

Defense Mechanism

Dr. Paul Brownback: “The use of psychology should be restricted to the periphery of the discipling process because the core is the rightful domain of God’s Word. Psychology can provide insights and specifics regarding human behavior by describing the syndrome of symptoms of emotional and behavioral problems related to what is called a disorder, not sin of fallen man”. (See Psychology p. 66)

The following information was taken from Pneumanetics class notes.

The definition of self-defense mechanism are the ways people react to frustration and conflict by deceiving themselves about their real desires and goals in an effort to maintain their self-esteem and avoid anxiety.

The purpose of self-defense mechanisms are:

1. to reduce emotional conflict and anxiety
2. to alleviate the effectiveness of dramatic experiences
3. to soften failure and disappointment
4. to eliminate clashes between attitudes and reality
5. to help the individual maintain his sense of adequacy and personal worth to avoid a loss of self-esteem

The Scriptures bearing on defense mechanisms:

1. **Prov. 16:2**; *all the ways of man are clean in his own site, but the Lord weighs the motives.*
2. **Prov. 21:2**; *every man’s way is right in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the hearts.*
3. **Jer. 17:9-10**; *The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; Who can understand it? I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds.*
4. **Eccl. 1:16**; *I said to myself “Behold, I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has observed a wealth of wisdom and knowledge.*
5. **Rom. 7:11**; *for sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.*
6. **Rom. 3:20**; *because by the works of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for through the law comes knowledge of sin.*

Defense mechanisms are sinful because all forms of deceit, including self-deceit are sin.

Prov. 14:8; *the wisdom of the prudent (sensible) is to understand his way, but the folly (foolishness) of fools is deceit.* The human heart, mind, will and emotions are deceitful, and we cannot understand the dimensions of human depravity. Even some good deeds that humans do can be done unconsciously for simple motives to impress others into believing that we are basically good.

In discipling, the Facilitator may need to identify defense mechanisms and bring them into the open by increasing the individual's insight of themselves and assist the person in analyzing their blind spots and motives.

Immature persons keep making the same mistakes in life because they do not make an effort to analyze their own blind spots. Minirith and Meier, et al, 1982

Self-deceit may occur and interfere in thinking, emotions and behavior. (See the Nature of Man p. 44)

1. The tendencies are in the old self of man and cannot be considered an ideal method of coping with problems of life.
2. Defenses may involve a high degree of self-deception and distortion of reality and may create more problems than they solve.
3. Defenses may interfere with relationships.
4. Most people are unaware of their defensive behavior and do not realize the threat of self-worth and anxiety that is behind the mechanisms.
5. A major mark of defense behavior is the intensity of its response. Erotic defenses tend to be more rigid and extreme than normal defenses.

The following are a list of self defense mechanisms:

Denial is the unconscious, not aware of doing it, defense mechanisms of denying the existence of painful facts. This defense enables a person to escape from painful thoughts, actions, events, and the anxiety they produce. It is a failure to perceive that they even exist and is called the Ostrich syndrome.

Rationalization is the unconscious defense of giving some acceptable or questionable excuses for one's behavior or actions to justify their behavior and to relieve disappointment. **Prov. 21:2** *every man's way is right in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs (pondereth) the hearts.*

Rationalization is the most frequently used defense mechanism. The basic behavioral purpose is to ward off feelings of guilt, anxiety or discouragement. If it is effective, the individual can do what he wants, think what he wants, and continue to act in the face of disappointment without losing his self-respect or feeling uncomfortable. Goldenson, 1970, P.1094. Rationalizing makes one feel more comfortable at the expense of deceiving ourselves, spending time justifying our mistakes and misdeeds instead of correcting them.

Projection is shifting the blame of one's faults to others. It is exonerating oneself from responsibility by justifying faulty behavior. A constant pattern of blaming others interferes with relationships, generates antagonism, intolerance and suspicion. When a person will not take responsibility for one's own predicament, blame and suspicion will be projected on others for causing problems, harm, or plotting his/her downfall. **Rom. 2:1-3** *Therefore you have no excuse, every one of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things. And do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment upon those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God?*

Regression is reverting to immature behavior, returning to reaction patterns that gave comfort or relief at an earlier period of time. Children who cannot resolve their emotional problems and sometimes regressed to sulking, weeping, or temper tantrums as a means of getting what they want, may as adults do the same thing or become helpless and indecisive requiring others to solve their problems for them as their parents did. The tendency for regression is found in individuals who got away with immature behavior as they were growing up. A parent who gives in to the child, who cries and pouts, may set a pattern which will be revived when the individual meets problems later on in life. Over protectiveness of parents can cause regressive behavior patterns later in life when they encounter difficulties that are too difficult to handle.

