**DEFENSE MECHANISMS**

**WHAT ARE THEY AND HOW DO THEY HELP US COPE**

Defense mechanisms are psychological strategies that are unconsciously used to protect a person from anxiety arising from unacceptable thoughts or feelings. Defense mechanisms are a way for the mind to cope with stress or difficult feelings. They are unconscious mechanisms, which means that a person uses them without realizing it.

Defense mechanisms can be positive ways to deal with stress. Other times, they can be unhelpful ways to avoid difficult emotions or excuse unhealthy or antisocial behavior. Recognizing defense mechanisms can help a person understand their own behavior.

*The psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud developed the idea of defense mechanisms as a way to understand human behavior. Freud proposed that people use defense mechanisms unconsciously, as a way to avoid uncomfortable feelings and emotions.*

1. Denial

This involves a person not recognizing the reality of a stressful situation in order to protect themselves from overwhelming fear or anxiety. Denial can be helpful in situations that are beyond a person’s control. For example, staying optimistic can benefit a person as they try to overcome a serious illness.

On the other hand, denial can stop a person from dealing with situations that require their attention. *For example, it may be easier to ignore the negative effects of excessive drinking than it is to cut down on alcohol.*

1. Distortion

Distortion involves a person believing something to be true when it is not.

In some cases, distortion can protect a person from the uncomfortable reality of a situation. For example, a person may believe that they failed a test because of difficult questions, not because they did not prepare fully. In other cases, distortion can convince a person that a situation is worse than it actually is.

*For example, a person may only see the negative in a situation and ignore the positive.*

Distorted thinking is a common feature of anxiety and depression. It is also common among people with the following disorders:

* anorexia nervosa
* bulimia nervosa
* body dysmorphic disorder (BDD)

People with the above conditions often have a distorted perception of their own body image.

1. Projection

Projection involves a person accusing someone else of having thoughts or feelings that they themselves are having. It can be a way of avoiding unwanted thoughts or avoiding responsibility for a particular behavior.

*For example, a person who realizes that they are being aggressive during an argument may accuse the other person of aggression.* This deflects criticism away from themselves and onto the other person.

Projection can be harmful, as it may stop someone from accepting and taking responsibility for their own thoughts or behaviors.

1. Dissociation

Dissociation involves feeling disconnected from a stressful or traumatic event — or feeling that the event is not really happening. It is a way to block out mental trauma and protect the mind from experiencing too much stress.

Sometimes, dissociation leaves a person unable to remember traumatic events in their past.

*A person who dissociates, often in childhood or adolescence, may go on to develop a dissociative disorder.* This is a particularly unhealthy form of dissociation, in which a person dissociates involuntarily and routinely.

1. Repression

Repression involves avoiding thinking about something to block out painful or uncomfortable feelings, emotions, and impulses. Repression is an unconscious process — a person is unaware that they are doing it.

A person may unconsciously repress a painful or difficult memory, but the memory remains. One aim of psychotherapy is to encourage a person to express repressed thoughts in order to deal with them in a more helpful way.

Repression could help explain the root of certain phobias. *For example, some unexplained phobias may stem from traumatic childhood experiences that the person has since repressed.*

Suppression is similar to repression, but suppression is a conscious process, it involves deliberately avoiding certain thoughts or memories and actively trying to forget them.

1. Reaction formation

Reaction formation involves acting in a way that contradicts unacceptable or anxiety-provoking thoughts or feelings as they arise. It is a way of protecting the mind from uncomfortable thoughts or desires.

*For example, a person may experience normal feelings of sadness or disappointment after a relationship breaks down.* If they feel that these emotions are unacceptable, they may publicly act as if they are happy or unconcerned.

Reaction formation can be a pattern of ongoing behavior. For example, a person who feels that expressing anger or frustration toward a parent is unacceptable may never react negatively to anything that their parent says or does, even when this would be a normal response.

1. Displacement

Displacement involves a person feeling that they cannot express a negative emotion toward a particular person, so they direct those negative emotions toward someone else.

*For example, a person who feels that their boss has been unfair may also fear being fired if they complain or express anger — and as a result, they may later shout at a family member.*

Displacement can have negative consequences for an individual and the people around them.

1. Intellectualization

Intellectualization involves a person using reason and logic to avoid uncomfortable or anxiety-provoking emotions.

Intellectualization can be a useful way of explaining and understanding negative events*. For example, if person A is rude to person B, person B may think about the possible reasons for person A’s behavior.* They may rationalize that person A was having a stressful day.

However, intellectualization can cause people to downplay the importance of their own feelings and focus instead on treating all difficult situations as problems that need to be solved. This can stop a person from learning how to deal with their own difficult emotions.

1. Rationalization

Some people may attempt to explain undesirable behaviors with their own set of “facts.” This allows you to feel comfortable with the choice you made, even if you know on another level it’s not right.

*For example, someone who didn’t get a promotion at work might say they didn’t want the promotion anyways.*

1. Sublimation

This type of defense mechanism is considered a mature, positive strategy. That’s because people who rely on it choose to redirect strong emotions or feelings into an object or activity that is appropriate and safe.

*For example, instead of lashing out at your coworkers during a stressful shift, you choose to channel your frustration into a kickboxing class.* You could also funnel or redirect the feelings into music, art, or sports.