

Coping and Defense Mechanisms

Level 1 - Primitive Defense Mechanisms

- **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.
- **Delusional Projection**: Grossly frank delusions about external reality, usually of a persecutory nature.

Level 2 - Immature Defense Mechanisms

- **Fantasy**: Tendency to retreat into fantasy in order to resolve inner and outer conflicts.
- **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.
- **Hypochondriasis**: The transformation of negative feelings towards others into negative feelings toward self, pain, illness, and anxiety.
- **Passive aggression**: Aggression towards others expressed indirectly or passively.
- **Acting out**: Direct expression of an unconscious wish or impulse without conscious awareness of the emotion that drives that expressive behavior.
- **Idealization**: Subconsciously choosing to perceive another individual as having more positive qualities than he or she may actually have.

Level 3 Neurotic Defense Mechanisms

- **Displacement**: Defence 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.

- **Isolation**: Separation of feelings from ideas and events, for example, describing a murder with graphic details with no emotional response.
- **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).
- **Reaction Formation**: Converting unconscious wishes or impulses that are perceived to be dangerous into their opposites; behavior 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.
- **Repression**: Process of pulling thoughts into the unconscious and preventing painful or dangerous thoughts from entering consciousness; 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.
- **Regression**: Temporary reversion of the ego to an earlier stage of development rather than handling unacceptable impulses in a more adult way.

Level 4 Mature Defence Mechanisms

- **Altruism**: Constructive service to others that brings pleasure and personal satisfaction
- **Anticipation**: Realistic planning for future discomfort
- **Humor**: 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. Humor, which explores the absurdity inherent in any event, enables someone to "call a spade a spade", while "wit" is a form of displacement (see above under Category 3). Wit refers to the serious or distressing in a humorous way, rather than disarming it; the thoughts remain distressing, but they are "skirted round" by the witticism.
- **Identification**: The unconscious modeling of one's self upon another person's character and behavior
- **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, behavior, or emotion.
- **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; able to later access uncomfortable or distressing emotions and accept them.

Freud, A. (1937). *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*. London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis.

Vaillant, George E. (1977). *Adaptation to Life*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Co