

## Defense Mechanisms

*Speaker: Jennifer Hess*

Defense mechanisms are one of my favorite topics in psychology. Defense mechanisms are reality-distorting strategies used to prevent awareness of anxiety-evoking thoughts, behaviors, emotions, or impulses. They operate unconsciously; the better your understanding and insight, the more you will recognize them in yourself and others. If you find that conflict remains unresolved in certain areas of life, it may be that defense mechanisms are at work.

The main defense mechanisms discussed in psychodynamic theory are repression, regression, displacement, denial, reaction formation, rationalization, projection, and sublimation. I will explain and provide examples for each of these in turn.

Repression involves pushing inappropriate thoughts, motives, or impulses into the unconscious, where the person is unaware of them. Even though the thoughts are unconscious, they still affect a person's behavior. A boss who represses inappropriate dislike for an employee may inadvertently give that employee harder jobs or evaluate the employee's performance more critically than the employee's peers without realizing it. Trauma can be repressed but still affect current behaviors. People who repress childhood abuse may become uncomfortable, fearful, or angry when someone touches them, without knowing why they are having such a strong reaction. Although the person is unaware of the repressed content, it can still impact thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Regression has only one letter difference in the spelling, but is a completely different concept. Regression occurs when someone reverts to a behavior that was experienced at an earlier stage of development. Regression is often triggered by stress. An example is a college student who may revert to biting his nails and becoming dependent on others when stressed. A child starting preschool may regress to having bathroom accidents, even though the child was fully potty trained before entering school. Sometimes, when life hits hard, you will see adults regressing to childhood gestures of wanting their mommy. Usually the person is reverting back to a safer dependent time in development.

Displacement is one of the most recognizable defense mechanisms. I'm sure you are all guilty, as am I, of using displacement. Displacement is the transfer of unacceptable impulses away from their original objects onto safer, less threatening objects. Many people use family members, their safe people, as a displacement dumping ground. The most cliché example is when a boss yells at a man, the man comes home and yells at his wife for something frivolous like the house being messy. Then in turn, the wife will yell at the children and the children may react by fighting with one another. Someone who gets stood up on a date may be mean to his or her family the rest of the evening. Sometimes displacement occurs toward objects, like slamming a door after arguing with someone; after getting a bad haircut, someone may exhibit road rage when driving home. The examples are endless. It's important to be insightful to our own displacement and try not to take frustrations out on the people we love most.

Denial is simply not accepting reality. It's the refusal to recognize a threatening impulse or desire. A father who is in denial that his son is gay may continue to believe that his son's partner is merely a good friend and roommate. Someone with aggressive impulses may violently choke someone and then act as if it was not a big deal. People with addictions often deny that they have a problem, despite suffering many consequences associated with the addiction.

Reaction formation is a very interesting defense mechanism. It's behaving the opposite of true wishes or desires in order to keep them repressed. Some people with low self-worth will overcompensate by telling others about their awesomeness. Many of those who preach about being faithful to one's spouse have been found to cheat in their own relationships. Several studies have found that many individuals with strong homophobia are repressing their own homosexual attractions. Many defense mechanisms go hand in hand and individuals may use more than one to remain unconscious of the truths.

Rationalization is the use of self-justification to explain away unacceptable behavior.

Rationalization is an intellectual excuse that makes sense to the person making the excuse, but does not acknowledge the reality of the situation. A man may rationalize that he has to work long hours and miss out on many of his family's activities because he must provide for them, when not wanting to admit the reality that he is unhappy with his marriage. A person trying to lose weight may rationalize that pizza is healthy for them because it contains all of the food groups to decrease their guilt about breaking their diet. The crust meets the daily carb intake, the tomato sauce counts as a vegetable, the cheese is dairy, and the pepperoni contains protein. The guilt evaporates when questionable decisions are rationalized. Many people rationalize while shopping. They may be eyeing something, like a purse, that is way too expensive for their budget, but can easily rationalize that the joy, confidence, and status that a three-hundred-dollar purse will bring them is worth the expense.

Projection is another interesting defense mechanism. It involves imposing one's own impulses or wishes onto another person. If someone accuses you of something you clearly are not doing, projection may be the culprit. According to the dynamics of projection, the accusers are engaging in the thoughts, emotions, and/or behaviors that they blame on others. Remember that defense mechanisms are unconscious, so the person is unaware of his or her own defenses. Projection is considered a primitive form of paranoia in which, on some level, people are anxious about their experiences and project them onto someone else. This is why a cheater often accuses his or her partner of cheating. They start to see, or imagine, their own behaviors in someone else. The textbook example is when a sexually inhibited person misinterprets other people's friendly approaches as sexual advances. If someone, whom you have no qualms with, asks, "Why are you so mad at me?" chances are, they are mad at you.

A positive defense mechanism is sublimation. Sublimation is channeling unacceptable impulses into socially constructive pursuits. I'm not the most domestic person, and my house tends to be messy; however, if I'm angry, my house becomes spotless. I redirect my energy into scrubbing tubs and floors. Many people channel angry impulses into sports, while others may sublimate by going for a run, singing, playing an instrument, writing, drawing, or doing pretty much anything that is constructive.

To recap:

- Repression is pushing inappropriate thoughts, motives, or impulses into the unconscious, where the person is unaware of them.
- Regression is reverting to an earlier, safer, stage of development during stressful times.
- Displacement is moving frustration from dis-place to dis-place. It's transferring unacceptable impulses away from their original objects onto safer, less threatening objects.
- Denial is the refusal to recognize a threatening impulse or desire, by just flat-out not acknowledging the reality before, or within, you.
- Reaction formation is doing the opposite of your true wishes or desires in order to keep them repressed. I've been shocked by some people who have confessed that they suffer from depression because they always seem to be chipper and happy.
- Projection is imposing one's own impulses or wishes onto another person. Basically, it's a guilty accuser.
- Sublimation is channeling your unacceptable impulses into socially constructive pursuits.

Try to take notice of the defense mechanisms that you, and the people you are close to, engage in. Gaining insight to your defenses will help you to see situations more clearly, preparing you to better resolve internal and external conflicts.