



Defense Mechanisms

How do you defend yourself against feeling the pain caused by someone who hurt you?

What does the Bible say about defending ourselves?

- But I will sing of Your power; Yes, I will sing aloud of Your mercy in the morning; For You have been my defense And refuge in the day of my trouble (Ps 59:16).
- keeping a clear conscience, so that those who slander you may be put to shame by your good behavior in Christ. (1 Peter 3:16).
- You shall not take revenge nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor (acquaintance, associate, companion) as yourself; I am the LORD. (Lev 19:18).
- Do not avenge yourselves, beloved, but leave room for God's wrath. For it is written: "Vengeance is Mine; I will repay, says the Lord. (Romans 12:19)

What are defense mechanisms?

Defense mechanisms are childhood methods of emotional survival. Unfortunately, the actual pain the child experienced during a trauma remains a reality and causes great damage. The defenses one uses depend on one's level of development and degree of anxiety.

The defense mechanisms are the mental processes that guard people from accessing their root problems. They are the false beliefs and defensive statements that hinder entrance into the memory where the original lie is embedded. They protect the person from the pain and from re-examining the old wound.

They are a vain attempt to heal oneself through denial, suppression and avoidance. Anything we can do to heal ourselves is a refusal of God's grace. They are like brick walls build up to guard against further pain. They help the individual cope with anxiety and prevent the ego from being overwhelmed.

Defenses also occur when we try to protect key parts of an image that we believe is being attacked. Just imagine what might happen if an important part of your presenting self was attacked by someone who was important to you.

- Someone who criticizes you.
- An acquaintance who accused you of being selfish.
- An employer who called you lazy.

Scripture calls these defense mechanisms fortresses, strongholds, and vain imaginations.



- for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, (2 Cor. 10:4,5).

Once you recognize them, they need to be denounced and confessed as (passive) sin because they are vain attempts at self-healing. After you confess the sin and receive God's forgiveness and release, you will be able to move on.

Defense mechanisms have two characteristics in common:

1. They either deny or distort reality.
2. They operate on an unconscious level.

Learn to identify your ways of staying out of touch with your feelings

If you operated on emotional overload as a child, a part of you may have decided that feelings were too hot to handle. You may have learned methods of keeping distance from your feelings. If you have a lifetime of experience in blocking or denying your feelings, it will take time to learn to identify them. Learn to identify your ways of running away from feelings you want to avoid. Here are some examples of ways people use to avoid their feelings. As you read about them, circle the ones you sometimes used.

A brief description of some common ego defenses:

- **Verbal aggression:** Shifts the blame over to someone else.
- **Sarcasm:** disguising the attack in a barbed, humorous message. Sarcastic responses often score high on wit and quick thinking, but their hostile, disconfirming nature usually leads to a counterattack and a mutually destructive defensive spiral.

Distort the information through rationalization, compensation, regression

- **Rationalization.** It helps justify specific behaviors and aids in softening the blow connected with disappointments. Involves explaining away failures or losses by manufacturing "good" reasons to explain away a bruised ego.
- **Compensation.** Consists of masking perceived weaknesses or developing certain positive traits to make up for limitations. Develop behaviors designed to get attention.
- **Regression.** Revert to a form of behavior, an earlier phase of development that they have outgrown, in which the demands are not so great and life was more secure. In the face of severe stress or extreme challenge, may attempt to cope with their anxiety by clinging to immature and inappropriate behaviors.

Avoiding information: avoidance, repression, apathy, displacement

- **Avoidance:** Physically avoiding situations.
- **Repression:** Threatening or painful thoughts and feelings are excluded from awareness. We mentally block something out. An involuntary removal of something



from consciousness. We repress by changing the subject, acting as if we did not understand, and even pretending we didn't hear.

- **Apathy:** Acknowledge the unpleasant situation, but act as if you do not care about it.
- **Displacement** consists of directing energy toward another object or person when the original object or person is inaccessible. We vent aggressive or hostile feelings against people or objects that are seen as less dangerous than the person or person who threatened you original. Displacement allows us to preserve the image that we are potent, that we're in control and can't be pushed around by forces beyond our control. It is a way to cope with anxiety by discharging impulses by shifting from a threatening object to a "safer target." The meek man comes home from work and unloads inappropriate hostility onto his children.

Other Defense Mechanisms

Swallowing a feeling. You are on the verge of crying or feeling angry. You sigh deeply or take a deep breath. You swallow with a gulp. You engage in some kind of physical activity that holds back the feeling.

Taking care of others. You focus on someone else's feelings rather than your own. You are eager to help someone else solve his problems, but you don't really want to talk about your own.

Denial: It is a way of distorting what the individual thinks, feels, or perceives in a traumatic situation. It consists of defending against anxiety by "closing one's eyes" to the existence of threatening reality. Generally operates at preconscious and conscious levels.

Reaction Formation: Defenses against a threatening impulse by actively expressing the opposite impulse. By developing conscious attitudes and behaviors that are diametrically opposed to disturbing desires, we do not have to face the anxiety that would result if we were to recognize these dimensions of ourselves. May mask cruelty with excessive kindness.

Projection: This mechanism of self-deception consists of attributing to others one's own unacceptable desires and impulses. Lustful, aggressive, or other impulses are seen as being possessed by "those people out there, but not by me."

Sublimation: Involves diverting sexual or aggressive energy into other channels, ones that are usually socially acceptable and sometimes even admirable.

Interjection: Consists of taking in and "swallowing" the values and standards of others. (Abused child who assumes the abusing parent's way of handling stresses and thus continues the cycle of child beating.)

Identification: People who feel basically inferior may identify themselves with successful causes, organizations, or people in the hope that they will be perceived as worthwhile.



Intellectualizing: Means that you try to keep thoughts and conversation on rational things rather than on feelings. You may be willing to discuss a list of traits of adult children but unwilling to say how you feel at that particular moment. Or when you feel a flood of emotion coming, you begin to talk about intellectual matters rather than feelings. You talk until you don't feel the emotion anymore.

Disassociation

One common defense against distress is dissociation – that is separating thoughts from physical sensations and emotions to the extent that you become unaware of what is going on around you. It is a common defense for people who were abused as children. Dissociation is a common means of surviving severely stressful events such as sexual or physical abuse; necessary for your psychic survival when you were experiencing times of abuse.

How to help someone surrender their defenses

You may want to ask the Lord Jesus to give them truth about their fear of surrendering their defenses. The truth is, these emotions are coming from their experiences and will override most of their logical suggestions.

Sometimes these strongholds are demonically enforced and must be dismantled by exercising your authority over such spirits with truth. You may pray against these defenses and have the person denounce them through prayers of confession and repentance.

Technique: lead them in prayer of confession

“I understand these defenses were what saved you as a child; they saved you from being destroyed by the emotional overload of the event, but now these defenses have become automatic guards keeping you locked away in bondage.”

Pray with the person out loud.

“Lord Jesus, I confess my sin of and I ask you for your complete forgiveness. I choose to acknowledge this sin and allow you to cleanse me of all my unrighteousness. Make me clean and whole and release me of this sin. I know I am helpless in overcoming it on my own, and unless you set me free I will never be free. I ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.”

Be sure to have them confess specifically what the sin is. Have them declare their total dependence on God freeing them. Have them ask God to release and forgive them of their sin. Have them state their desire to turn from it and receive His grace.

Reassure the person that the strong and powerful feelings they will experience are only emotions and not reality. They are completely safe and no harm will come by feeling the original pain. Help the person see that he has already endured the original event and the emotions he presently feels are merely the residue of the original experience.