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Person GrowthContributing Sex & Relationships EditorBy Kelly GonsalvesPh.D., ABPPBoard-certified clinical psychologist with a background in neuroscience. She is also the Director of Clinical Training at Bay Path University, and an associate professor in Graduate Psychology.Sometimes when life gets hard, our minds do a funny thing. Instead of facing the challenge head-on, we subconsciously twist our internal story of what's happening into something different. Something that's more palatable, or something that feels more within our control.In psychology, these mental gymnastics are known as defense mechanisms.What are defense mechanisms? Defense mechanisms are unconscious behaviors or psychological strategies people use to avoid experiencing anxiety, discomfort, or threats to the ego. Common examples of defense mechanisms include denial, projection, rationalization, and suppression, among many others.People are typically not aware when they're using these self-protective methods, according to couples' therapist Alicia Muñoz, LPC. "Because they're survival adaptations, it would be misguided to say defense mechanisms are bad, wrong, or unhealthy," she adds. "At the same time, they tend to block our awareness of our true underlying experiences, create tension in our bodies, and make it harder for us to be truly intimate and vulnerable with others."The concept of defense mechanisms stems from Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory and was developed in detail by his daughter Anna Freud, who in 1937 published her book *The Ego and the Defense Mechanisms*. Freud's work continues to be an important part of how many psychologists and mental health professionals understand how to best support people who work with the goal being to increase awareness and healthier ways of coping with stressful situations.The psychology behind defense mechanisms starts with Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, which holds that an individual's personality has three components: the id, the ego, and the superego. The id is the primal part of ourselves that seeks to fulfill our most basic desires and impulses, whereas the superego is the part of ourselves concerned with upholding morality and social norms. The ego is the realistic part of ourselves that attempts to satisfy, moderate, and balance the needs of the id, the superego, and reality.In the Freudian psychological framework, defense mechanisms are actually ego defenses—methods used by the ego to protect against the anxiety of dealing with the competing, often incompatible demands of the id and the superego. When situations arise where the id, superego, and reality are in conflict with one another, the ego attempts to protect itself from the resulting discomfort by using these defense mechanisms.As of 2015 study2 puts it, defense mechanisms are used "in order to maintain mental homeostasis and protect the conscious mind from the effects of such conflicts." In essence, the subconscious mind attempts to protect the conscious mind from being aware of the uncomfortable feelings so the individual can continue to move through the world "normally" with as little disruption as possible.There are different types of defense mechanisms, ranging from primitive and neurotic to mature and adaptive. The healthier end of the spectrum might be more accurately described as positive coping strategies, whereas the other end of the spectrum represents emotional dysregulation, dysfunctional self-protective behaviors, and high internal conflict. (The latter is more typically what people are referring to when they use the term "defense mechanism.")Here are some examples of defense mechanisms and how they're used in action:Projection is taking a negative quality about yourself and attributing it to someone else. For example, a person who is a spendthrift constantly accusing their partner of being irresponsible with money, or a person who has insecurities about their body projecting that onto others by making critical comments about their bodies."Projection is one of those things that can make you feel crazy," relationship counselor Margaret Paul, Ph.D., writes for mbg. She notes that it can also happen in parent-child relationships: "Maybe your parents called you selfish, irresponsible, or crazy or told you to stop being angry when they were the ones being selfish, irresponsible, off-kilter, or getting angry."Displacement is another way of redirecting your feelings away from the correct target. In this case, a person transfers their emotional reaction from one thing to another, such as when a person is having an ongoing conflict at home and takes out their frustrations on their coworkers, or vice versa.Someone is in denial when they refuse to accept reality or acknowledge the facts of a situation, such as when a person refuses to acknowledge their partner is cheating on them despite catching them in the act, or when a woman in a toxic relationship continues to act like there's nothing wrong with how her partner treats her.Repression is a defense mechanism wherein the subconscious mind blocks out unpleasant feelings, events, or memories, such as when a trauma survivor cannot remember the actual details of what happened to them despite the fact that they were conscious when it was occurring. They have repressed those memories in order to cope with the trauma. (That said, sometimes certain triggers can cause the repressed memory to resurface, which can sometimes be therapeutic if done in a safe setting with a therapist but potentially retraumatizing in other contexts.)Suppression is similar to repression, except that it's done more consciously. A person may choose to suppress difficult memories, ideas, or feelings by trying to push these thoughts out of their mind.According to psychotherapist Emily Roberts, LPC, one