress, refusing to leave their bed and engage in normal, everyday activities. 3. Acting Out

Acting Out is performing an extreme behavior in order 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 a 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 with a parent. Self-injury may also be a form of acting-out, expressing in physical pain what one cannot stand to feel emotionally. 4. Dissociation

Dissociation is when a person loses track of time and/or person, and instead finds another representation of their self in order to continue in the moment. A person who dissociates often loses track of time 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, dissociation 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, 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. 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.

#### 6. Projection

Projection is the misattribution of a person’s undesired thoughts, feelings or impulses onto another person who does not have those thoughts, feelings or impulses. Projection is used especially when the thoughts 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 their significant other for not listening, when in fact it is the angry spouse who does not listen. 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 the converting of 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 anger and unhappiness. Less Primitive, More Mature Defense Mechanisms

Less primitive defense mechanisms are a step up from the primitive defense mechanisms in the previous section. Many people employ these defenses as adults, and while they work okay for many, they are not ideal ways of dealing with our feelings, stress and anxiety. If you recognize yourself using a few of these, don't feel bad – everybody does. 8. Repression

Repression is the unconscious blocking of unacceptable thoughts, feelings and impulses. The key to repression is that people do it unconsciously, so they often have very little control over it. “Repressed memories” are memories that have been unconsciously blocked from access or view. But because memory is very malleable and ever-changing, it is not like playing back a DVD of your life. The DVD has been filtered and even altered by your life experiences, even by what you've read or viewed. 9. Displacement

Displacement is the redirecting of thoughts feelings and impulses directed at one person or object, but taken out upon another person or object. People often use displacement when they cannot express their feelings in a safe manner to the person they are directed at. The classic example is the man who gets angry at his boss, but can't express his anger to his boss for fear of being fired. He instead comes home and kicks the dog or starts an argument with his wife. The man is redirecting his anger from his boss to his dog or wife. Naturally, this is a pretty ineffective defense mechanism, because while

the anger finds a route for expression, it's misapplication to other harmless people or objects will cause additional problems for most people. 10.

### Intellectualization

Intellectualization is the overemphasis on thinking when confronted with an unacceptable impulse, situation or behavior without employing any emotions whatsoever to help mediate and place the thoughts into an emotional, human context. Rather than deal with the painful associated emotions, a person might employ intellectualization to distance themselves from the impulse, event or behavior. For instance, a person who has just been given a terminal medical diagnosis, instead of expressing their sadness and grief, focuses instead on the details of all possible fruitless medical procedures. 11.

### Rationalization

Rationalization is putting something into a different light or offering a different explanation for one's perceptions or behaviors in the face of a changing reality. For instance, a woman who starts dating a man she really, really likes and thinks the world of is suddenly dumped by the man for no reason. She reframes the situation in her mind with, " I suspected he was a loser all along." 12. Undoing

Undoing is the attempt to take back an unconscious behavior or thought that is unacceptable or hurtful. For instance, after realizing you just insulted your significant other unintentionally, you might spend then next hour praising their beauty, charm and intellect. By " undoing" the previous action, the person is attempting to counteract the damage done by the original

comment, hoping the two will balance one another out. Mature Defense Mechanisms

Mature defense mechanisms are often the most constructive and helpful to most adults, but may require practice and effort to put into daily use. While primitive defense mechanisms do little to try and resolve underlying issues or problems, mature defenses are more focused on helping a person be a more constructive component of their environment. People with more mature defenses tend to be more at peace with themselves and those around them. 13. Sublimation

Sublimation is simply the channeling of unacceptable impulses, thoughts and emotions into more acceptable ones. For instance, when a person has sexual impulses they would like not to act upon, they may instead focus on rigorous exercise. Refocusing such unacceptable or harmful impulses into productive use helps a person channel energy that otherwise would be lost or used in a manner that might cause the person more anxiety. Sublimation can also be done with humor or fantasy. Humor, when used as a defense mechanism, is the channeling of unacceptable impulses or thoughts into a light-hearted story or joke. Humor reduces the intensity of a situation, and places a cushion of laughter between the person and the impulses. Fantasy, when used as a defense mechanism, is the channeling of unacceptable or unattainable desires into imagination. For example, imagining one's ultimate career goals can be helpful when one experiences temporary setbacks in academic achievement. Both can help a person look at a situation in a

different way, or focus on aspects of the situation not previously explored.

#### 14. Compensation

Compensation is a process of psychologically counterbalancing perceived weaknesses by emphasizing strength in other arenas. By emphasizing and focusing on one's strengths, a person is recognizing they cannot be strong at all things and in all areas in their lives. For instance, when a person says, " I may not know how to cook, but I can sure do the dishes!," they're trying to compensate for their lack of cooking skills by emphasizing their cleaning skills instead. When done appropriately and not in an attempt to over-compensate, compensation is defense mechanism that helps reinforce a person's self-esteem and self-image.

