

Breaking Through to Recovery

By Using The “Defense Mechanisms” Worksheet

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Part I: Definitions and Examples of Defense Mechanisms

Defense mechanisms are those unconscious psychological techniques that people use to keep from fully experiencing the reality of their situations. Defense mechanisms are psychological strategies used by individuals (and by extension, groups of individuals) to cope with reality, to maintain self-image, and to reduce emotional or psychological distress.

Everyone uses defense mechanisms. They are necessary part of life. They can become counter-therapeutic or pathological when they are used repeatedly to ignore the warning signs that something is “wrong”. Defense mechanisms, initially used to reduce distress and to protect us from “harm”, can eventually lose their benefit when they are used as a part of a pattern of dysfunctional behavior. Defense mechanisms that distort enough reality over time become maladaptive and enable persist self-destructive behavior.

The defense mechanisms listed below are commonly used to describe psychological processes used by people to keep from “seeing” the extent of their problems and to allow them to comfortably continue their problematic behavior.

Projection - Projection is the act of ascribing our own unacknowledged thoughts, feelings, motives, or behavior to others. Projection allow people to keep their own self-image intact by projecting those thoughts, feelings, behaviors, or motives onto others. An example might be the spouse who is having an affair accusing the other spouse of infidelity.

Rationalization – Rationalization involves making excuses and justification for one’s behavior. Although the rationalizations may be plausible, they are not the real reasons for the behavior. An example might be, “I drink because we fight so much that I get sad, depressed, and disgusted with myself”. Once someone is alcoholic, the real reason that he drinks is because he is alcoholic. The rest of the explanations are excuses.

Intellectualization – Intellectualization allows us to keep from feeling emotional connection to our behavior. It allows us to focus on the thinking aspects of something to deflect personal connection. An example might be the cannabis addict who tries to divert and deflect attention from talking about the impact of pot on his own life by trying to engage in a debate over legalization of pot.

Minimization – Minimization is the act of making something smaller than it is. “The Problem” may be acknowledged by the extent or the impact of the problem is minimized. An example might be the alcoholic who acknowledges that he has a little drinking

problem, but that he doesn't drink hard liquor, drink everyday, doesn't drink before 5:00, has never gotten a DUI, and is really hurting no one but himself.

Denial – Denial is simply a refusal to accept reality. Generally, people do not really understand that they are “in denial”. They do not know that they are refusing to acknowledge some reality of their lives or circumstances. An example of denial could be the alcoholic simply saying to his spouse that he does not have an addiction or a drinking problem.

Suppression and Repression- Suppression is the deliberate attempt to put off dealing with some emotional issue or condition. Repression is also an attempt to put something painful into the background. Repression is unconscious, however. An example might be Scarlett O'Hara's famous “I'll think about that tomorrow!” statement. Traumatic events might be repressed for psychological survival and health.

Avoidance, deflection, manipulation, hostility, and lying. These are not exactly psychological defenses, but rather tools used by alcoholics and addicts (or spouses) to protect themselves from other people who may be trying to get them to “see” the effect of the dysfunctional behavior on their lives. These tools assist in avoiding the subject, to keep from being confronted with their own behavior and its impact, and to assist them in refusing to accept responsibility for their own behavior.

Blaming – Blaming is projecting responsibility for one's own feelings, decisions, behavior, and happiness/misery onto others.

These are not the only defense mechanisms used and they are not necessarily the classic examples of defenses used in psychoanalytic theory.

Part II

The Defense Mechanisms Worksheet

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Using the descriptions of defense mechanisms given above, give examples of how you used these defenses to avoid dealing with the reality of your circumstances and to persist in your unhealthy behavior.

1. Projection:

Example: "I think you have a spending addiction", while being concerned about one's own drinking problem.

My Examples:

2. Rationalization:

Example: "I work hard all day long; I deserve a little time to myself to drink."

My Examples:

3. Intellectualization:

Example: "Everyone is on a campaign to stop drug abuse, while alcohol is the number one abused drug there is. Because drugs are illegal, my drug of choice is not considered acceptable."

My Examples:

4. Minimization:

Example: "I don't drink nearly as much as my fiend, Fred. I only drink on weekends. I only drink beer. When I drink, I don't drive. I don't get drunk each time I drink. I always get up and go to work."

My Examples:

5. Denial:

Example: "I don't have a drinking problem. My husband overreacts."

My Examples:

6. Suppression:

Example: "If we can just get the kids out of high school, then I can figure out what I want to do about the marriage and the addiction."

My Examples:

7. Avoidance: Example: The alcoholic stays out until he knows the spouse has gone to bed, so that he does not have deal with her questions or comments about his drinking. The alcoholic avoids going around his family of origin because of guilt and shame, or to avoid answering any questions.

My Examples:

8. Deflection: Example: “You can’t talk about my drinking when you a spending money hand over fist. Take care of your own issues instead.”

My Examples:

9. Manipulation: Example: Picking a fight with your spouse so that you can leave the house in an angry fit and go drink.

My Examples:

10. Hostility: Example: Getting angry and making threats to leave when spouse tries to talk to you about your behavior (e.g., drinking, staying out all night, spending, flirting, etc.).

My Examples:

11. Lying: Example: “I have a lot of extra things to do at work so I have to stay late” (you are in fact planning to party with your friends). “I have not been drinking.” “I only drank two beers.”

My Examples:

12. Blaming: Example: “If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t need to drink so much”.

My Examples:
