

APPENDIX III

DEFENSE MECHANISMS

We've now arrived at the last stage of schema management. Defense mechanisms are the foot soldiers of the schema modes that arise as maladaptive thoughts and behaviors. You can now see the full sequence that occurs in the mind as a result of a trauma.

Trauma → Schema → Schema Mode →
Defense Mechanism

Defense mechanisms are an important component of the ABCDE practice outlined in Chapter 8. It's vital to know them because they are usually the first indication that a schema and a resulting schema mode are operating in any given moment.

For example, when I see myself going to great people-pleasing lengths, I know that my small self's Compliant Surrenderer schema mode is operating. That means I have work to do that day, because schemas must be addressed every time they interfere with one's life!

It's important to note that a defense mechanism is a *thought*, such as *There's no way I could've known that the chip was going to blow up* or a *behavior*, such as avoiding a party where you're likely to see your ex-partner. Beliefs can also serve as defense mechanisms, which complicates matters, given their ability to shape perception.

They stem from deep-seated conscious and unconscious assumptions that convince you you're a small self. The key thing to realize about defense mechanisms is that they protect you in the short term but are maladaptive in the long term for many reasons, not the least of which is that they prevent you from living and experiencing a full human life. Most critically though, they prevent you from fully knowing the truth about yourself and your life. Likewise, they prevent others from knowing the same about you, hindering the ability to connect and bond healthily.

Thought-based defense mechanisms manifest as cognitive distortions, like overgeneralization. For example, saying "You never think about me when making a decision!" reflects this distortion. Cognitive distortions attempt to bend reality into whatever the small self/schema mode needs it to be, often to maintain beliefs or justify feelings and reactions. It can be helpful to search the internet for a list of these if you want to get further into this, but it's not necessary.

Acting Out: Performing an extreme behavior to express thoughts or feelings the person feels incapable of expressing. Instead of saying "I'm angry with you," someone who acts out may throw a book or punch a hole in a wall. When a person acts out, it can serve as a pressure release and often helps the individual feel calmer and peaceful once again. For instance, a child's temper tantrum when they don't get their way with a parent is a form of acting out. Self-injury may also be a form of acting out, expressing in physical pain what one cannot stand to feel emotionally. (Note: There are several other reasons for self-harm besides acting out.)

Assertiveness: The presentation of a person's needs or thoughts in a respectful, direct, and firm manner. Communication styles

exist on a continuum, ranging from passive to aggressive, with assertiveness falling neatly in between. People who are passive and communicate accordingly tend to be good listeners, but rarely speak up for themselves or their needs in a relationship. People who are aggressive and communicate aggressively tend to be good leaders, but often at the expense of being able to listen empathetically to others and their ideas and needs. Assertive people strike a balance by speaking up for themselves, expressing their opinions and needs respectfully yet firmly, and actively listening to others.

Avoidance: A behavioral defense in which the person takes actions to avoid a situation or, much more often, the feelings likely to result from that situation. Avoiding a party your ex-lover is attending is one example. Drinking and drug use are also behavioral avoidance mechanisms.

Compartmentalization: A milder form of dissociation occurs when parts of oneself remain disconnected from awareness of other parts. An example might be an honest person who cheats on their income tax return and keeps their two value systems distinct and disintegrated while remaining unconscious of the cognitive dissonance.

Compensation: Psychologically counterbalancing perceived weaknesses by emphasizing strength in other areas. By highlighting and focusing on one's strengths, a person recognizes they cannot be great at everything. For instance, when someone says, "I may not know how to cook, but I can do the dishes perfectly," they're trying to compensate for their lack of cooking skills by emphasizing their cleaning skills. When done appropriately and not in an attempt to overcompensate, compensation can help reinforce a person's self-esteem and self-image.

Denial: The refusal to accept reality or fact, suggesting that a painful event, thought, or feeling doesn't exist. Psychologists consider it one of the most primitive defense mechanisms because it typically emerges during 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 functioning alcoholic will often simply deny they have a drinking problem, pointing to how well they function in their job and relationships.

Displacement: 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 believe they cannot safely express their feelings. The classic example is the man who gets angry at his boss but can't express his anger for fear of being fired. He instead comes home and kicks the dog or starts an argument with his wife. The man redirects his anger from his boss to his dog or wife.

Dissociation: Occurs when a person is no longer present at the moment, even shifting into another representation of themselves to continue navigating the moment. A person who dissociates often loses track of time or themselves and their usual thought processes and memories. In extreme cases, dissociation can lead to a person believing they have multiple selves (dissociative identity disorder). In this manner, a person who dissociates can "disconnect" from the real world for a time and live in a different world that is not cluttered with unbearable thoughts, feelings, or memories.

Intellectualization: The overemphasis on thinking when confronted with an unacceptable impulse, situation, or behavior with-

out employing emotions 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. Conspiratorial thinking also often falls under this category.

Projection: The misattribution of a person's undesired thoughts, feelings, or impulses onto another person who does not have those thoughts, feelings, or impulses. People especially use projection when they view certain thoughts as unacceptable or feel deeply uncomfortable 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 often results from a lack of insight and acknowledgment of one's motivations and feelings.

Rationalization: Twisting a situation into a different light or offering a different explanation for one's perceptions, speech, or behaviors in the face of reality. For instance, a woman dating a man she adores is suddenly and painfully dumped, so she reframes the situation in her mind and thinks, *No big deal—he was a loser anyway*. Or my all-time personal favorite as a therapist, “I didn't have time to complete my eight minutes of daily therapy homework.”

Reaction Formation: 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 cannot express the negative emotions of anger and unhappiness with her job and instead becomes overly kind to publicly demonstrate her supposed lack of anger and unhappiness.

Regression: The reversion to an earlier stage of development in the face of unacceptable thoughts or impulses. For example, an adolescent who is overwhelmed with fear, anger, and growing sexual impulses might become clingy and start exhibiting earlier childhood behaviors they have long since overcome, such as bed-wetting. An adult may regress under tremendous stress, refusing to leave their bed or engage in everyday activities.

Repression: 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 have been unconsciously blocked from access or view. But because memory is very malleable and ever-changing, it is not like playing back a recording of your life. The video has been filtered and even altered by your life experiences or what you've read or viewed. If you struggle to feel subtle sensations/emotions, it can be due to repression. Therapy would likely help.

Sublimation: Channeling unacceptable impulses, thoughts, and emotions into more acceptable ones. For instance, when a person has sexual impulses they do not want to act on, 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. People can also use humor or fantasy as a way to sublimate. Humor, when used as a defense mechanism, is the channeling of unacceptable impulses or thoughts into a

lighthearted story or joke. Humor reduces the intensity of a situation and places a cushion of laughter between the person and the impulses.

When used as a defense mechanism, fantasy is channeling 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 a problem not previously explored.

Undoing: The attempt to take back an unconscious behavior or thought that is unacceptable or hurtful. For instance, after realizing you just insulted your significant other unintentionally, you might spend the next hour praising their beauty, charm, and intellect. By “undoing” the previous action, the person is attempting to counteract the damage done by the original comment.