

## Module-9

### Defense Mechanism

Unlike the damage repair mechanisms and task oriented reaction patterns, which are consciously driven processes, defense mechanisms are supposed to be unconsciously driven. So, the moment we accept that these are unconsciously driven we know that the individual using them is not aware of it. This is the basic premise on which the whole construct of defense mechanism is based. This means that once you are in a troublesome condition and anticipate that damage can be done to your ego, you, in an anticipatory move, plan one of these mechanisms and apply it, without being consciously aware that you are trying to defend yourself.

There are several defense mechanisms. The table given below summarizes them.

Denial of reality	Protecting self from unpleasant reality by refusal to perceive or face it.
Fantasy	Gratifying frustrated desires by imaginary achievements.
Repression	Preventing painful or dangerous thoughts from entering consciousness.
Rationalization	Attempting to prove that one's behaviour is "rational" and justifiable and thus worthy of self and social approval.
Projection	Placing blame upon others or attributing one's unethical desires to others.
Reaction formation	Preventing dangerous desires from being expressed by

	exaggerating opposed attitudes and types of behaviour and using them as “barriers”.
Displacement	Discharging pent-up feelings, usually of hostility, on objects less dangerous than those which initially aroused the emotions.
Emotional insulation	Reducing ego involvement and withdrawing into passivity to protect self from hurt.
Intellectualization	Cutting off affective charge hurtful situations or separating incompatible attitudes by logic-tight compartments.
Undoing	Atoning for and thus counteracting immoral desires or acts.
Regression	Retreating to earlier developmental level involving less mature responses and usually a lower level of aspiration.
Identification	Increasing feelings of worth by identifying self with person or institution of illustrious standing.
Introjection	Incorporating external values and standards into ego structure so individual is not at their mercy as external threats.
Compensation	Covering up weakness by emphasizing desirable trait or making up for frustration in one area by overgratification in another.

\* **Source-** Source: Coleman, J. C. (1976). *Abnormal psychology and modern life*. Scott Foresman & Company

## **Denial of reality**

Denial of reality is used to protect oneself from unpleasant reality by refusing to see it or by refusing to face it. Many of you must have experienced such things. If you listen to the experiences of doctors, especially paediatricians, or psychologists working in paediatrics clinic, you might know the other side of the story. In many cases patients tend to deny the initial diagnosis made by the doctor. Say, you are well informed attendant of the patient or the patient himself/ herself and you are told that you have been diagnosed with disorder X where X has social acceptability. Say, your blood sugar level has gone up; this is socially acceptable but medically harmful. Because it is socially acceptable you do not scrutinize the report and its interpretation or revisit another doctor and laboratory for a second confirmatory examination. On the contrary, if the doctor tells that you are diagnosed with disorder AIDS your response might not be the same. This too is medically harmful but the social acceptance is very little compared to blood sugar level. Therefore, the tendency to revisit the doctor's prognosis is higher. You find it hard to believe that you are HIV positive or have AIDS. You find your own reasons to think why the diagnosis is likely to be erroneous. This is denial of reality; you do not accept what the real life situation tells you. Such denials make you feel pleased.

One more example from psychological clinic that is very common is that many parents when told that their young baby is mentally retarded or seem to be autistic, they initially have a hard time believing it. They might question the credibility of the psychologist saying that he' she is too young for such diagnosis. I have personally seen many parents rejecting the diagnosis during the crucial years. They would consult other social agents who would confirm their viewpoint. In fact, a grey market thriving due to this. Many parents realize that the clinical diagnosis is not fetching the desired outcome and hence they visit a *Tantric* or a *Baba*. They follow the unscientific suggestions given by them anticipating that

this would promote well-being of their child. Parents of autistic children, mentally retarded children, other learning disabilities, and many more clinical problems are seen visiting such *babas* and they follow their advice for years. Rather than relying on the consultant clinician they deny the diagnosis and follow methods suggested by the non-clinical agents of the society. After certain number of years they tend to accept the diagnosis. This is how people deny reality at the cost of helping their own baby and helping themselves. This is denial of reality.

