



## WHICH DEFENCE MECHANISMS DO YOU USE?

Life coach Maryam Ghouth looks at the reasons we use defence mechanisms, why some can be positive, and how to adapt them in order to improve relationships

The mind provides us with extraordinary means to protect ourselves against feelings and thoughts that are too difficult for the conscious mind to cope with.

Referred to as defence mechanisms, these strategies help us to defend and distance ourselves from full awareness of unpleasant experiences, and later become habitual and automatic.

Joseph Burgo, author of *Why Do I Do That?* explains that psychological defence mechanisms are an inevitable and necessary part of the human experience but when they become too pervasive or deeply entrenched, they may damage our personal relationships, restrict or distort our emotional lives and prevent us from behaving in ways that promote lasting self-esteem.

An understanding of the workings of defence mechanisms allows us to grasp the

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counterintuitive rationale of what seems completely irrational.

This article will explain the potential flaws underlying some defence mechanisms and list examples of a few healthy and unhealthy common ones.

### Defence mechanisms

The term 'defence mechanisms' was first used in Sigmund Freud's paper *The Neuro-Psychoses of Defence* in 1894. The concept derives from the psychoanalytic hypothesis that there are forces in the mind that oppose and battle against each other.

Underlying these defences are fear, shame or guilt because we are reacting to a perceived threat to our psychological wellbeing.

However, what we deem as threatening may be skewed and the way in which we respond to those perceptions can be harmful both to ourselves and to those we react to.

The sources of these misconceptions and reactions are myriad, rooted in causes ranging from past wounds to familial and social influences. Most defences develop very early in life and tend to deny reality while others are formed in later periods of development and can preserve reality checking.

When a defence mechanism is learned in childhood during the developmental phase of the nervous system, it's difficult to recognise let alone change, which is why many of us continue to use them as adults.

### What defence mechanisms commonly exist?

The number of defence mechanisms is inconclusive, and the lines between each one are blurry. In many cases they overlap. Moreover, there are different categorisations of defence mechanisms, the most popular of which was developed

by George Eman Vaillant, an American Psychiatrist and Professor at Harvard Medical School. Vaillant's classification is based on each defence mechanism's psychoanalytical developmental level and includes four levels – pathological, immature, neurotic and mature.

As there continues to be uncertainty with regard to which defence belongs to which category, I will only list two groups. The first group contains a few examples of maladaptive defence mechanisms and the other contains a list of healthier coping strategies.

### Maladaptive defence mechanisms

#### 1. Denial

Denial is the refusal to accept a painful reality.

**Example:** a person who is a functioning alcoholic will often deny that they have a drinking problem.

#### 2. Projection

Projection is when a person attributes his or her own unwanted thoughts, emotions and evaluations to someone else.

**Example:** a person may be angry at their significant other for not listening, when in fact it is the angry spouse who does not listen.

#### 3. Blame

This is when people do not want to admit their own short-comings or contributions to a problem so they blame others instead.

**Example:** a husband blames his wife for his anger rather than acknowledging his own temper.

#### 4. Sensitisation

This is when a person seeks out more information in an attempt to gain a complete picture of a threat that may occur, regardless of how anxiety-provoking it might be.

**Example:** a person demands to

know the exact number and details of their significant other's past intimate relationships in an attempt to cope with insecurities about unfavorable comparisons.

#### 5. Regression

Regression is reverting back to a childlike response or state whereby your unconscious fears, anxieties and angst reappear.

**Example:** an adult may throw a tantrum and whimper as a child.

#### 6. Rationalisation

Rationalisation involves unconsciously giving a false explanation for your own behavior or the behavior of others.

**Example:** when someone doesn't show interest in you, you convince yourself he or she isn't your type anyway.

#### 7. Intellectualisation

Rather than deal with the emotions of an event, you retreat into a cognitive analysis of the event as to distance yourself from it emotionally.

**Example:** you seek refuge in understanding the cause and effect of an experience rather than face the pain of it.

#### 8. Repression

Repression is the unconscious process of blocking painful or unaccepted thoughts, feelings and impulses.

