

EGO DEFENSE MECHANISMS

Altruism: Emotional conflict addressed by meeting the needs of other

- Woman loses husband in car accident; begins volunteer work for a grief/survivor group

Compensation: Overachievement in one area to offset real or perceived deficiencies in another area

- Napoleon complex: diminutive man becoming emperor (AKA “short man syndrome”)
- Nurse with low self-esteem working double shifts so her supervisor will like her

Conversion: Expression of an emotional conflict through the development of a physical symptom, usually sensorimotor in nature

- Teenager forbidden to see X-rated movies is tempted to do so by friends and develops blindness, and the teenager is unconcerned about the loss of sight

Denial: Failure to acknowledge an unbearable condition; failure to admit the reality of a situation or how one enables the problem to continue

- Diabetic person eating chocolate candy • Waiting 3 days to seek help for severe abdominal pain

Displacement: Ventilation of intense feelings toward persons less threatening than the one who aroused those feelings

- Person who is mad at the boss yells at his or her spouse • Child who is bullied at school mistreats a younger sibling

Dissociation: Dealing with emotional conflict by a temporary alteration in consciousness or identity

- Amnesia that prevents recall of yesterday’s auto accident • Adult remembers nothing of childhood sexual abuse

Fixation: Immobilization of a portion of the personality resulting from unsuccessful completion of tasks in a developmental stage

- Never learning to delay gratification • Lack of a clear sense of identity as an adult

Humor: Use humor or irony

- Woman can’t find suit for husband’s burial and states, “Well, he probably didn’t pick it up from the dry cleaners, he never was very organized!”

Identification: Modeling actions and opinions of influential others while searching for identity, or aspiring to reach a personal, social, or occupational goal

- Nursing student becoming a critical care nurse because this is the specialty of an instructor she admires

Intellectualization: Separation of the emotions of a painful event or situation from the facts involved; acknowledging the facts but not the emotions

- Person shows no emotional expression when discussing serious car accident

Introjection: Accepting another person's attitudes, beliefs, and values as one's own

- Person who dislikes guns becomes an avid hunter, just like a best friend

Projection: Unconscious blaming of unacceptable inclinations or thoughts on an external object

- Man who has thought about same-gender sexual relationship, but never had one, beats a man who is gay
- Person with many prejudices loudly identifies others as bigots

Rationalization: Excusing own behavior to avoid guilt, responsibility, conflict, anxiety, or loss of self-respect

- Student blames failure on teacher being mean
- Man says he beats his wife because she doesn't listen to him

Reaction formation: Acting the opposite of what one thinks or feels

- Woman who never wanted to have children becomes a supermom
- Person who despises the boss tells everyone what a great boss she is

Regression: Moving back to a previous developmental stage to feel safe or have needs met

- Five-year-old asks for a bottle when new baby is being fed
- Man pouts like a 4-year-old if he is not the center of his girlfriend's attention

Repression: Excluding emotionally painful or anxiety-provoking thoughts and feelings from conscious awareness

- Woman has no memory of the mugging she suffered yesterday
- Man has no memory before age 7, when he was removed from abusive parents

Resistance: Overt or covert antagonism toward remembering or processing anxiety-producing information

- Nurse is too busy with tasks to spend time talking to a dying patient
- Person attends court-ordered treatment for alcoholism but refuses to participate

Somatization: Turning emotional pain or distress into a physical symptom

- Professor has an important speech to deliver to faculty group and develops laryngitis

Sublimation: Substituting a socially acceptable activity for an impulse that is unacceptable

- Person who has quit smoking sucks on hard candy when the urge to smoke arises
- Person goes for a 15-minute walk when tempted to snack

Substitution: Replacing the desired gratification with one that is more readily available

- Woman who would like to have her own children opens a day care center

Suppression: Conscious exclusion of unacceptable thoughts and feelings from conscious awareness

- Student decides not to think about a parent's illness to study for a test
- Woman tells a friend she cannot think about her son's death right now

Undoing: Exhibiting acceptable behavior to make up for or negate unacceptable behavior

- Man who is ruthless in business donates large amounts of money to charity

Yellow = Healthy (higher or more adaptive level)

Green = Intermediate

Blue = Immature or primitive (lowest adaptive level)