

## Defense Mechanisms

We have learned this week about cognitive biases that can cause bad reasoning and bad judgment. But psychological *defense mechanisms* often are what cause these biases, as when someone is “in denial” about an undesirable situation. Thus, one way to stay alert to biases is to take note when these defense mechanisms are triggered.

Put differently: A poor judgment is often the result of a series of events caused by a defense mechanism:

Defense Mechanism → Bias → Bad Reasoning → Poor Judgment.

However, defense mechanisms are not always bad. In fact, they can often be quite helpful as a coping strategy. Furthermore, biases are not always due to defense mechanisms; e.g., the Anchoring Effect is usually motivated more by a desire to conserve cognitive energy rather than defend one’s ego.

But in a critical thinking course, the key reason to be aware of defense mechanisms is because of the bad effect they can have on our thinking, insofar as they can produce bias and poor judgment.

### *10 Key Defense Mechanisms<sup>1</sup>*

#### **1. Displacement**

Have you ever had a really bad day at work and then gone home and taken out your frustration with family and friends? Then you have experienced the ego defense mechanism of displacement.

Displacement involves taking out our frustrations, feelings, and impulses on people or objects that are less threatening.

Displaced aggression is a common example of this defense mechanism. Rather than express our anger in ways that could lead to negative consequences (like arguing with our boss), we instead express our anger towards a person or object that poses no threat (such as our spouse, children, or pets).

#### **2. Denial**

Denial is probably one of the best-known defense mechanisms, used often to describe situations in which people seem unable to face reality or admit an obvious truth (e.g., “He’s in denial”).

Denial is usually an outright refusal to admit or recognize that something has occurred or is currently occurring. People living with drug or alcohol addiction often deny that they have a problem, while victims of traumatic events may deny that the event ever occurred.

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<sup>1</sup> What follows is lifted directly from Cherry, Kendra (2021). “20 Common Defense Mechanisms Used for Anxiety,” *Verywell Mind*. Available at <https://www.verywellmind.com/defense-mechanisms-2795960>.

In other cases, denial might involve admitting that something is true, but minimizing its importance. Sometimes people will accept reality and the seriousness of the fact, but they will deny their own responsibility and instead blame other people or other outside forces.

### **3. Repression and Suppression**

Repression is another well-known defense mechanism. Repression acts to keep information out of conscious awareness.

However, these memories don't just disappear; they continue to influence our behavior. For example, a person who has repressed memories of abuse suffered as a child may later have difficulty forming relationships.

Sometimes we do this consciously by forcing the unwanted information out of our awareness, which is known as suppression. In most cases, however, this removal of anxiety-provoking memories from our awareness is believed to occur unconsciously.

### **4. Sublimation**

Sublimation is a defense mechanism that allows us to act out unacceptable impulses by converting these behaviors into a more acceptable form. For example, a person experiencing extreme anger might take up kick-boxing as a means of venting frustration.

Freud believed that sublimation was a sign of maturity that allows people to function normally in socially acceptable ways.

### **5. Projection**

Projection is a defense mechanism that involves taking our own unacceptable qualities or feelings and ascribing them to other people.

For example, if you have a strong dislike for someone, you might instead believe that they do not like you. Projection works by allowing the expression of the desire or impulse, but in a way that the ego cannot recognize, therefore reducing anxiety.

### **6. Intellectualization**

Intellectualization works to reduce anxiety by thinking about events in a cold, clinical way. This defense mechanism allows us to avoid thinking about the stressful, emotional aspect of the situation and instead focus only on the intellectual component.

For example, a person who has just been diagnosed with a terminal illness might focus on learning everything about the disease in order to avoid distress and remain distant from the reality of the situation.

## 7. Rationalization

Rationalization is a defense mechanism that involves explaining an unacceptable behavior or feeling in a rational or logical manner, avoiding the true reasons for the behavior.

For example, a person who is turned down for a date might rationalize the situation by saying they were not attracted to the other person anyway. A student might blame a poor exam score on the instructor rather than their own lack of preparation.

Rationalization not only prevents anxiety, but it may also protect self-esteem and self-concept.

When confronted by success or failure, people tend to attribute achievement to their own qualities and skills while failures are blamed on other people or outside forces.

## 8. Regression

When confronted by stressful events, people sometimes abandon coping strategies and revert to patterns of behavior used earlier in development...For example, an individual fixated at an earlier developmental stage might cry or sulk upon hearing unpleasant news.

Behaviors associated with regression can vary greatly depending upon which stage at which the person is fixated.

According to Freud, an individual fixated at the oral stage might begin eating or smoking excessively, or might become very verbally aggressive. A fixation at the anal stage might result in excessive tidiness or messiness.

## 9. Reaction Formation

Reaction formation reduces anxiety by taking up the opposite feeling, impulse, or behavior. An example of reaction formation would be treating someone you strongly dislike in an excessively friendly manner in order to hide your true feelings.

Why do people behave this way? According to Freud, they are using reaction formation as a defense mechanism to hide their true feelings by behaving in the exact opposite manner.

## 10. Other Defense Mechanisms

Since Freud first described the original defense mechanisms, other researchers have continued to describe other methods of reducing anxiety. Some of these defense mechanisms include:

***Acting out:*** Coping with stress by engaging in actions rather than acknowledging and bearing certain feelings.

***Aim inhibition:*** Accepting a modified form of their original goal (e.g., becoming a high school basketball coach rather than a professional athlete).

***Altruism:*** Satisfying internal needs through helping others.

***Avoidance:*** Refusing to deal with or encounter unpleasant objects or situations.

***Compensation:*** Overachieving in one area to compensate for failures in another.

***Dissociation:*** Becoming separated or removed from one's experience.

***Fantasy:*** Avoiding reality by retreating to a safe place within one's mind.

***Humor:*** Pointing out the funny or ironic aspects of a situation.

***Passive-aggression:*** Indirectly expressing anger.

***Undoing:*** Trying to make up for what one feels are inappropriate thoughts, feelings, or behaviors (e.g., if you hurt someone's feelings, you might offer to do something nice for them in order to assuage your anxiety or guilt)

Remember, defense mechanisms can be both good and bad.

While defense mechanisms are often thought of as negative reactions, we all need them to temporarily ease stress and protect self-esteem during critical times, allowing us to focus on what is necessary at the moment. They can serve a helpful role by protecting your ego from stress and providing a healthy outlet.

Some of these defenses can be more helpful than others. For example, utilizing humor to overcome a stressful, anxiety-provoking situation can actually be an adaptive defense mechanism.

In other instances, these defense mechanisms might hold you back from facing reality and can act as a form of self-deception. If you notice that overuse of certain defense mechanisms is having a negative impact on your life, consider consulting with a mental health professional. Psychotherapy may help whether you pursue a traditional face-to-face treatment or an online therapy option.