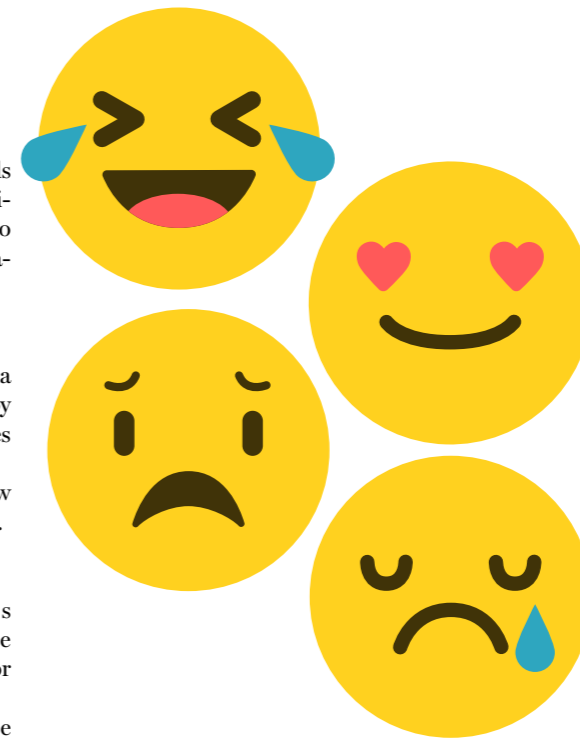
**Example:** you forget the funeral of a parent or a situation that you're ashamed of.

### Healthy coping strategies

#### 1. Suppression

Suppression and repression are very similar defence mechanisms. However, suppression is a conscious choice not to think about something.

**Example:** you avoid thinking of your pain to complete an assignment and revert back to your feelings later.



#### 2. Sublimation

Sublimation refers to the channeling of unwanted thoughts and emotions into acceptable behaviors.

**Example:** you're feeling upset so you go for a run.

#### 3. Altruism

Altruism involves constructive service to others that leads to personal fulfillment.

**Example:** you donate money to a non-profit charity aiding victims of child abuse.

#### 4. Humour

Humour is used to diffuse tension or lighten a challenging experience.

**Example:** you're losing your hair so you joke about becoming bald.



#### 5. Compensation

Compensation is the process of counterbalancing perceived weaknesses by emphasising strengths in other areas.

**Example:** you're not good at math but you recognise you're a great artist so you focus on the latter.

**THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT DEFENCE MECHANISMS ARE OFTEN LEARNED BEHAVIORS. THIS MEANS WE CAN CHOOSE TO UNLEARN THEM AND ADOPT HEALTHIER WAYS TO RESPOND TO SEEMINGLY THREATENING SITUATIONS.**

### In conclusion

We all use defence mechanisms, and relationships are the place where the defensive behaviors are most evident as they are triggered and replayed.

Once you appreciate that defence is a form of self-protection, it won't continue to have the same hold over you.

This isn't to say that one should turn a blind eye to maladaptive defence mechanisms all the time. Various combinations of power struggles, codependence and push-pull dynamics can ensue if people maintain a high level of defensiveness and remain relatively unconscious of them.

As such, being aware of the defence mechanisms you and others use, while empathetic to the underlying causes, is a step in the right direction.

The good news is that defence mechanisms are often learned behaviors. This means we can choose to unlearn them and adopt healthier ways to respond to seemingly threatening situations.

Mature defences allow better modulation of anxiety while maintaining engagement with reality but they do require practice and effort to put into daily use.

Breaking through our defences by accepting responsibility isn't an easy process though – otherwise everyone would be eager to resolve them. The rewards however, are worth the effort as they can lead to better relationship dynamics and long lasting self-esteem.

If you recognise using any of the defence mechanisms mentioned above in your relationships with friends, colleagues or loved ones, consider working through them in order to foster stronger and more fulfilling connections.

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