
The “mature” defense mechanisms:

Rationalizing/Intellectualizing: Explaining away or refusing to face one’s feelings through the use of socially acceptable, positive-sounding explanations rather than acknowledging the anxiety, sadness, or other unacceptable/painful emotion. “Sour Grapes/Sweet Lemons”

Sublimation: A constructive form of displacement in which sexual or unacceptable urges are rechanneled into productive activities. A person who does not get a desired promotion spends more time pursuing hobbies.

Less adaptive, but used occasionally by everyone:

Repression: The complete exclusion from consciousness of anxiety-producing thoughts, feelings, or impulses. This defense mechanism looks like “forgetting.”

Displacement: Emotional impulses are redirected toward a substitute person or object because “displacing” the impulses to the alternative is less threatening or dangerous than directing them at the true source. Your boss picks on you; you come home and yell at your spouse or child.

Projection: The attribution of your own unacceptable urges or qualities to others. A person who tends to lie frequently always thinks that others are lying to him.

Reaction Formation: Thinking or behaving in a way that is the extreme opposite of unacceptable urges or impulses.

Denial: The failure to recognize or admit to the existence of anxiety-provoking information or unacceptable impulses or qualities. “I don’t have a problem!”

Undoing: A form of “unconscious repentance.” Performing actions that are interpreted by the self as neutralizing or atoning for an unacceptable thought or action. Giving money to charity after cheating or stealing from someone.

Defense mechanisms that are considered healthy only for children and adolescents:

Daydreaming: Occupying one’s mind with fantasy to avoid painful or unacceptable feelings. A teenager who feels unpopular and unattractive spends time spinning stories in which he or she is an omnipotent, sought-after hero or heroine.

Identification: Admiring and imitating a real person known personally or through the media, to avoid feelings of inadequacy. A little boy whose father left his family pretends to be a “power ranger” as his sole form of play.

Regression: Reversion to behavior more appropriate for a younger child or teenager when faced with unacceptable feelings or anxiety. A four-year-old starts wetting her pants after the birth of her baby brother.