

Defense Mechanism	Definition	Example
Denial	Refusing to accept the reality of a situation or experience, because acknowledging it would be too emotionally painful or overwhelming.	A person who drinks alcohol daily insists they do not have a drinking problem. Despite negative consequences due to their drinking, they refuse to accept that their alcohol consumption is problematic.
Repression	Pushing uncomfortable thoughts or memories into the unconscious mind to avoid dealing with them consciously.	A child who was abused by a family member might have no recollection of the abuse as an adult. The memory is too painful, so the mind buries it deep within the unconscious.
Projection	Attributing one's unwanted thoughts, feelings, or impulses to another person, often as a way of avoiding personal responsibility or guilt.	A person feeling guilty about lying might accuse someone else of being dishonest. They project their feelings of dishonesty onto another person.
Displacement	Redirecting negative emotions or impulses from their original source to a less threatening target, often to cope with anger or frustration.	After a stressful day at work, a husband comes home and yells at his wife. Instead of addressing his anger toward his boss, he displaces it onto a less threatening target.
Rationalization	Creating justifications or excuses for one's behavior or emotions to avoid confronting the real reasons.	After not getting promoted, a person might say they did not want the higher responsibility anyway, even if they were previously excited about the possibility.
Intellectualization	Focusing on the intellectual aspects of a situation rather than the emotional ones, often as a way of avoiding painful feelings.	Instead of expressing the emotional pain of a recent breakup, someone might study the psychological processes of grief and heartbreak, distancing themselves from their feelings by examining the situation purely intellectually.
Reaction formation	Behaving in a manner opposite to one's true feelings to conceal or deny them.	A person who harbors feelings of prejudice might go out of their way to be overly kind and generous to individuals from the group they have prejudiced feelings toward. They overcompensate in the opposite direction of their actual feelings.
Sublimation	Channeling negative emotions or impulses into socially acceptable behaviors	A person with aggressive tendencies might channel those feelings into contact sports, like boxing or football.

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	or activities, such as engaging in artistic pursuits or exercise to cope with stress.	This way, they convert their unacceptable urges into a more acceptable form.
Regression	Reverting to earlier stages of development or behaviors typically associated with childhood to cope with stress or difficult emotions.	An adult, when facing marital problems, might start to act childishly, throwing tantrums or sulking, reverting to an earlier stage of development.
Undoing	Attempting to “undo” or compensate for an undesirable thought, feeling, or action by engaging in behaviors that symbolically negate it.	After saying something hurtful to a friend, a person might be excessively kind or generous to them in an attempt to “undo” the harm they caused.
Identification	Adopting the characteristics, beliefs, or behaviors of another person or group, often as a way of managing feelings of insecurity or inadequacy.	A bullied child might start emulating the behavior of his bully, trying to feel powerful by identifying with the aggressor.

**Table 17.1** Common Defense Mechanisms (Bailey & Pico, 2020)