of the most common ways this defense mechanism gets deployed is when people try to suppress their emotions to avoid having to deal with them. But it tends to be a double-edged sword: "We've learned how to push discomfort away, but even when we do, it always stays—and grows," she writes at mbg. "When we avoid our emotions, we're actually making them stronger. This can create many malaises in the body and in the mind, causing a myriad of health issues."Regression is a defense mechanism wherein a person will revert to an earlier developmental stage when faced with certain types of stressful situations, such as a person who starts sulking childishly when an adult reenacts teenage behavior around their controlling parents."These dynamics may feel comfortable, even if in reality they're anything but," social psychologist Jennifer Goldman-Wetzler, Ph.D., recently told mbg. "You can slide back into these very familiar patterns of interaction without even realizing it."Rationalization can take many forms, but it refers to when we try to justify unacceptable behavior using logic or reason rather than acknowledging the true, emotional, and potentially negative truths behind why we did what we did. For example, a guy who cheated on his partner might try to justify his actions by saying he was drunk so it "shouldn't count," or he might point to the fact that he and his partner don't have sex that regularly to justify why he sought sex elsewhere behind her back.Intellectualization is a defense mechanism wherein you overly focus on the intellectual aspects of an issue to avoid dealing with the emotional parts of it. "A cognitive defense mechanism might be talking intellectually about the cycle of life and death, how nobody escapes it, and how everybody grows old and dies when someone has just asked you how you feel about someone you love passing away," says Muñoz.Reaction formation refers to when a person replaces their initial reaction toward a situation with the opposite feelings or behavior, in an attempt to hide how they really feel. For example, someone might be overly nice to someone who they secretly dislike, or a person might laugh when they're uncomfortable or breaking down inside.Or take the example of a person with a superiority complex: "Superiority complexes usually are defense mechanisms that come from deep personal insecurities, shame, and feelings of being inadequate in some way," licensed mental health counselor Hailey Shafir, M.Ed., LCMHCs, LCAS, CCS, previously told mbg. Because shame is such a distressing and uncomfortable emotion, a person may use these feelings from others, deny them in themselves, and avoid having to experience them."Another example may be stonewalling. Rather than acknowledging how activated and upset they are, a person may shut down in conflict, become noncommittal, or sublimate the underlying feelings into something more socially acceptable, such as a person who is angry about a situation but instead of expressing their anger, they fixate on the details of the situation."Sublimation is a classic example of someone using humor as a way to deflect from his anxiety, insecurity, or general day-to-day irritability, but it's a very basic defense mechanism."To avoid naming or acknowledging a negative emotion, a person may instead "act them out," such as a person who starts yelling and screaming during an argument instead of directly saying that they're angry or upset. Another example might be a person who resorts to impulsive, reckless, or otherwise problematic behaviors to distract themselves from feeling their difficult emotions.A person may choose to avoid people, places, or experiences that are associated with negative feelings as a way to avoid having to deal with them head-on. For example, a person with abandonment issues might avoid relationships completely so they don't need to deal with the fear or sadness of getting abandoned. This is common behavior among those with an avoidant attachment style.Conversion is actually a psychosomatic defense mechanism, wherein a person develops physical conditions or sensory issues to cope with emotional distress. An example might be someone who witnesses a tragedy but failed to say something to stop it from happening in the moment; unable to cope with the guilt, the person develops a physical inability to speak at all. This response is also known as conversion disorder, and it appears in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, though research on it is still ongoing.Identification, also known as introjection, is when a person unconsciously adopts or reproduces the feelings or behavior they see in other people. "It occurs as a normal part of development, such as a child taking on parental values and attitudes," licensed psychoanalyst Jordan Dann, MFA, LL.M., CIRI, writes at mbg. "However, it can also be a defense mechanism, and in many instances, introjection creates unconscious behavior, rigidity, anxiety, fixedness, and suffering."A person may focus on a specific area of their life, such as their wealth, in order to avoid dealing with other areas of their life that are causing them stress or discomfort. For example, a woman might focus on describing the events and logistics of her divorce whenever she talks about it without ever bringing up how it felt for her emotionally.Altruism can sometimes be used as a defense mechanism, and it can even be a healthy coping strategy in some situations. For example, a person who is depressed might feel it rewarding to support other people living with depression, and it might even personally help that person with their own mental health.As another example of a defense mechanism on the healthier side of the spectrum, a person who is headed into a potentially stressful situation might try to think ahead and anticipate what emotional troubles they might encounter, so that they can