Defenses

From DSM-IV

Defensive Functioning Scale

Defense mechanisms (or coping styles) are automatic psychological processes that protect the individual against anxiety and from the awareness of internal or external dangers or stressors. Individuals are often unaware of these processes as they operate. Defense mechanisms mediate the individual's reaction to emotional conflicts and to internal and external stressors. The individual defense mechanisms are divided conceptually and empirically into related groups that are referred to as *Defense Levels.*

To use the Defensive Functioning Scale, the clinician should list up to seven of the specific defenses or coping styles (starting with the most prominent) and then indicate the predominant defense level exhibited by the individual. These should reflect the defenses or coping styles employed at the time of evaluation, supplemented by whatever information is available about the individual's defenses or coping patterns during the recent time period that preceded the evaluation. The specific defense mechanisms listed may be drawn from the different Defense Levels.

The Defensive Functioning Axis is presented first, followed by a recording form. The rest of the section consists of a list of definitions for the specific defense mechanisms and coping styles.

Defense Levels and Individual Defense Mechanisms

High adaptive level. This level of defensive functioning results in optimal adaptation in the handling of stressors. These defenses usually maximize gratification and allow the conscious awareness of feelings, ideas, and their consequences. They also promote an optimum balance among conflicting motives. Examples of defenses at this level are

•anticipation
•affiliation
•altruism
•humor
•self-assertion
•self-observation
•sublimation
•suppression

Mental inhibitions (compromise formation) level. Defensive functioning at this level keeps potentially threatening ideas, feelings, memories, wishes, or fears out of awareness. Examples are

•displacement
•dissociation
•intellectualization
•isolation of affect

•reaction formation
•repression
•undoing

Minor image-distorting level. This level is characterized by distortions in the image of the self, body, or others that may be employed to regulate self-esteem. Examples are

•devaluation
•idealization
•omnipotence

Disavowal level. This level is characterized by keeping unpleasant or unacceptable stressors, impulses, ideas, affects, or responsibility out of awareness with or without a misattribution of these to external causes. Examples are

•denial
•projection
•rationalization

Major image-distorting level. This level is characterized by gross distortion or misattribution of the image of self or others. Examples are

•autistic fantasy
•projective identification
•splitting of self-image or image of others

Action level. This level is characterized by defensive functioning that deals with internal or external stressors by action or withdrawal. Examples are

•acting out
•apathetic withdrawal
•help-rejecting complaining
•passive aggression

Level of defensive dysregulation. This level is characterized by failure of defensive regulation to contain the individual's reaction to stressors, leading to a pronounced break with objective reality. Examples are

•delusional projection
•psychotic denial
•psychotic distortion

From Valliant
Mature Defenses

Altruism

Using constructive and instinctually gratifying service to others to undergo a vicarious experience. It includes benign and constructive reaction formation. Altruism is distinguished from altruistic surrender, in which a surrender of direct gratification or of instinctual needs takes place in favor

of fulfilling the needs of others to the detriment of the self, and the satisfaction can only be enjoyed vicariously through introjection.

Anticipation

Realistically anticipating or planning for future inner discomfort. The mechanism is goal-directed and implies careful planning or worrying and premature but realistic affective anticipation of dire and potentially dreadful outcomes.

Asceticism

Eliminating the pleasurable effects of experiences. There is a moral element in assigning values to specific pleasures. Gratification is derived from renunciation, and asceticism is directed against all base pleasures perceived consciously.

Humor

Using comedy to overtly express feelings and thoughts without personal discomfort or immobilization and without producing an unpleasant effect on others. It allows the person to tolerate and yet focus on what is too terrible to be borne; it is different from with, a form of displacement that involves distraction from the affective issue.

Sublimation

Achieving impulse gratification and the retention of goals but altering a socially objectionable aim or object to a socially acceptable one. Sublimation allows instincts to be channeled, rather than blocked or diverted. Feelings are acknowledged, modified, and directed toward a significant object or goal, and modest instinctual satisfaction occurs.

Suppression

Consciously or semiconsciously postponing attention to a conscious impulse or conflict. Issues may be deliberately cut off, but they are not avoided. Discomfort is acknowledged but minimized.

Narcissistic Defenses*

Denial

Avoiding the awareness of some painful aspect of reality by negating sensory data. Although repression defends against affects and drive derivatives, denial abolishes external reality. Denial may be used in both normal and pathological states.

Distortion

Grossly reshaping external reality to suit inner needs (including unrealistic megalomanic beliefs, hallucinations, wish-fulfilling delusions) and using

sustained feelings of delusional superiority or entitlement.

Projection

Perceiving and reacting to unacceptable inner impulses and their derivatives as though they were outside the self. On a psychotic level, this defense mechanism takes the form of frank delusions about external reality (usually persecutory) and includes both perception of one's own feelings in another and subsequent acting on the perception (psychotic paranoid delusions). The impulses may derive from the id or the superego (hallucinated recriminations) but may undergo transformation in the process. Thus, according to Freud's analysis of paranoid projections, homosexual libidinal impulses are transformed into hatred and then projected onto the object of the unacceptable homosexual impulse.

Immature Defenses

Acting out

Expressing an unconscious wish or impulse through action to avoid being conscious of an accompanying affect. The unconscious fantasy is lived out impulsively in behavior, thereby gratifying the impulse, rather than the prohibition against it. Acting out involves chronically giving in to an impulse to avoid the tension that would result from the postponement of expression.

