

Ego defense mechanisms | analysis



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Defense mechanisms were first conceptualized by Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, and further developed, by his daughter Anna Freud.

Sigmund Freud described personality as being made up of three components: the id, the ego and the superego.

The id operates solely on the pleasure principle; it is comprised of basic instincts and animalistic drives. The superego is a person's moral compass; it is comprised of the morals and values that are instilled in a person. The id and the superego are always at odds, and the ego balances the desires of both with what reality dictates. When the impulses of the id cannot be satisfied because they go against social and cultural norms, the ego employs different defense mechanisms to avoid being overwhelmed with anxiety (Hansell & Damour, 2008).

Defense mechanisms can be identified in common human behaviour. For example, a mother whose son dies suddenly may refuse to admit that he is gone. This is the defense mechanism called denial. Most defense mechanisms have the capacity to be adaptive or maladaptive depending on the context in which it is used and the duration of its use. In the example above, it may be adaptive for the mother to deny her son's death when she first hears about it so she can have some time to let it sink in. However, once she has had time to adjust to the horrible news, she must admit to herself that it happened in order to move on. If she does not then it becomes a maladaptive defense mechanism. This essay will define the defense mechanisms, give examples for each and examine the different methods of classifying them. It will also explore the research on the association between different disorders and defense mechanisms.

Some of the most common defense mechanism found in the literature are: acting out, affiliation, denial, repression, regression, displacement, identification with the aggressor, projection, sublimation, reaction formation, intellectualization, undoing, idealization, projective identification, splitting, turning against the self, fantasy, dissociation and isolation (Thobaben, 2005); (Kramer, de Roten, Perry, & Despland, 2013); (Vaillant, 1992).

Descriptions and Examples of Defense Mechanisms

Acting out is when someone uses physical action instead of being vulnerable and speaking about his or her emotions. An example of acting out is when a boy hurts other kids at school to avoid dealing with real issues that are going on at home (Thobaben, 2005).

Affiliation is when a person turns to others for support to deal with emotional conflict. Denial is when a person unconsciously denies an event or fact that is true to reality. Repression involves keeping an anxiety-provoking event from consciousness. This can happen to people who have suffered through a traumatic event, the event is kept out of consciousness (Thobaben, 2005).

Regression is when someone returns to an earlier stage of development where they felt more safe and secure. This can be seen when a grown man who is under extreme stress will lie down on the floor and curl up into the fetal position. A person will regress to the stage at which they are fixated. If someone is fixated at the oral stage then they will suck their thumb when they regress (Freud, 2011).

Displacement occurs when someone experiences a build-up of intense emotion in one situation and releases it in another situation (Thobaben, 2005). A common example of this is a businessman who comes home and kicks the dog or yells at his wife because his boss was yelling at him all day.

Identification with the aggressor is not as common as the others, it occurs when someone is abused and begins to act like the abuser (Hansell & Damour, 2008). There are accounts of this happening in the holocaust, where some Jews began to act like their Nazi captors. It is important to note that there is a distinction to be made between identification and imitation. Imitation is a conscious process where an individual tries to do a certain action he sees another do. Identification takes place, usually, at a very early age where the child is unable to differentiate between himself and his parents thus, his unconscious incorporates aspects of his parents into his own personality (Freud & Strachey, 1984). This defense mechanism has been found to be associated with antisocial personality disorder. Later on in life they harm people because they unconsciously want others to feel the same helplessness and fear that they felt as children (Hansell & Damour, 2008).

Projection is when someone unconsciously attributes thoughts and feelings that are deemed unacceptable onto another person (Thobaben, 2005). An example of this is, someone in a relationship who has thoughts of infidelity and unconsciously attributes those thought to his or her partner and then accuses the partner of cheating. This defense mechanism is often used by those suffering from paranoia, either paranoid schizophrenia or paranoid personality disorder. They unconsciously project their own hostile feelings

onto others, which makes them constantly feel like they are being chased (Hansell & Damour, 2008).

Sublimation involves redirecting id impulses into socially acceptable avenues (Thobaben, 2005). For example, a teenager with pent up sexual energy channels it into creating great music. Freud

Reaction formation is when a person deals with unacceptable thought feeling or behaviours by doing the opposite (Thobaben, 2005). This type of defense mechanism is exemplified by priests who molest little boys but then preach that homosexuality is an abomination.

Intellectualization is when someone deals with a highly emotional subject in a very cold and logical fashion (Thobaben, 2005). This can often be seen in clients with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); the traumatic event can be so painful that the only way to speak about it is by speaking about without engaging their emotions.

Undoing is when a person does something in an attempt to undo bad thoughts, feeling or actions (Thobaben, 2005). Undoing is most commonly seen in client's with obsessive compulsive disorder, they have intrusive thoughts that compel them to engage in rituals that are believed to undo any bad things they may have done, felt or thought.

Idealization is when someone unconsciously attributes more positive qualities to someone else than the person possesses (Thobaben, 2005). This is often the case with celebrities who are made out to be larger than life by their fans.

Projective identification is like projection but in this case the person on which the negative attributes are projected, eventually takes on those negative attributes in reality (Thobaben, 2005).

Splitting is where a person sees others as either all good or all bad; this defense is often used by those with borderline personality disorder (Vaillant, 1992).

Turning against the self is described as a distorted form of displacement where the displaced object becomes the self and one's anger is dealt out to the self (Vaillant, 1992). An example of this is when a child is scolded by a parent and runs off and bashes his or her head into the wall repeatedly.

Fantasy is where someone substitutes a real relationship with one that exists only in the imagination. An example Freud gives for this concept, is a man who imagined marrying his doctor's daughter, when in reality he had stopped being with women altogether (Vaillant, 1992).

Dissociation, the first defense mechanism identified by Freud, involves detaching from reality for a period of time (Vaillant, 1992). This defense is often used by clients with a history of abuse, to avoid being overwhelmed by the pain from the abuse, the mind of the victim would dissociate during the act.

Isolation is where the bonds between negative thoughts and feelings are broken so that thinking of one does not trigger the thought and feelings of others; this is achieved using a pause in thought or a ritual to break the chain of thought (Vaillant, 1992).

Classification of Defense Mechanisms

The American Psychological Association classifies these defense mechanisms into seven categories, from high adaptive level to defensive dysregulation. The first level represents the defense mechanisms that result in optimal defensive functioning and overall feelings of well-being. Affiliation and sublimation are two examples from this level. The bottom level represents the defense mechanisms that result in the highest amount of dissociation from reality and dysfunctional coping strategies. This level includes delusional projection and psychotic denial both of which are completely dysfunctional coping mechanisms (Thobaben, 2005).

Two other defense levels in between the two described above are mental inhibition and disavowal. The mental inhibition level, as its name indicates, includes the defense mechanisms that help a person keep thoughts, memories and feelings outside of consciousness. Some examples of defense mechanisms at this level are: intellectualization, dissociation, displacement, repression, reaction formation, and undoing. The disavowal level includes defense mechanisms that keep unacceptable stressors or impulses outside of awareness with or without attributing them to someone else. A couple of examples of defense mechanisms on this level are: denial and projection (Vaillant, 2000)

Vaillant (1977) describes four levels for classifying defense mechanisms. The first category he describes is made up of two pathological defenses; psychotic denial and delusional projection. There are very few recorded cases of delusional projection, and only of psychotic denial. In both cases

these defense mechanisms completely detach the person from reality. The next level up is comprised of immature defenses. These mechanisms are common in children and adolescents as well as adults suffering from depression and addiction. These include, projection fantasy, acting out, turning against the self, and hypochondriasis. These defenses do reduce anxiety for the user of these mechanisms but everybody else knows that they are inappropriate and extremely inconvenient. The user will never understand that there is a problem. Level three is the neurotic defenses category, which includes intellectualization, repression, reaction formation, displacement and dissociation. These defense mechanisms underlie neuroses but are also found in average people from childhood until old age. While the immature defense could be used to deal with interpersonal conflict as well as intrapersonal conflict, this level only deals with intra personal conflict. Unlike immature defenses where the user will not admit to having a problem neurotic defense users will seek out help. Level four is the mature defenses; these are sublimation, anticipation, humor, altruism and suppression. These can be thought of as adaptive versions of the immature defenses. These defense mechanisms cannot be consciously forced they need to be organic.

Defense Mechanisms Associated with Disorders

In a study by Perry, Presniak and Olson (2013), they explored which defense mechanisms were associated with schizotypal, borderline, antisocial and narcissistic personality disorder. They found that in schizotypal personality disorder the most consistent and predominant defense mechanisms employed were: projection, devaluation, splitting of others-images, splitting

<https://assignbuster.com/ego-defense-mechanisms-analysis/>

of self-images and denial. Borderline personality disorder had the strongest association with defense mechanisms out of all the personality disorders; splitting and repression were very prominent in this disorder. In antisocial personality disorder denial about the self and grandiosity were prevalent, they deny the effect their actions have on others and rationalize their criminal behaviour and violence. Narcissistic personality disorder, some believe, is a less aggressive version of antisocial personality disorder. It is not so much of a surprise that the same defense mechanisms that are prevalent in antisocial personality disorder are the same as in narcissistic personality disorder.

In another study Olson, Presniak and MacGregor sought out to see if defense mechanism could assist in differentiating between depression and anxiety. They found that overall depression was related to immature defenses, while anxiety was associated with neurotic mechanisms. Specifically depression was associated with: acting out, turning against the self, isolation and projection. Anxiety was associated with: idealization, reaction formation and undoing.

Panic disorder is associated with immature and neurotic defense mechanisms as, Kipper et al. (2004) found in their study on Brazilians suffering from panic disorder. These findings show that people with panic disorder have coping mechanisms that are sub-par compared to the norm in Brazil. There were no differences in mature defences between those with panic disorder and the control group. This study found that specifically somatization, displacement, undoing, idealization, projection, and

devaluation were the immature and neurotic defenses that were used more often by participants with panic disorder.

In conclusion, defense mechanisms are processes that are largely unconscious, which allow the mind to cope with unwanted id impulses. They achieve this by either directly blocking the animalistic drives or reducing them. Some defense mechanisms are inherently maladaptive and some are inherently adaptive and can be either or depending on the context and the duration when it is used. The majority of the most common defense mechanisms were defined and examples were given as an illustration for each. A couple of systems of classification were presented and the associations between mental disorders and defense mechanisms were provided. Defense mechanisms can be an integral part of understanding a client to help him or her make their way on the road to recovery.