Quick Study: Defense Mechanisms

PSYCHOLOGICAL DEFENSE MECHANISMS

- Psychological defense mechanisms help the ego cope with anxiety, frustration, and unacceptable impulses.
- Psychological defense mechanisms help relieve tension between inner psychological reality and the demands of the external world.
- Denial, reaction formation, and projection are considered primitive defenses because they are more out of touch with reality.
- Sublimation, undoing, rationalization, displacement, identification, and intellectualization represent higher levels of functioning.
- Each person has their unique set of psychological defenses that make up their personality.

Rationalization

- Rationalization is a defense process by which plausible reasons justify an action or opinion.
- Rationalization helps the person cope with disappointments by blaming external circumstances.
- A person is using rationalization when, after not getting a job he applied for, he thinks, “I’ll be better off at a different company.”
- A person is using rationalization when, after getting turned down for a date, she says, “That person is really snobby.”
- An abused spouse may rationalize hitting her children as ‘punishment’ after being hit by her spouse.

Repression

- Repression refuses to let into awareness unacceptable impulses but remains unconsciously operative in behavior.
- A person using repression might feel sexually attracted toward members of the same sex but pushes away this intolerable thought from consciousness only to later dream about such sexual impulses.
- A person is using repression when, after years of celibacy, the person begins to eat copious amounts of food.
- A young boy exhibits repression when he has a phobia of dogs but cannot remember the first time he was afraid of them.
Displacement
- Displacement is a defense mechanism in which affect is transferred from one object to another.
- A person is using displacement when he compulsively eats lollipops after having quit smoking.
- A person is using displacement when she begins to compulsively wash her hands after being shamed for masturbating.
- A man is using displacement when he yells at his spouse because he is unable to express anger toward his boss.

Identification
- Identification is a process by which qualities of an external object are absorbed into one’s personality.
- A Bruce Lee fan is using identification when he becomes a disciplined martial art champion.
- A young person is using identification when deciding to follow in her father’s footsteps and become a lawyer.

Intellectualization
- Intellectualization is a process by which content is separated from repressed affect.
- A person uses intellectualization when speaking of his traumatic childhood as if reading a scripted story.
- A victim of sexual assault may use intellectualization by researching factual PTSD criteria instead of addressing her emotional pain in therapy.

Asceticism
- Asceticism is characterized by rigor and self-denial.
- An adult uses asceticism when she refuses to eat or sleep until a major work project is complete.
- An adolescent uses asceticism to cope with sexual tension and desire by refusing to engage in all pleasurable activities.

Reaction Formation
- Reaction formation is a process by which unacceptable impulses are expressed as their opposites.
- Reaction formation helps release anxiety and guilt associated with the true impulse.
- An angry supervisee uses reaction formation when being overly nice to his supervisor.
- A parent with an unwanted child may demonstrate reaction formation by being very overprotective.
- A man who is gay uses reaction formation when he openly dates women and criticizes gay men.
**Introjection and Internalization**
- Introjection is the internalization of outside events or characteristics of other people.
- A victim may use introjection to identify with the aggressor’s behaviors to help protect himself.
- A person uses introjection when putting on her seat belt before driving away in her car.

**Projection**
- Projection places unacceptable feelings from the person feeling them onto another person.
- A highly anxious colleague is projecting when complaining about another colleague’s anxieties.
- A person is using projection when he complains that no one likes him but in reality he does not like himself or others.

**Denial**
- Denial distorts reality and does not acknowledge emotion.
- Denial is uncommon in very young children because they are unable to distinguish between fantasy and reality.
- A person is using denial when he continues to eat unhealthy foods despite his doctor’s orders to eat healthier.
- An alcoholic is in denial when she attends a recovery program but continues to drink alcohol.

**Sublimation**
- A person using sublimation will displace unacceptable instincts for constructive and socially acceptable behaviors.
- A person with major depression may use professional dance to help sublimate suicidal thoughts.
- A person with aggressive impulses may use sublimation by becoming a kickboxing instructor.

**Undoing**
- Undoing is a process by which we avoid being punished for undesirable thoughts or actions.
- A spouse unconsciously undoes his many adulterous acts by buying his partner lavish gifts.
- A person is overly nice to a person she had just insulted in her mind.