

Sticking your head in the sand: Unhealthy defensive mechanisms against stress

Although many theories exist on coping strategies, they are typically divided into two types: Adaptive/Healthy and Maladaptive/Unhealthy. The type of techniques we use are significantly shaped by our personality and life experiences, but they are not necessarily set in stone: New coping strategies can be learned.

When it comes to sports and stress, sometimes the best offense is a good defense. Many psychoanalysts believe that people who are psychologically healthy are more likely to use different types of coping strategies throughout their lifetime. These techniques only become unhealthy if their use *adversely affects a person's physical and/or mental health*.

Theorist, George Eman Valliant divided defense mechanisms into four levels. Let's start by looking at the unhealthy ones.

Level 1: Pathological Defenses

People who use these techniques do so for one purpose: To avoid facing reality.



- ❖ **Delusional Projection:** People who engage in this pathological defense distort reality in order to cope with a problem by projecting their faults and/or vices onto others. For example: A person who bullies others because he believes they would do the same to him.
- ❖ **Denial:** People who use this defense refuse to accept the reality of a problem, often because it's just too terrifying to face. For example: An employee who is unwilling to accept that she can't handle a project, despite the fact that she is stressed, overwhelmed, and working long hours.
- ❖ **Distortion:** People who use this defense only see the parts of reality that they want to see. The rest is ignored. For example: A manager who praises an employee's work while completely overlooking the fact that this person has a severe attitude problem and in reality, is just not worth keeping.

- ❖ **Splitting:** People who use this mechanism view situations or people as either totally good or totally bad. For example: “Once a liar, always a liar.”

Level 2: Immature Defenses

The focus of these defenses is to reduce the distress and anxiety resulting from a stressor. However, people who use these defenses are still choosing not to face reality, and are often considered difficult, immature, or delusional.

- ❖ **Acting out:** People who use this defense purposely engage in irrational or impulsive behavior. For example: A teenager who gets in trouble because he can’t deal with his parents’ divorce.
- ❖ **Fantasy:** When a person can’t face a problem or a stressor, he or she may escape into a fantasy world. For example: A child who gets bullied loses himself in the world of comics or video games.
- ❖ **Idealization:** People who use this defense try to emulate someone they admire, but refuse to believe that their “idol” has any faults, even if they are blatant. For example: A personal assistant who has nothing but good things to say about her boss, in spite of his tendency to insult her in front of others.
- ❖ **Somatization:** This defense mechanism involves turning negative feelings inwards, which can result in anxiety or even illness. For example: When a person’s unresolved guilt “eats them up” psychologically as well as physically (via ulcers, digestive problems, etc.).

- ❖ **Passive Aggression:** An all-too-common defense mechanism. The person who uses it deals with difficult emotions by taking them out on others. For example: A manager who snaps at employees because pressure at work is getting to her.
- ❖ **Projective Identification:** Unlike other defense mechanisms, this particular technique can be a “two-way” defense. Person A projects his or her faults onto Person B. Person B accepts person A’s opinion as true, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. For example: John is stressed out about completing his part of a team project. He tells Anne, who is working on her own part, that she seems worried about meeting her deadline. Anna begins to doubt her ability to complete her part of the project on time.



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