

EGO DEFENSE MECHANISMS

Defense mechanisms are patterns of thinking that we engage in to provide ourselves psychological protection. Healthy defense mechanisms help us cope with trauma, stress, and adversity. However, if we use defense mechanisms to avoid feelings that must be fully experienced, to avoid unpleasant truth and reality, or to avoid difficult work, responsibility or accountability, then this process is unhealthy. We will be more successful in our lives as we understand how we use these unhealthy defenses and learn to recognize them in ourselves.

Ego Defense Mechanisms

Denial We protect ourselves from some unpleasant reality by simply refusing to face or accept it.

Example: It is obvious that an alcohol addiction is creating serious problems in my life, but I deny it because I don't want to give up the perceived benefits that I get from drinking.

Repression This is essentially forgetting, but it is not as if the information is disposed of permanently; rather, the information is tucked away into the subconscious and has the potential to resurface violently at any moment. The forgetting is used for defense as it protects the individual from consciously dealing with painful circumstances and events.

Example: I experienced a traumatic event in my childhood which I was unprepared to cope with at the time, so I repressed the memory to protect myself. Even though I am older now, and can adequately cope with this I keep it repressed to avoid facing it.

Suppression This is a conscious process in which we choose to immediately suppress a thought or feeling in order to avoid it.

Example: I have some legitimate angry feelings toward my brother that should be expressed but every time I feel the anger I suppress it in order to avoid a confrontation.

Rationalization We try to convince ourselves and others with reasonable-sounding arguments that an unacceptable thought, attitude, behavior, etc., is acceptable. By so doing we avoid responsibility and accountability.

Example: A parent beats his child and avoids feelings of guilt and wrongdoing by convincing himself that it is for the child's own good.

Projection We deny and avoid accountability for our own undesired feelings and inappropriate behaviors by attributing them to someone else.

Example: An angry husband accuses his wife of hostility towards him when the truth is that he is the one feeling hostility towards her.

Displacement Discharging pent up feelings onto less threatening objects.

Example: A teen girl's anger at her boyfriend, which she is afraid to express to him, may be displaced later in an angry outburst towards her little brother.

Reaction Formation This is turning a feeling into its opposite. To ward off an anxiety-causing and unacceptable impulse, one may replace it with its over-emphasized opposite.

Example: The young boy who hates his older brother for his accomplishments, praise and attention may transform this hatred into aggressive love and praise. This makes his behavior socially acceptable but the underlying hatred remains.

Regression The method of reverting back to a behavior that was comforting, enjoyable or protective in youth but was less functional and adaptive than more mature behaviors currently available to the individual. Often, the experience of significant stress can cause one to revert back to more childish coping strategies rather than face the more difficult task of responsible problem solving.

Fantasy This is a normal and acceptable behavior, and can be positive in many ways, such as providing a motivation to achieve. However, one must realize that fantasy and reality are two separate entities, and that fantasizing will neither resolve conflict nor bring about self-improvement. One must actively pursue the goals of fantasies in order for them to become reality. Fantasy becomes unhealthy when it is used to avoid important real experience and development.

Intellectualization The use of a strictly cognitive approach to life's experiences without the accompanying emotions which may be perceived as threatening, unpleasant, weak, etc.

Example: An individual who, when told that she has a life threatening disease, focuses exclusively on the statistical percentages of recovery and is unable to cope with her fears and sadness.

Identification Increasing one's feeling of worth by identifying one's self with a person, group, or institution perceived as desirable. We lose our own identity in the process, and fuse our identity with the other person or entity.

Example: A teen boy, feeling like he doesn't belong anywhere and unsure of his worth and identity, joins a gang. The gang accepts him and gives him a sense of power, meaning and belonging, but requires him to abide by a code of behavior that diminishes his freedom and safety.

Compensation A form of denial in which one covers up weakness and avoids change and accountability by emphasizing only desirable traits or making up for frustrations in one area by over-gratification in another area.

Example: A student struggles with interest, motivation and aptitude in academics but is a good athlete and so focuses an inordinate amount of time and effort on sports and thereby neglects academic work.

Acting Out Reducing anxiety aroused by forbidden desires by permitting oneself to act them out. Acting out allows one to be impulsive, irresponsible and out of control. Rather than find

healthy, constructive and socially acceptable means to channel frustration and aggressive feelings one acts out by “going off” and abusing oneself and/or other people and property. Example: A girl is betrayed by a close friend. She acts out by cutting herself to express the emotional pain that she feels. A boy is told by his father that he can no longer see a certain friend. He acts out his anger and sadness by kicking a hole in the wall.

THINKING ERRORS

Thinking errors are patterns of thinking which are twisted, distorted and erroneous. They are a lot like ego defenses in that they often have as their root an attempt to avoid or escape unwanted or unpleasant feelings, effort, responsibility or accountability for past behaviors. Sometimes thinking errors are simply the result of inexperience, disturbed development, or lack of wisdom and maturity. As with unhealthy ego defense mechanisms, it is important to recognize and eliminate thinking errors in order to have good relationships and good personal functioning.

Thinking Errors:

Blaming A rationalization in which something or someone else is made to appear responsible for your behavior or problem. Also called “externalization”.

Example: I deny responsibility for my anger problem and avoid responsibility for getting it under control by saying to myself, “It’s not my fault. Everyone in my family is rude and inconsiderate to me. How else can I act?”

Redefining This is shifting the focus off an issue to avoid solving a problem or being accountable.

Example: A parent confronts a daughter about her failure to take responsibility for completing daily chores. Rather than admitting that this is indeed a problem, discussing a solution and committing to change, the daughter shifts the focus to complain that she has too much to do, doesn’t have time for everything she wants to do, etc. By shifting the focus to her frustration with time she avoids dealing with her failure on the chores.

Superoptimism Believing that things are a certain way or will be a certain way, just because you believe they will be. This permits you to function according to what you want rather than according to the facts of the situation. This is a form of both denial and fantasy, sometimes called “magical thinking”. Superoptimism allows us to go ahead with things without adequately considering risk, consequences, need for planning and preparation and necessary work and sacrifice.

Example: I believe that I can run my own business and assume that I can figure things out as I go along so I rush headlong into it without checking out the market for my product, looking at competition, projecting costs, etc.

Assuming It is believing that you know what others feel, think or act without checking out the facts, and then guiding your actions by these beliefs as if they were true. Assuming is used as an excuse not to talk with others, to act rashly or passively because you “know” what the other person is going to do or how they are going to react.

Example: A teen does not invite one of her friends out on a group activity, assuming that the friend would not be interested because she was with her boyfriend all day and never spoke to her once.

I'm Unique This is believing that you are unique and so special that the rules for others do not apply to you. It allows you to shut others out and say you do not need any help. It allows you to say that no one can understand you and that no one can tell you what to do.