plan how to deal with them in the moment. As long as this is done without rumination—i.e., overthinking about what's to come—this can be a healthy type of coping mechanism.Why people use defense mechanisms. People use defense mechanisms to protect themselves from unwanted or difficult feelings, says Muñoz, though especially with the less healthy methods, it's usually not a conscious decision. "We're mostly unaware that we're using defense mechanisms," she explains. "They tend to be unconscious, at least until we put in the effort to become more aware of them."According to Muñoz, most of our defense mechanisms are usually learned in childhood. "Defense mechanisms are a huge part of what has helped us survive difficult or overwhelming physical, emotional, and psychological experiences as we've moved through childhood and adolescence into adulthood," she explains.Despite helping us move through difficult experiences in the past, Muñoz notes that many of our defense mechanisms can contribute to relationship issues, emotional issues, and even physical issues, wherein we may be experiencing symptoms of anxiety or depression. She says that the operation of our defense mechanisms can be as simple as creating a barrier between ourselves and the world around us, disconnecting us from our feelings, or making it difficult to understand ourselves and our feelings, the easier it will be to know what we need to do to truly and fully care for ourselves. This ad is displayed using third party content and we do not control its accessibility features. Defense mechanisms are mental, emotional, or physical actions that protect us from feeling or expressing unwanted feelings. These defenses may be healthy and adaptive but also maladaptive at times. If they lead to excessive denial, repression, projection, etc., it's important to know what your defense mechanisms are and how they affect you in order to make the best decisions.What Are Defense Mechanisms?Defense mechanisms are psychological strategies that we use to protect ourselves from anxiety-provoking thoughts, feelings, or memories. They can be very helpful in minimizing distress. But they can also get in the way of our relationships and interfere with our ability to achieve our goals. Some common defense mechanisms include denial, repression, projection, and dissociation.Defense mechanisms are generally classified as "healthy" or "unhealthy" depending on whether they meet the four following criteria:Whether they help to avoid conflict and shameWhether they help to achieve goalsHow much reality they distortThe extent to which they damage interpersonal relationships and hinder psychological growthSome Common Defense MechanismsThere are many different types of defense mechanisms, but some of the most common ones are denial, rationalization, and projection. Denial is when you refuse to believe a fact even though the evidence is staring you in the face. Rationalization is when you try to explain away unacceptable behavior or thoughts. And projection is when you attribute your own unacceptable thoughts, feelings, or impulses to other people. Some other types of defense mechanisms are Displacement, Reaction formation, Repression/suppression, Undoing, Identification with the aggressor, Passive-aggressive behavior, Self-handicapping, Intellectualization, Sublimation, Defense mechanisms are a way for us to protect ourselves from uncomfortable feelings, but they can also be used in ways that are harmful to our relationships and our mental health. A healthy defense mechanism is one that allows you to protect yourself without causing harm to your relationships with others. It is based on reality, and it helps you to cope with difficult situations in a healthy way. One example of a healthy defense mechanism is displacement. It is when you redirect your feelings or impulses onto someone or something else. For example, if you are angry at your boss but can't express those feelings because it would be inappropriate, you might take out your anger on your partner instead. An example of a healthy defense mechanism might be that of humor. When you are feeling attacked by someone, laughing at their attempt to hurt you can help you avoid conflict and shame. It may also elevate your status over the person who has attacked you. However, it does not distort reality very much, nor does it damage interpersonal relationships. An example of an unhealthy defense mechanism might be that of self-handicapping, where you purposely sabotage your efforts so that you can't fail or succeed. Unhealthy Defense MechanismsThere are many common unhealthy defense mechanisms and below we will briefly discuss some of them:ProjectionWhen people are projecting, they are attributing their own unacceptable thoughts, feelings, or impulses to other people. For example, someone who is angry at his mother might accuse her of being an alcoholic without any evidence for this claim.Projection becomes unhealthy when you blame the wrong person. Projection can also cause us to have unrealistic expectations. Because we perceive other people to be more evil or selfish than they actually are. DenialWhen you use denial, you refuse to believe a fact even though the evidence is staring you in the face. One example might be someone who becomes angry with a friend for canceling plans but does not admit that she was hurt by her friend's change of plans. This is different from lying because, in order to lie, you have to know the truth about what happened. Denial can become unhealthy when you are in denial for too long. Or if you deny issues that have to do with serious problems in relationships—romantic, family, friendship, etc.