Individuals who fall in love with someone usually describe the eyes of the beloved as awfully beautiful. This might be true in few cases but invariably everyone recounts the eyes the same way. Even for squinting eyes the description by and large remains the same. This is denial of reality with an element of positivity attached to it. In the earlier case, when people refuse to listen to the diagnosis of a doctor, denial has negativity attached to it. It is important to note that positive elements do not harm anybody; rather it can be even helpful to certain extent. But if this denial is used with element of negativity wherein you refuse to accept things which are of utmost importance at that point of time then it is likely to cause harm.

Unlike the previous two strategies where one was consciously planning the strategy and then doing things, here the whole operation is unconscious simply because you consider that this could be too detrimental for you and therefore you deny it completely.

## **Fantasy**

Fantasy is a defense mechanism which is used to gratify frustrated or unattainable desires by some type of imaginary achievement. This helps save the self-esteem due to imaginary achievement. There was an old TV serial named '*Mungeri lal ke haseen sapne*'.

This was about a character who always had imaginary achievements. Those of you who have seen it might easily understand this mechanism. There is an interesting dimension to fantasy. You can have two kinds of fantasy— conquering hero fantasy and suffering hero fantasy. In both the cases you remain the central character in the story that you mentally fabricate. Let us take an example. You look at the war veterans and imagine that the honours are being bestowed upon you as you bravely fought for the country. However, you could not survive a grenade attack. The civilian and military authorities come to your cremation to pay homage. Ultimately you succeed becoming a man of recognition. This is an example of suffering hero fantasy.

Let us take example of educational achievement to understand conquering hero fantasy. The JEE results have been declared and you are the topper not only of this year but of all JEE exams conducted till now. So, you are not only enjoying status of a topper but also as an all time topper. Before counselling, the chairman of the all the IITs come to your house to congratulate you and your parents and all IITs are welcoming you to their respective institute. You can sense an increase in the intensity of fantasy. This is an example of conquering hero fantasy.

## **Repression**

Repression helps prevent painful or dangerous thoughts from coming to conscious awareness. We have already discussed the difference between suppression and repression. If you hold your thought and feeling and thinking that the time is not appropriate to express it, this is suppression. As you can make out, this suppression is a conscious process. Repression, on the other hand, is an unconscious mechanism. Before the thought or feeling sprouts it is put in the dark box. Say, you have a dangerous thought which is likely to invite extreme social rejection and scrutiny from your super ego. You might unconsciously try to contain it.

This is repression. You did not even allow it to come to conscious awareness. It is imperative that you will never be aware of the elements you have repressed.

Let us draw a parallel to mining engineering. During digging the earth mining engineers are very cautious of gas leaking out of the burrow. You might find metal reservoir with copper caps in certain mining area. These reservoirs contain gas and the cap prevents it from leakage. Because one does not want to compromise on mining hence reservoirs are created. This is similar to the interplay between our id, ego, and super ego. You want to satisfy your id, you want to maintain the integrity of your ego and you want to tell your superego how well and just you are. But then you have to contain few thoughts that you do not want to surface and come to the awareness. You prevent it from confronting the super ego. That is the process of repression. Now is it that the more you repress the thoughts and desires the more uncomfortable you are within? This could be an obvious interpretation. But this is not the usual case because the thoughts and desires are already repressed therefore they do not even reach the conscious awareness and you still hold that moral ground that you are really just and great.

