

## Defense Mechanisms

### 1. Denial

Denial is the refusal to accept reality or fact, acting as if a painful event, thought or feeling did not exist. It is considered one of the most primitive of the defense mechanisms because it is characteristic of early [childhood](#) development. Many people use denial in their everyday lives to avoid dealing with painful feelings or areas of their life they don't wish to admit. For instance, a person who is a functioning alcoholic will often simply deny they have a drinking problem, pointing to how well they function in their job and relationships.

### 2. Regression

Regression is the reversion to an earlier stage of development in the face of unacceptable thoughts or impulses. For an example an adolescent who is overwhelmed with fear, anger and growing sexual impulses might become clingy and start exhibiting earlier childhood behaviors he has long since overcome, such as bedwetting. An adult may regress when under a great deal of stress, refusing to leave their bed and engage in normal, everyday activities.

### 3. Projection

Projection is the misattribution of a person's undesired thoughts, feelings or impulses onto another person who does not have those thoughts, feelings or impulses. Projection is used especially when the thoughts are considered unacceptable for the person to express, or they feel completely ill at ease with having them. For example, a spouse may be angry at their significant other for not listening, when in fact it is the angry spouse who does not listen. Projection is often the result of a lack of insight and acknowledgement of one's own motivations and feelings.

### 4. Reaction Formation

Reaction Formation is the converting of unwanted or dangerous thoughts, feelings or impulses into their opposites. For instance, a woman who is very angry with her boss and would like to quit her job may instead be overly kind and generous toward her boss and express a desire to keep working there forever. She is incapable of expressing the negative emotions of anger and unhappiness with her job, and instead becomes overly kind to publicly demonstrate her lack of anger and unhappiness.

### 5. Repression

Repression is the unconscious blocking of unacceptable thoughts, feelings and impulses. The key to repression is that people do it unconsciously, so they often have very little control over it. "Repressed memories" are memories that have been unconsciously blocked from access or view. But because [memory](#) is very malleable and ever-changing, it is not like playing back a DVD of your life. The DVD has been filtered and even altered by your life experiences, even by what you've read or viewed.

## 6. Displacement

Displacement is the redirecting of thoughts feelings and impulses directed at one person or object, but taken out upon another person or object. People often use displacement when they cannot express their feelings in a safe manner to the person they are directed at. The classic example is the man who gets angry at his boss, but can't express his anger to his boss for fear of being fired. He instead comes home and kicks the dog or starts an argument with his wife. The man is redirecting his anger from his boss to his dog or wife. Naturally, this is a pretty ineffective defense mechanism, because while the anger finds a route for expression, it's misapplication to other harmless people or objects will cause additional problems for most people.

## 7. Intellectualization

Intellectualization is the overemphasis on thinking when confronted with an unacceptable impulse, situation or behavior without employing any emotions whatsoever to help mediate and place the thoughts into an emotional, human context. Rather than deal with the painful associated emotions, a person might employ intellectualization to distance themselves from the impulse, event or behavior. For instance, a person who has just been given a terminal medical diagnosis, instead of expressing their sadness and grief, focuses instead on the details of all possible fruitless medical procedures.

## 8. Rationalization

Offering a socially acceptable and apparently more or less logical explanation for an act or decision actually produced by unconscious impulses. The person rationalizing is not intentionally inventing a story to fool someone else, but instead is misleading self as well as the listener. Examples: (1) a man buys a new car, having convinced himself that his older car won't make it through the winter. (2) a woman with a closet full of dresses buys a new one because she doesn't have anything to wear. Rationalization is the cognitive distortion of "the facts" to make an event or an impulse less threatening. We do it often enough on a fairly conscious level when we provide ourselves with excuses. But for many people, with sensitive egos, making excuses comes so easy that they never are truly aware of it. In other words, many of us are quite prepared to believe our lies. Controversial behaviors or feelings are justified and explained in a seemingly rational or logical manner to avoid the true explanation.

## 9. Sublimation

Sublimation is simply the channeling of unacceptable impulses, thoughts and emotions into more acceptable ones. For instance, when a person has sexual impulses they would like not to act upon, they may instead focus on rigorous exercise. Refocusing such unacceptable or harmful impulses into productive use helps a person channel energy that otherwise would be lost or used in a manner that might cause the person more anxiety.

Sublimation can also be done with humor or fantasy. Humor, when used as a defense mechanism, is the channeling of unacceptable impulses or thoughts into a light-hearted story or joke. Humor reduces the intensity of a situation, and places a cushion of laughter between the person and the impulses. Fantasy, when used as a defense mechanism, is the channeling of unacceptable or unattainable desires into imagination. For example, imagining one's ultimate career goals can be helpful when one experiences temporary setbacks in academic achievement. Both can help a person look at a situation in a different way, or focus on aspects of the situation not previously explored.