—in order to avoid dealing with them. Denial can also be used to avoid dealing with the consequences of one's actions. Another type of defense mechanism is rationalization, which involves explaining away unacceptable behavior or thoughts. For example, someone might have gotten into a big fight right before going to a dinner party. So they go even though they haven't patched things up with their friend yet. They might tell themselves that the friend will probably not even notice if they don't say anything to him all night. Rather than admit that they are having fun with their friends and enjoying the dinner party, rationalization is mostly associated with justifications for our own behavior or actions such as blaming external factors for mistakes. But it can also involve justifying the behavior or actions of others. For example, we might tell ourselves that our friends would not be acting like they were if they did not have good intentions. Even though it is clear to us that their rude behavior could harm someone else. Projection, denial, and rationalization are three very common types of unhealthy defense mechanisms. The next time you find yourself feeling uncomfortable about your own thoughts or behaviors, take a step back and see if you can identify the underlying reason for your feelings. Are you projecting? Denying? Making excuses for yourself or someone else? These are all warning signs that your defense mechanisms are becoming unhealthy. How To Deal With Harmful Defense MechanismsIf you find that you are using defense mechanisms that are harmful, such as denial, rationalization, or projection, there are a few things you can do to deal with them. First, it's important to be aware of what you're doing and why. Once you have identified the defense mechanism you are using, you might want to make a concerted effort to stop. You can also try talking to someone, like a family member or friend, about the problem. Sometimes, it's hard to break the habit of using defense mechanisms, so it may be helpful for you to talk to your therapist. You can also try to work on your self-esteem and self-worth. If you are using defense mechanisms to avoid dealing with your problems, it might be helpful for you to talk about the subject with someone else. The next time somebody close to you calls you out on something or confronts you about how your behavior is affecting them, try being honest with them rather than getting defensive. A good thing to do would be to identify your defense mechanism and explain why it's beneficial for you in this situation. As long as the other person has opened up with you about their feelings, it should not be hard for you to do likewise. Talking To A TherapistAnother option that may help if high levels of stress have led you to use unhealthy defense mechanisms is talking to a therapist. They can let you know what type of defense mechanisms are common for people in your situation. If you're not sure where to start, try checking out online reviews or asking around to see if anybody you know has had a good experience with a certain therapist. Having An Open Relationship With OthersWhen it comes down to it, the best way to deal with your defenses is open and honest communication with people who are close to you. This reduces stress by letting out feelings that might otherwise build up inside you without getting any release whatsoever. When somebody close tells you what's going on inside their head, don't be afraid to do likewise! You'll find that being open and honest can strengthen relationships rather than tear them apart. I think that the best defense mechanism is to be open and honest with people. I think that if you can share what's going on inside of your head with somebody, you're less likely to subject yourself to unhealthy amounts of stress in order to keep it bottled up. It may be helpful for you to talk to your therapist about how you can allow yourself to be more open in the future. I think that if you can share what's going on inside of your head with somebody, you're less likely to subject yourself to unhealthy amounts of stress in order to keep it bottled up. It may be helpful for you to talk to your therapist about how you can allow yourself to be more open in the future. I think that if you can share what's going on inside of your head with somebody, you're less likely to subject yourself to unhealthy amounts of stress in order to keep it bottled up. It may be helpful for you to talk to your therapist about how you can allow yourself to be more open in the future. 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are not aware of what they are doing. History of Defense Mechanisms The concept of defense mechanisms emerged in the early 20th century as a result of Freud’s groundbreaking work on psychoanalysis. Freud proposed that defense mechanisms were strategies employed by the unconscious mind to guard against painful and anxiety-inducing thoughts and feelings. His work laid the foundation for further research and exploration into the realm of defense mechanisms, leading to a comprehensive understanding of how individuals protect their psyches from emotional turmoil. Learning defense mechanisms has become an integral component of psychotherapy. Some of the major defense mechanisms that are widely used are the following: Defense MechanismDefinitionExampleDisplacementRedirection of negative urges or feelings from an original object to a safer or neutral substitute. The man who is angry with his boss and returns home and becomes angry instead with his wife or children.DenialRefusal to admit to a painful reality, which is treated as if it does not exist.The woman who miscarries denies that she has lost the baby and continues to wear maternity clothes.IntellectualizationUse of excessive reasoning rather than reacting or changing.A woman attending Alcoholics Anonymous meeting reports that she is a nurse and has conducted many 12-step sessions.IntrojectionEngulfment or incorporation of specific traits, behaviors or qualities into self or ego structure.A depressed man who