#### 15. Assertiveness

Assertiveness is the emphasis of a person's needs or thoughts in a manner that is respectful, direct and firm. Communication styles exist on a continuum, ranging from passive to aggressive, with assertiveness falling neatly inbetween. People who are passive and communicate in a passive manner tend to be good listeners, but rarely speak up for themselves or their own needs in a relationship. People who are aggressive and communicate in an aggressive manner tend to be good leaders, but often at the expense of being able to listen empathetically to others and their ideas and needs.

People who are assertive strike a balance where they speak up for themselves, express their opinions or needs in a respectful yet firm manner, and listen when they are being spoken to. Becoming more assertive is one of the most desired communication skills and helpful defense mechanisms



most people want to learn, and would benefit in doing so. Vaillant's categorization of defence mechanisms

#### [edit]Level 1 – Pathological

The mechanisms on this level, when predominating, almost always are severely pathological. These six defences, in conjunction, permit one to effectively rearrange external experiences to eliminate the need to cope with reality. The pathological users of these mechanisms frequently appear irrational or insane to others. These are the “ psychotic” defences, common in overt psychosis. However, they are found in dreams and throughout childhood as well. They include:

Delusional Projection: Delusions about external reality, usually of a persecutory nature. Conversion: the expression of an intrapsychic conflict as a physical symptom; some examples include blindness, deafness, paralysis, or numbness. This phenomena is sometimes called hysteria.[18] Denial: Refusal to accept external reality because it is too threatening; arguing against an anxiety-provoking stimulus by stating it doesn't exist; resolution of emotional conflict and reduction of anxiety by refusing to perceive or consciously acknowledge the more unpleasant aspects of external reality. Distortion: A gross reshaping of external reality to meet internal needs. Splitting: A primitive defence. Negative and positive impulses are split off and unintegrated. Fundamental example: An individual views other people as either innately good or innately evil, rather than as an individual who is defined by his or her actions. Extreme projection: The blatant denial of a

moral or psychological deficiency, which is perceived as a deficiency in another individual or group. [edit]Level 2 – Immature

These mechanisms are often present in adults. These mechanisms lessen distress and anxiety provoked by threatening people or by uncomfortable reality. Excessive use of such defenses is seen as socially undesirable in that they are immature, difficult to deal with and seriously out of touch with reality. These are the so-called “immature” defences and overuse almost always leads to serious problems in a person’s ability to cope effectively. These defences are often seen in major depression and personality disorders. They include:

Acting out: Direct expression of an unconscious wish or impulse in action, without conscious awareness of the emotion that drives that expressive behaviour. Fantasy: Tendency to retreat into fantasy in order to resolve inner and outer conflicts. Idealization: Unconsciously choosing to perceive another individual as having more positive qualities than he or she may actually have.[19] Passive aggression: Aggression towards others expressed indirectly or passively such as using procrastination. Projection: Projection is a primitive form of paranoia. Projection also reduces anxiety by allowing the expression of the undesirable impulses or desires without becoming consciously aware of them; attributing one’s own unacknowledged unacceptable/unwanted thoughts and emotions to another; includes severe prejudice, severe jealousy, hypervigilance to external danger, and “injustice collecting”. It is shifting one’s unacceptable thoughts, feelings and impulses within oneself onto someone else, such that those same thoughts, feelings,

beliefs and motivations are perceived as being possessed by the other.

Projective identification: The object of projection invokes in that person precisely the thoughts, feelings or behaviours projected. Somatization: The transformation of negative feelings towards others into negative feelings toward self, pain, illness, and anxiety. [edit]Level 3 – Neurotic

These mechanisms are considered neurotic, but fairly common in adults. Such defences have short-term advantages in coping, but can often cause long-term problems in relationships, work and in enjoying life when used as one's primary style of coping with the world. They include:

Displacement: Defense mechanism that shifts sexual or aggressive impulses to a more acceptable or less threatening target; redirecting emotion to a safer outlet; separation of emotion from its real object and redirection of the intense emotion toward someone or something that is less offensive or threatening in order to avoid dealing directly with what is frightening or threatening. For example, a mother may yell at her child because she is angry with her husband. Dissociation: Temporary drastic modification of one's personal identity or character to avoid emotional distress; separation or postponement of a feeling that normally would accompany a situation or thought. Hypochondriasis: An excessive preoccupation or worry about having a serious illness. Intellectualization: A form of isolation; concentrating on the intellectual components of a situation so as to distance oneself from the associated anxiety-provoking emotions; separation of emotion from ideas; thinking about wishes in formal, affectively bland terms and not acting on them; avoiding unacceptable emotions by focusing on the intellectual

aspects (e. g. isolation, rationalization, ritual, undoing, compensation, magical thinking).

Isolation: Separation of feelings from ideas and events, for example, describing a murder with graphic details with no emotional response.