Repression is related to denial to hold down or keep back painful or threatening experiences and impulses and as such are automatically excluded from the consciousness. Traumatic events and disturbing experiences are pushed into the unconscious because the individual cannot tolerate the anxieties they generate. The memories may be gone, but they still influence behavior, and as one becomes aware of them, they may produce intense anxiety. It is a form of escape, but it is usually better to face problems than to ignore or evade them. Repression is the basic defense mechanism that is used frequently to protect the ego. It comes into play when we fail to perceive unpleasant realities, or when we conceal objectionable impulses by “reacting” to the opposite extreme and protect ourselves from hurt by withdrawing, passivity, intellectualism and emotional insulation. We cannot say I won’t repress because this mechanism operates under automatic, unconscious level. To keep it in check we have to approach it indirectly by getting into the habit of sharing our feelings openly and encouraging our children to express their feelings. If we create an accepting and secure atmosphere feelings of anxiety are unlikely to arise. Goldenson, p. 1130.

Reaction formation is the unconscious defense mechanism of going to the opposite extreme. It is protecting one from unacceptable impulses through behavior that is the reverse of our actual feelings, to conceal indifference, become over solicitous, to deny ingratitude, become effusive, excessive emotion, resist hostile impulses or become over friendly. The behavior is generally exaggerated uncompromising or inappropriate. Goldenson, p.1098.

Emotional insulation is an unconscious, not aware of doing it, defense mechanism of indifference and attachment to avoid letdown from disappointment and frustration. Rejection and fear of disappointment can cause passivity and emotional isolation that often go together. The depressed person can detach himself so completely that he loses the power to even react to fortunate events. (See Rejection p. 163)

Idealization or identification is a defense for overestimating the character or abilities of another person. It is when a person assumes the ideas, behaviors, and traits of another person. It serves a double purpose of increasing emotional security and self-esteem. It increases our self-esteem when we identify with the person whom we idolize. This could take the form of hero worship and create an emotional bond however fictitious that gives him strength and encouragement. Goldenson, 1970, p. 590.

Intellectualism is the unconscious mechanism of concealing feelings through intellectual activity. It can be manifested by analyzing away the differences between right and wrong, by

sidetracking emotions and becoming preoccupied with meaningless details or by working out emotions as if they were problems in accounting, i.e. adding up all the reasons for in one column and all the reasons against in another.

Displacement is the unconscious defense of transferring emotional reactions from one object to another, i.e. taking it out on an innocent person. This behavior or emotion is directed at a safe person, place or thing. This is the old saying that dad takes it out on mom, mom takes it out on the child, and the child takes it out on the dog. This reaction can take far more benign forms. A child who succeeds in repressing all resentment in extreme cases can rebel against all authority. Goldenson, 1970, p. 338-339.

Fantasizing is escaping the pain of reality through daydreaming. A person may seem spacey and out of touch with the real world.

Suppression is indefinitely postponing dealing with conflict. They think they will deal with the conflict later, but later never comes.

Remedies:

1. **Ps. 139:23** *search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my anxious thoughts.*
2. **2 Cor. 13:5** *Test yourself to see if you are in the faith. Examine yourselves, do you not recognize this about yourself that Jesus Christ is in you, unless indeed you fail the test.*
3. **Eph. 4:15** *but speaking the truth in love. Lord to grow up in all aspects into him who is the head, even Christ.*
4. Larry Crabb: The mature Christian acknowledges everything to God, not necessarily to everyone. Wisdom is knowing when and how I should express my emotions under control, this does not mean that one experiences only positive emotions. A full emotion is determined by acknowledging the feelings, whatever they are. The principle is when something bad happens, experience the emotion don't pretend. Consciously shift to the volitional choice of what I do based on Biblical truth. Subordinate expression of emotion to the will of God.
5. Realize that stripping defense mechanism may be painful. Strip the person gradually of their emotions or they may break from the overwhelming emotional pain of dealing with reality. They must admit and walk in the truth as a way of life.
6. Exercise forgiveness and yielding rights.
7. Repent and confession.
8. Choose to love others
9. See what God can use in weakness by turning them into strengths.

Because disciples differ, some need strong encouragement, **1 Thess. 5:14** *We urge you brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted (feeble-minded) (timid), help the weak, be patient with everyone.* It is not easy to know how much pressure to exert, when and in what ways, so keep the rest of the verse in mind - be patient with everyone. Feedback should provide

the insight that you need to make the decision of when and how to strip defense mechanisms and offer suggestions. Evasive tactics can be interpreted in any number of ways. They offer little understanding, except that you know there is something still in the way of commitment to transform. "Prayer can be a benefit, never as the purpose of inviting a counselee to pray, but much can be learned about the counselee from the form and content of prayers. The counselee should be aware of this". J. Adams, 1979, p. 66-67.

The sources for much of this material:

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Goldenson, R. M. 1970. *The Encyclopedia of human behavior*. Garden City, New York, Doubleday.

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