incorporates the negative feelings and hatred of his estranged wife, who recently filed for divorce.ProjectionBlame of other’s or things for one’s own feelings or thoughts.The client experiencing paranoia blames others for disliking him.RationalizationAn effort to replace or justify acceptable reasons for feelings, beliefs, thoughts, or behaviors for real ones.A woman who overextended credit cards rationalizes that she can use er savings to pay for a new dress she recently purchased.Reaction formationRepression of painful or offensive attitudes or traits with unconscious opposite ones.The college student who feels angry and hostile toward her professor is overtly friendly and agreeable in class.RegressionRetreat to an earlier developmental stage.The 3-year old child who begins wetting his pants after the birth of a new sibling.RepressionUnconscious, purposeful forgetting of painful or dangerous thoughts (the most basic defense mechanism).The married woman who expresses hostility toward a male co-worker to avoid dealing with her sexual attraction to him.SublimationNormal form of dealing with undesirable feelings or thoughts by keeping them in an acceptable context.The woman who is unable to bear children begins working in a preschool.SuppressionConscious and deliberate forgetfulness of painful or undesirable thoughts and ideas.A rape victim attempts to forget the incident and fails to report it to the proper authorities.Facebook/EmailPrint/Buffer/Pinterest/Share Anna Freud defined defense mechanisms as “unconscious resources used by the ego” to decrease internal stress ultimately. Patients often devise these unconscious mechanisms to decrease conflict within themselves, specifically between the superego and id. Psychodynamic therapy is used by clinicians to help orient patients to their own unconscious processes. By recognizing and identifying these processes, patients improve their self-awareness and gain a new understanding of their own behaviors. This activity defines major defense mechanisms to increase clinician’s understanding of their patients during patient encounters and the role of the interprofessional team in the care of these patients. Objectives: Identify and define the common psychological defense mechanisms.Describe the goal of psychodynamic therapy in relation to defense mechanisms.Review the clinical significance of defense mechanisms in relation to psychodynamic therapy.Outline interprofessional team strategies for improving coordination and communication in the care of patients with defense mechanisms. Access free multiple choice questions on this topic. Sigmund Freud, known as the father of psychoanalysis, began the discussion of defense mechanisms in the nineteenth century in relation to the subconscious defenses of the id, ego, and superego.[1] These initial defense mechanisms were more clearly defined and analyzed by his daughter, Anna Freud, in the twentieth century. She created 10 major defense mechanisms, but the number of mechanisms has since been increased by later psychoanalysts.Anna Freud defined these defense mechanisms as “unconscious resources used by the ego” to decrease internal stress ultimately.[2] Patients often devise these unconscious mechanisms to decrease conflict within themselves, specifically between the superego and id. Psychodynamic therapy is used by clinicians to help orient patients to their own unconscious processes. By recognizing and identifying these processes, patients improve their self-awareness and gain a new understanding of their own behaviors. These insights can be helpful to patients with a variety of mental health disorders, including depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and personality disorders.[3] As we progress from childhood to adolescence and then progress from adolescence into adulthood, these psychological defense mechanisms can persist from one phase to the next, regress to earlier phases in response to stressors, or can evolve over time.[4] Defense mechanisms can be internalized or externalized, resulting in corresponding behavior problems, which can complicate psychiatric treatment.[5] Having a thorough understanding of defense mechanisms can help clinicians progress through treatment and avoid pitfalls. For example, recognizing the presence of defense mechanisms during a patient encounter can help maintain an appropriate therapeutic and professional relationship.[6]If defense mechanisms are identified and addressed, it can help predict further development of personality disorders.[7] Therefore, the early identification of defense mechanisms can have great clinical significance. Depending on the context and the severity, defense mechanisms can be either maladaptive or adaptive.[8] Primitive Defense Mechanisms [1] [9] Acting out: The development of detrimental behaviors that distract attention and energy away from other stressors. This defense mechanism may be present in conduct disorder, antisocial personality disorder, or oppositional defiant disorder. Avoidance: Dismissing thoughts or feelings that are uncomfortable or keeping away from people, places, or situations associated with uncomfortable thoughts or feelings. This defense mechanism may be present in post-traumatic stress disorder, where one avoids the location of a traumatic motor vehicle accident or avoids driving completely. Conversion: The development of physical symptoms that cannot be explained by pathophysiology or physical injury. This defense mechanism is recognized in conversion disorder, also known as functional neurologic symptom disorder. Denial: Dismissing external reality and instead focusing on internal explanations or fallacies and thereby avoiding the uncomfortable reality of a situation. This defense mechanism may be present in someone who continues to shop for expensive designer clothes despite being in serious financial