Rationalization (making excuses): Where a person convinces him or herself that no wrong was done and that all is or was all right through faulty and false reasoning. An indicator of this defence mechanism can be seen socially as the formulation of convenient excuses – making excuses. Reaction

formation: Converting unconscious wishes or impulses that are perceived to be dangerous into their opposites; behaviour that is completely the opposite of what one really wants or feels; taking the opposite belief because the true belief causes anxiety. This defence can work effectively for coping in the short term, but will eventually break down. Regression: Temporary reversion of the ego to an earlier stage of development rather than handling unacceptable impulses in a more adult way.

Repression: The process of attempting to repel desires towards pleasurable instincts, caused by a threat of suffering if the desire is satisfied; the desire is moved to the unconscious in the attempt to prevent it from entering consciousness;[20] seemingly unexplainable naivety, memory lapse or lack of awareness of one's own situation and condition; the emotion is conscious, but the idea behind it is absent.[citation needed] Undoing: A person tries to 'undo' an unhealthy, destructive or otherwise threatening thought by acting out the reverse of unacceptable. Involves symbolically nullifying an unacceptable or guilt provoking thought, idea, or feeling by confession or

atonement. Withdrawal: Withdrawal is a more severe form of defence. It entails removing oneself from events, stimuli, interactions, etc. under the fear of being reminded of painful thoughts and feelings. [edit]Level 4 – Mature

These are commonly found among emotionally healthy adults and are considered mature, even though many have their origins in an immature stage of development. They have been adapted through the years in order to optimize success in life and relationships. The use of these defences enhances pleasure and feelings of control. These defences help us to integrate conflicting emotions and thoughts, whilst still remaining effective. Those who use these mechanisms are usually considered virtuous. They include:

Altruism: Constructive service to others that brings pleasure and personal satisfaction. Anticipation: Realistic planning for future discomfort. Humour: Overt expression of ideas and feelings (especially those that are unpleasant to focus on or too terrible to talk about) that gives pleasure to others. The thoughts retain a portion of their innate distress, but they are “skirted round” by witticism, for example Self-deprecation. Identification: The unconscious modelling of one’s self upon another person’s character and behaviour. Introjection: Identifying with some idea or object so deeply that it becomes a part of that person. Sublimation: Transformation of negative emotions or instincts into positive actions, behaviour, or emotion. Thought suppression: The conscious process of pushing thoughts into the preconscious; the conscious decision to delay paying attention to an emotion

or need in order to cope with the present reality; making it possible to later access uncomfortable or distressing emotions whilst accepting them defense mechanism, in psychoanalytic theory, any of a group of mental processes that enables the mind to reach compromise solutions to conflicts that it is unable to resolve. The process is usually unconscious, and the compromise generally involves concealing from oneself internal drives or feelings that threaten to lower self-esteem or provoke anxiety.

The concept derives from the psychoanalytic hypothesis that there are forces in the mind that oppose and battle against each other. The term was first used in Sigmund Freud's paper *The Neuro-Psychoses of Defence* (1894). Some of the major defense mechanisms described by psychoanalysts are the following:

- \* 1. Repression is the withdrawal from consciousness of an unwanted idea, affect, or desire by pushing it down, or repressing it, into the unconscious part of the mind. An example may be found in a case of hysterical amnesia, in which the victim has performed or witnessed some disturbing act and then completely forgotten the act itself and the circumstances surrounding it.
- \* 2. Reaction formation is the fixation in consciousness of an idea, affect, or desire that is opposite to a feared unconscious impulse. A mother who bears an unwanted child, for example, may react to her feelings of guilt for not wanting the child by becoming extremely solicitous and overprotective to convince both the child and herself that she is a good mother.
- \* 3. Projection is a form of defense in which unwanted feelings are displaced onto another person, where they then appear as a threat from the external world.

A common form of projection occurs when an individual, threatened by his own angry feelings, accuses another of harbouring hostile thoughts. \* 4.

Regression is a return to earlier stages of development and abandoned forms of gratification belonging to them, prompted by dangers or conflicts arising at one of the later stages. A young wife, for example, might retreat to the security of her parents' home after her first quarrel with her husband. \*

5. Sublimation is the diversion or deflection of instinctual drives, usually sexual ones, into noninstinctual channels. Psychoanalytic theory holds that the energy invested in sexual impulses can be shifted to the pursuit of more acceptable and even socially valuable achievements, such as artistic or scientific endeavours.

\* 6. Denial is the conscious refusal to perceive that painful facts exist. In denying latent feelings of homosexuality or hostility, or mental defects in one's child, an individual can escape intolerable thoughts, feelings, or events. \* 7. Rationalization is the substitution of a safe and reasonable explanation for the true (but threatening) cause of behaviour.

Psychoanalysts emphasize that the use of a defense mechanism is a normal part of personality function and not in and of itself a sign of psychological disorder. Various psychological disorders, however, can be characterized by an excessive or rigid use of these defenses.