

Defense Mechanisms

Unconscious resources used by the ego to decrease internal stress

-Anna Freud, *Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*

Immature Defenses

Defenses on this list are primarily maladaptive, occur unconsciously, and allow conflict to significantly or entirely bypass awareness.

Denial	Rejection of a reality that feels threatening	<i>A child transfers schools due to acts of aggression. His mother believes he has a "powerful presence" rather than a mental health concern.</i>
Repression	Blocking intolerable feelings by making them inaccessible to consciousness	<i>A man is unable to recall verifiable events when he was left alone with an abusive relative.</i>
Regression	Reverting to an earlier level of psychosocial development	<i>A teenager experiences bed-wetting after being bullied. A man served with divorce papers cries in the fetal position.</i>
Somatization	Transforming psychological distress into physical symptoms	<i>Stress headaches, vomiting from anxiety, some chronic pain/fatigue, psychogenic seizures</i>
Identification	Taking on attributes of another so the self becomes like the other	<i>A new teacher alters his attire to be like a teacher he admires and adopts his mannerisms and communication style in an unconscious attempt to harness his colleague's strengths.</i>
Introjection	Incorporating attributes or behavior of another person into one's own self-structure	<i>A man with strict, authoritative parents becomes an uncompromising father. He isn't aware he has internalized traits of his parents.</i>
Projection	Attributing a quality of the self to someone else	<i>A woman attracted to her neighbor is suspicious that her partner is unfaithful.</i>
Projective identification	Undesired qualities are transferred to someone who introjects them, taking them as their own	<i>An example in therapy is the feeling of helplessness or inadequacy evoked in the therapist that actually belongs to the client.</i>
Acting out	Expressing thoughts or feelings using behaviors rather than words	<i>A woman is angry about her partner working late again. She spends the evening canceling plans for their birthday.</i>
Splitting	Polarizing a situation, person or the self into positive and negative attributes	<i>An employee idolizes his boss, denying his shortcomings until a payroll error is made when they decide he is incompetent and at fault for the error although he does not oversee payroll.</i>
Dissociation	Modifying awareness so thoughts, feelings, or experiences are no longer integrated	<i>A client described derealization triggered by work meetings, saying that time stood still, people and sounds were far away and he was "pushed back" from everything.</i>

Defense Mechanisms

Neurotic Defenses

Defenses of this variety are more adaptive than immature defenses and may be perceived as more socially acceptable. They remain largely unconscious and allow conflict to bypass *parts* of awareness rather than the whole of awareness.

Reaction formation	Mastering unacceptable emotions or impulses by producing an exaggerated opposite reaction	<i>A student attracted to a classmate teases them incessantly. A woman describes her relationship with her mother as “perfect” and very close, however their history includes estrangement and significant conflict.</i>
Displacement	Transferring an emotion or impulse to a more acceptable or less threatening target	<i>A mother yells at her child because she is angry at her wife. An adolescent with a difficult home life bullies kids at school.</i>
Compartmentalization	Separating thoughts and emotions that are in conflict	<i>A lawyer’s family is his top priority, and he works long hours several days a week. While at the office, he shuts off the “parent” side of himself.</i>
Intellectualization	Using reason and analysis to distance the self from emotion	<i>A man with a terminal illness spends visits with friends sharing medical research. A client fills therapy sessions by asking about how addiction works in the brain.</i>
Undoing	Symbolically canceling out unpleasant thoughts, feelings or actions	<i>A woman apologizes to her coworker after asserting a boundary. An abusive parent provides an over-the-top Christmas for her kids.</i>
Isolation of affect	Separating emotion from idea	<i>A young adult calmly recites details of the day his father performed CPR on his sister.</i>

Higher Level Defenses

These mature defenses are the most adaptive. They are found in adults with a functional relationship to reality and occur without restriction of awareness.

Suppression	Actively shutting out information that causes distress	<i>A young adult is upset with his parents, but doesn’t want conflict over a holiday, so he puts it out of his mind to address at another time.</i>
Anticipation	Experiencing in advance the emotions associated with a situation	<i>A teen takes on household responsibilities while his mother has cancer treatments. He focuses on the day treatment will be complete so he can be with his friends again.</i>
Altruism	Management of emotional conflict through service to others	<i>A mom with a history of compulsive spending volunteers at a food bank. She helps others while remembering that she once needed assistance after spending her family’s savings.</i>
Sublimation	Transforming socially unacceptable thoughts or impulses into productive pursuits	<i>A man with a strong aggressive drive becomes a pro football player. A woman preoccupied with a sense of hostility takes up competitive shooting.</i>
Compensation	Dismissing perceived weakness while emphasizing perceived strengths	<i>A man smokes daily while congratulating himself on his dedication to a healthy diet.</i>
Humor	Using comedy to express thoughts or feelings rather than speaking directly	<i>A doctor is diagnosed with heart disease and jokes that he can probably fix himself.</i>