debt. Identification: The internalization or reproduction of behaviors observed in others, such as a child developing the behavior of his or her parents without conscious realization of this process. Identification is also known as introjection. Projection: Attributing one’s own maladaptive inner impulses to someone else. For example, someone who commits an episode of infidelity in their marriage may then accuse their partner of infidelity or may become more suspicious of their partner. Regression: Adapting one’s behavior to earlier levels of psychosocial development. For example, a stressful event may cause an individual to regress to bed-wetting after they have already outgrown this behavior. Repression: Subconsciously blocking ideas or impulses that are undesirable. This defense mechanism may be present in someone who has no recollection of a traumatic event, even though they were conscious and aware during the event. Schizoid fantasy: Creating an internal retreat into one’s imagination to avoid uncomfortable situations. This defense mechanism may present commonly in children or later in development, may be present in schizoid personality disorder. Splitting: Failing to reconcile both positive and negative attributes into a whole understanding of a person or situation, resulting in all-or-none thinking. Splitting is commonly associated with borderline personality disorder. Higher-level Defense Mechanisms [10] Anticipation: The devotion of one’s effort to solving problems before they arise. This defense mechanism may be present in someone who prepares for an important job interview by practicing their answers to the toughest questions. Compensation: Focusing on achievement in one area of life in order to distract attention away from the inadequacy or fear of inadequacy in another area of life. This defense mechanism may be present in a student who receives poor grades on their report card and then devotes more time and effort to extracurricular clubs and activities. Displacement: Transferring one’s emotional burden or emotional reaction from one entity to another. This defense mechanism may be present in someone who has a stressful day at work and then lashes out against their family at home. Humor: Decreasing or combating the negative emotions associated with a situation by using comedy. For example, telling a funny story about someone during a eulogy. Intellectualization: The development of patterns of excessive thinking or over-analyzing, which may increase the distance from one’s emotions. For example, someone diagnosed with a terminal illness does not show emotion after the diagnosis is given but instead starts to research every source they can find about the illness. Isolation of Affect: Avoiding the experience of an emotion associated with a person, idea, or situation. This defense mechanism may be present in someone who describes the day their house burnt down in a factual way without displaying any emotion. Rationalization: The justification of one’s behavior through attempts at a rational explanation. This defense mechanism may be present in someone who steals money but feels justified in doing so because they needed the money more than the person from whom they stole. Reaction formation: Replacing one’s initial impulse toward a situation or idea with the opposite impulse. This defense mechanism may be present in someone who teases or insults a romantic interest whom they like. Conversely, reaction formation may be present in someone who is overly kind to someone whom they dislike. Sexualization: Associating sexual aspects to one’s experience of certain norms, places, objects, or ideas. Sexualization can refer to the development of one’s sexual identity in general. Alternatively, sexualization can refer to the development of specific fetishes or sexual references to conventionally non-sexual entities. Sublimation: Transforming one’s anxiety or emotions into pursuits considered by societal or cultural norms to be more useful. This defense mechanism may be present in someone who channels their aggression and energy into playing sports. Suppression: Consciously choosing to block ideas or impulses that are undesirable, as opposed to repression, a subconscious process. This defense mechanism may be present in someone who has intrusive thoughts about a traumatic event but pushes these thoughts out of their mind.Recognition and interpersonal communication about any defense mechanisms the patient is using amongst the psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, primary care provider, nurse, and family can help to orient the team and enhance patient-centered care. Psychodynamic therapy can involve the patient in their own care by achieving greater awareness of their own patterns of psychological defense mechanisms. Some meta-analysis studies have shown psychodynamic therapy to have equal efficacy compared to cognitive behavioral therapy and pharmacotherapy in the treatment of mild to moderate mood disorders. It is important to recognize that therapeutic treatments based on self-awareness and communication will avoid the possible complications of pharmacotherapy, such as side effects and drug-to-drug interactions, and some patients may be more willing to try these therapies compared to pharmacotherapy.