## **Rationalization**

Rationalization is basically an attempt to prove that your behaviour is justified and therefore you are worthy of self and social approval. Irrespective of what you have done you justify your behaviour. If you have gained something you justify why it was important for you to gain it. If you have not gained then you justify how good it was that you did not get it at that time. We know that the same issue can be handled and interpreted in different ways. This means that you can rationalize your misdeeds and under achievements as well. Most common example is when you see people driving, especially in certain cities of India, people

do not use brakes whether on motorized or non motorized vehicles, as if it is the duty of the other person to use it. In case of an accident they rationalize saying that their vehicle was much far off from yours and when you saw that person coming you should have applied the brake. This is what human beings are capable of. As a defense what we do is that acts or occurrences that are likely to damage the ego structure we try to justify. Although the act of justification is conscious, the fact that I am trying to protect myself and hence is attempting to justify is unconscious.

### **Intellectualization**

In intellectualization one disconnects the affective charges that hurts and thus finds logic for defense. Alternatively, incompatible attitudes are separated by logic and thus one defends oneself. The reflected behaviour shows as if you are indulging in an intellectual enterprise. The moment the blame is shifted on you, you chop the bigger blame into pieces. You have to break it into pieces because you might not have a sound logic for defending your whole action. You break it into certain pieces and for each piece you have a logical defense; and those rationales are so compartmentalized that you say that it is not required to look at the entire behaviour; rather each set has its own justification. Everything becomes very logically compartmentalized and all these compartments are logically tightly fitted.

You do good and bad things, you do socially acceptable and socially unacceptable things and for every action and for every thought you have a justification. This is intellectualization. For example, in recent court case three members of the parliament (MPs) who were involved in showing cash in the parliament saying that they were bribed during the confidence motion were sent to custody. According to them they showed loyalty to their party and even though they had received the cash they did not vote against the party but then

they wanted the chairperson of the lower house to recognize the fact that they were being bribed. Another interesting dimension to it was that two more names came to limelight for the alleged conspiracy. They were also sent to prison. Later while talking to media they all gave sound logic for their action. One of the person alleged to have planned the conspiracy said that he did it to strengthen democracy. The TV channel involved in the sting operation said that they did so not for a sensational news item but to help strengthen Indian democracy. Even the three MPs who had received the money and showed it in the parliament said that they were trying to help democracy. Everybody was trying to strengthen democracy and to fulfil a much bigger cause, one by giving money, other by receiving money and third by recording the money transaction. This is a beautiful illustration of intellectualization. If you look at them in isolation it seems very logical. If you are running a news channel, why should you not record something which could really be path breaking and sensational? If you are a MP and if you are bribed, you just accept it on the camera to prove that people are trying to approach you and you are now playing the whistle blower. This action too has logic. If you break it into pieces all small actions can be fitted into logical compartments and this is what one does in intellectualization.

## **Projection**

Projection is a process wherein one places the blame on others and attributes the unethical thoughts and desires also to others. If you draw a parallel to the classroom setting, it is exactly like putting the transparency at the projector and getting the image on the screen. Earlier in our discussion of normality and the possible range of human reaction we had taken the example of a woman in the Indian culture that is not able to bear a child to see the whole range of possible behaviour. One such possibility was projection where the woman blamed



the faulty deeds of the parents and faulty parenting to be responsible for her not conceiving a baby.

Social constructions are important for human beings. The realization that you do not have a child is not unethical but many of the other things that you weave around it could invite social disapproval and therefore becomes unethical. There are even chances of condemning oneself for not being able to bear a child. Unethical is what your own super ego and social norms do not permit. Being childless challenges your worthiness as a woman; your biological potential to conceive is being challenged; the whole concept of self as a woman gets challenged, and hence one has to defend oneself. Cases where one shows extreme degree of attachment towards the pet and treat it as a human being are examples of projection. The heightened degree of love for the pet is basically projecting feelings for the missing child on the animal. This has complete personal and social acceptability. So, the reflected behaviour does not show any form of defense, rather it shows compassion.

Projection is also used as a technique to decipher the personality of an individual. The projective tests of personality include Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), sentence completion test, word association test, and Rorschach inkblot test. Although we are not going to deliberate on these tests right now, it does show the powerful usages of projection as a technique.