Blocking

Temporarily or transiently inhibiting thinking. Affects and impulses may also be involved. Blocking closely resembles repression but differs in that tension arises when the impulse, affect, or thought is inhibited.

Hypochondriasis

Exaggerating or overemphasizing an illness for the purpose of evasion and regression. Reproach arising from bereavement, loneliness, or unacceptable aggressive impulses toward others is transformed into self-reproach and complaints of pain, somatic illness, and neurasthenia. In hypochondriasis, responsibility can be avoided, guilt may be circumvented, and instinctual impulses are warded off. Because hypochondriacal introjects are ego-alien, the afflicted person experiences dysphoria and a sense of affliction.

Introjection

Internalizing the qualities of an object. Although vital to development, introjection also serves specific defensive functions. When used as a defense, it can obliterate the distinction between the subject and the object. Through the introjection of a loved object, the painful awareness of separateness or the threat of loss may be avoided. Introjection of a feared object serves to avoid anxiety when the aggressive characteristics of the

object are internalized, thus placing the aggression under one's own control. A classic example is identification with the aggressor. An identification with the victim may also take place, whereby the self-punitive qualities of the objects are taken over and established within one's self as a symptom or character trait.

Passive-aggressive

Expressing aggression toward others indirectly through passivity, masochism, behavior and turning against the self. Manifestations of passive-aggressive behavior include failure, procrastination, and illnesses that affect others more than
oneself.

Regression

Attempting to return to an earlier libidinal phase of functioning to avoid the tension and conflict evoked at the present level of development. It reflects the basic tendency to gain instinctual gratification at a less-developed period. Regression is a normal phenomenon as well, as a certain amount of regression is essential for relaxation, sleep, and orgasm in sexual intercourse. Regression is also considered an essential concomitant of the creative process.

Schizoid fantasy

Indulging in autistic retreat in order to resolve conflict and to obtain gratification. Interpersonal intimacy is avoided, and eccentricity serves to repel others. The person does not fully believe in the fantasies and does not insist on acting them out.

Somatization

Converting psychic derivatives into bodily symptoms and tending to react with somatic manifestations, rather than psychic manifestations. In desomatization, infantile somatic responses are replaced by thought and affect; in resomatization, the person regresses to earlier somatic forms in the face of unresolved conflicts.

Neurotic Defenses

Controlling

Attempting to manage or regulate events or objects in the environment to minimize anxiety and to resolve inner conflicts.

Displacement

Shifting an emotion or drive cathexis from one idea or object to another that resembles the original in some aspect or quality. Displacement permits the symbolic representation of the original idea or object by one that is less highly cathected or evokes less distress.

Externalization

Tending to perceive in the external world and in external objects elements of one's own personality, including instinctual impulses, conflicts, moods, attitudes, and styles of thinking. Externalization is a more general term than projection.

Inhibition

Consciously limiting or renouncing some ego functions, alone or in combination, to evade anxiety arising out of conflict with instinctual impulses, the superego, or environmental forces or figures.

Intellectualization

Excessively using intellectual processes to avoid affective expression or experience. Undue emphasis is focused on the inanimate in order to avoid intimacy with people, attention is paid to external reality to avoid the expression of inner feelings, and stress is excessively placed on irrelevant details to avoid perceiving the whole. Intellectualization is closely allied to rationalization.

Isolation

Splitting or separating an idea from the affect that accompanies it but is repressed. Social isolation refers to the absence of object relationships.

Rationalization

Offering rational explanations in an attempt to justify attitudes, beliefs, or behavior that may otherwise be unacceptable. Such underlying motives are usually instinctually determined.

Dissociation

Temporarily but drastically modifying a person's character or one's sense of personal identity to avoid emotional distress. Fugue states and hysterical conversion reactions are common manifestations of dissociation. Dissociation may also be found in counterphobic behavior, dissociative identity disorder, and the use of pharmacological highs or religious joy.

Reaction formation

Transforming an unacceptable impulse into its opposite. Reaction formation is characteristic of obsessional neurosis, but it may occur in other forms of neuroses as well. If this mechanism is frequently used at any early stage of ego development, it can become a permanent character trait, as in an obsessional character.

Repression

Expelling or withholding from consciousness an idea or feeling. Primary

repression refers to the curbing of ideas and feelings before they have attained consciousness: secondary repression excludes from awareness what was once experienced at a conscious level. The repressed is not really forgotten in that symbolic behavior may be present. This defense differs from suppression by effecting conscious inhibition of impulses to the point of losing and not just postponing cherished goals. Conscious perception of instincts and feelings is blocked in repression.

Sexualization

Endowing an object or function with sexual significance that it did not previously have or possessed to a smaller degree in order to ward off anxieties associated with prohibited impulses or their derivatives.

Adapted by from Vaillant GE: Adaptation to Life. Little Brown, Boston, 1977; Semrad E: The operation of ego defenses in object loss. In The Loss of Loved Ones, DM Moriarity, editor. Charles C Thomas, Springfield, IL, 1967; and Bibring GL, Dwyer TF, Huntington DS, Valenstein AA: A study of the psychological process in pregnancy and of the earliest mother-child relationship: Methodological considerations. Psychoanal Stud Child 16:25, 1961.
*The categorization of these defenses as narcissistic is controversial. Many psychoanalysts would subsume them under "Immature Defenses."