[11] Disclosure Ryan Bailey declares no relevant financial relationships with ineligible companies. Disclosure: Jose Pico declares no relevant financial relationships with ineligible companies. Sigmund Freud and his theories are well known, and not just by psychologists and psychiatrists. His opinions and writings have made a home in our collective unconscious, so much so, that I often hear my clients make comments about Freud “rolling in his grave” As a psychologist who works with trauma, defense mechanisms come up in therapy quite often. So what are these defense mechanisms named by Freud? Before we explore defence mechanisms, it is important to note that Sigmund Freud is not the Freud who developed these in detail. They were defined by his daughter, Anna Freud. Meaning of Defence Mechanisms Freud, Anna, defines defence mechanisms as “unconscious resources used by the ego” to decrease internal stress, conflict, and other unpleasant emotional experiences. As far as Freudian Theory goes, employing defence mechanisms involves a distortion of reality to some capacity which allows us to better cope with situations. Types of Defence Mechanisms Anna Freud identified and defined 10 defence mechanisms Denial - This is one we’re all familiar with. This defence mechanism is activated in response to a difficult aspect of reality, and results in a refusal to accept a painful or distressing truth. It is particularly prevalent in drug use and dependence. Drug users or alcoholics often deny that they have a problem. Displacement - This is witnessed as the transferring of challenging urges and emotions to an object that did not trigger the urge. This is most commonly seen in people who may spend a lot of time in positions where they do not have power or control, and often then displace their anger or distress over in areas where they do have control, or are less threatening. Rationalisation - another common mechanism for coping, this refers to a persistent pattern of “logically” explaining painful emotions and situations. It is done at the cost of any underlying reasons or emotions that may be distressing. A classic example is when a person fails a test they worked really hard for; they might say they “never cared” anyway. Intellectualisation - in a similar vein as rationalisation, this refers to a tendency to focus on the “intellectual components” of a situation, thereby distancing oneself from distressing emotions that the situation may be causing, of the situation helps to distance people from the anxiety-provoking emotions associated with the situation. Think of a parent whose child develops a terminal illness, and they spend all their time learning about the illness and its treatment, keeping away from the pain they may be feeling otherwise. Suppression - This mechanism can often operate semi-consciously and manifests as the decision to “not dwell” on a memory, emotion, or thought. This is done so that attention can be better focused elsewhere. Repression - more likely to be unconscious, it is similar to suppression. However, it manifests itself as forgetfulness or lack of awareness of one’s internal thoughts or external experiences. Often, the person repressing is unaware of the subject of repression and its consequences. Projection - this mechanism is relatively simple to spot, as it appears as a persistent pattern of attributing one’s own undesirable feelings or thoughts onto another. This mechanism works because the unacceptable emotion gets to be expressed, but in a way that protects one’s perception of oneself. A common situation is when a person feels their partner is “insecure” or “jealous”, when they themselves may be harbouring similar feelings. Reaction formation - this mechanism works by replacing a painful, unacceptable emotion with an “opposite” emotion. For example, think of a teenager who dislikes someone and then proceeds to go on a date with them Regression - this mechanism often leads a person to “revert” to patterns of thinking and behaving they used at a previous stage of development. This mechanism has a bad reputation. Often adults tend to curl up and cry in a fetal position when distressed, and this would be a form of regression. Sublimation - when unacceptable emotions and desires are converted into acceptable activities, it is a form of sublimation. For example, a person with chronic difficulty with anger, may take up boxing classes. Do you recognise any of these in your own behaviour? Written by the team at Contemporary Psychology. A major obstacle to developing effective ethical judgment is called “defense mechanisms.” Sigmund Freud popularized the concept of human defence mechanisms when he introduced his personality model—the id, ego and superego. The ego deals with reality, attempting to reconcile the conflicting demands of the id and superego. The id seeks to fulfill wants, needs and impulses, while the superego seeks to act in an idealistic and moral manner. While modern research does not focus on Freud’s theories the same way he presented them, the concept of defense mechanisms remains as a viable way to understand human behavior and, in our context here, as a challenge to ethical judgment. Defense mechanisms are sometimes created to shield us from the conflict between what we want instinctually and the standards of behavior that have been established. In an attempt to protect ourselves, and sometimes coupled with rationalization, can be used to distort the choices we make. Defense mechanisms filter out an alternate reality in favor of the reality that the mind prefers— they can falsify, twist, or deny reality. Denial is an open rejection of an obvious truth. By simply denying that the problem, affliction or ailment exists, the person does not have to deal with it. Denial as a defense mechanism has become especially evident with the judgment students are making regarding alcohol consumption and binge drinking. Despite best efforts, overdoses involving alcohol alone rose 25% since 2008 in college populations (NIH, 2014). The first step to helping students have better judgment towards consuming alcohol involves the rejection of denial; we cannot deny that many college students will drink, and virtually all of them will experience the effects of college drinking. Here are the current facts about college drinking from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. We know that:
• 1,825 college students die every year from alcohol-related injuries.
• 690,000 students are assaulted by someone who has been drinking.
• 97,000 of those are alcohol-related sexual assaults or rape.
• 25% of college students report academic consequences of alcohol abuse.
• 1.5% of college students report trying to commit suicide due to drinking or drug use issues.
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For example, other rights such as publicity, privacy, or moral rights may limit how you use the material. Thus there are defences generated by the psychical apparatus before the ego’s structuring - such as, for example, repression - and others that practically result from any type of mind operation initiated by the ego, such as the logical explanation of some events. Sigmund Freud talks about the defence mechanisms in works such as Inhibition, symptom, anxiety (1926) but this theme is taken over - even though not in a systematic manner - by his daughter, Anna. Here are some defence mechanisms briefly described and followed by short examples:DenialIt can be explained through the refusal of accepting something that rose or it is happening in the mind. Thus the victims of some family traumatic events can deny these traumas. The well known case of the wife beaten by the husband who refuses to recognize she is beaten. In this case we are not talking about a defense against anxiety but of sparing the narcissist ego.RepressionRepression is an autonomous mechanism which acts in order to hinder representatives connected to unconscious demands to access the conscience and take a course of action. We sometimes act consciously in this direction and we call this mechanism suppression or condemnation. Freud writes precisely that in the psychoanalytical treatment repression has to be replaced with conviction, meaning with the processing at a conscious level of the conflict with the unconscious minds. DisplacementIt is a frequent mechanism especially known for dreams formation process. Displacement means that an affect is associated with other objects or events that are in a contiguity relationship with the initials ones which triggered it. We generally discover very easily the displacement in day to day life when someone is fighting with his children because he cannot confront a hostile boss. Or the hostility displaced against a neighbor while the actual cause was an unpopular measure of the government or the corruption in the public administration etc.SublimationThrough sublimation an unacceptable drive is transformed into a social acceptable one. In sports, for example, we find the sublimation of aggressive demand in the competition or contest.ProjectionIt refers to the case when we attribute our own drives or character features to exterior objects. Projection is characterized through an extortionate development of criticism against other people’s biases and flaws. Projection comes together with denial. IntellectualizationIt is recognized in mental operations which tend to transform an uncomfortable or painful reality in philosophical contents, for example. Thus a failed exam can turn into a reflection over the life quality or the relativity of success. Rationalization It offers explanations following a logical pattern for some biases or manifestations which make the subject feel embarrassed or uncomfortable. This mechanism can also be used to protect the narcissist ego.RegressionIt refers to going back to the phases of sexual development and previous objects. For example to the oral phase, where the person can develop the feeling of being always hungry or the refusal to eat (anorexia). A student in love with an assistant professor develops anorexia due to the fact that her best friend “steals” her boyfriend (she cannot “swallow” this situation). Or the frequent case of an adult person who is getting divorced in order to marry his “first love” (regression to object).Reaction-formationIt can be easily explained by transforming a wish in its reverse. For example the desire of having immoral sexual intercourse turns into a cleaning obsession. Or the hostility felt against a person is hidden by some strong friendship proofs. Turning against one selfA well known mechanism, such as for example, when the wife states loud and clear that her husband is not to blame for his infidelity, that it is her fault as she did not communicate enough with him.Other mechanisms discovered or defined after Freud:Acting out - refers to the tendency of acting in an involuntary manner stirred up by a demand disclosed during the analysis, thus confirming what it is actually repressed and denied.Affiliation - refers to the person’s tendency to request other people’s help, collaborating willingly with them.Purpose inhibition - the person accepts an altered form of his initial purpose - it is what we usually call “to go half way”. Altruism - the unconditional dedication for someone else’s needs by totally neglecting or denying one’s own identical needs. It is the well known case of the neurotic person who asks for the help of the psychoanalyst for another person he feels attached to through compassion and friendship bounds. Avoiding - the refusal of interacting with conflicting situations or persons.Compensation - the excessive development of interest and action in a certain domain only to hide the missing of satisfaction in a previous one. Humor - revealing the funny or comical side of an embarrassing situation. Passive aggression - the tendency of showing aggressiveness in an indirect manner.

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