### **Reaction formation**

Reaction formation is a defense mechanism wherein one attempts to prevent dangerous desires from getting expressed by exaggerating the opposed attitudes. This primarily means that you use it as barrier so that the original desire is not visible and at the

same time you display exactly the opposite of what you inwardly feel. You hate somebody like anything but your hatred is not at all reflected; rather you show extreme love for that person.

## **Displacement**

Displacement is characterized by discharging mostly hostile pent up feelings on objects that are considered to be less dangerous. So, initially the person gets emotionally aroused by one stimulus but later the reaction is exhibited on some other stimulus. The steps involved in displacement would be— one, that you should have pent up feelings; two, felt emotions should be leading on to a sense of hostility; and three, the object that you select to displace your emotion on should be less dangerous. The most common example is the case when you are scolded or when you receive punishment from sources which are stronger compared to you, say parents or teachers. You displace the same on those who are subordinate to you. Say, in a family setup the father scolds the mother, the mother in turn scolds the child, the child then scolds the maid and this is how the anger gets displaced. Other forms of displacement could also be when you do not have the option of venting out yourself on animate characters. Then you may also go on to inanimate characters. And those would be the situations when you kick a piece of stone or a ball and you keep kicking it harder and harder till you think that it is enough. These are the popular examples of displacement.

An important characteristic of displacement which makes it different from projection is that in case of projection you anticipate blame for certain things and therefore before the blame comes to you, you project it on something else. So, finally the negative evaluation from the society does not reach you. You do not become the victim of scrutiny because you project the blame on someone or something else. Even if you have unsatisfied desires, you

would project it and this projection safeguards you from undergoing certain degree of negative evaluations whereas in the case of displacement it is not the negative evaluation, rather it is venting out your sense of hostility on characters which are less dangerous.

When you shout at your spouse you know that she would not shout back. The intensity of the reaction will not be the same. In case that does not happen, you will change your strategy. You might then scold your child anticipating that he will not respond. So, every time in the case of displacement you first select a soft target on which whole hostility can be displaced and you also know that you are safe enough as the person concerned will not revert back. Displacement per se is not known to you. One is not aware that he/she is trying to displace hostility; rather most of the time people will say that they are scolding somebody as they have a justification for it. Ask any parent or teacher and they will tell you good reasons why the child deserved the punishment he/she got. Nobody thinks that it could also be a case of displacement.

### **Emotional insulation**

This is a situation where one reduces involvement of one self and withdraws into passivity just as to safeguard oneself from getting hurt. If you are in a situation where you do not have a choice, you have to face what you do not want to then one might display emotional insulation. Human beings can land up in situations where they do not have a choice. One strong possibility is that you realize that you are in a situation where you feel extremely disgusted but you do not have a choice. You can neither show your disgust nor can you get involved in the process and that is the time when you decide to not get involved in the occurrences or the phenomena that is taking place around you and therefore you become more and more passive. For example, you do not want to get caught in the fight between the

child and the mother or between two siblings and therefore concentrate on the TV set. You see something taking place and you pick up the newspaper and get engrossed in it. These are the examples of emotional insulation. As you do not want to get involved in the activity, you show that you are nowhere connected to it and hence do not process it. Because you do not dedicate yourself and you do not allow your mental faculties to process the information therefore your ego nowhere comes at stake. Remember that emotional insulation will be used only when you realize that you can neither escape nor you can get involved in the process.

Remember that we are always focussing on the micro aspects of the human behaviour. If one practices emotional insulation just as a defense it is perfectly okay. Problems arise when you have a critical mass in any given society which starts showing emotional insulation. If that happens then the whole social structure is at stake, the reason being that there could be intense phenomena taking place in the environment to which a critical mass is not being sensitive enough to and therefore a small group overrides the majority and does whatever they want.

## **Identification**

In this you increase your feeling of worthiness by identifying yourself with the person or institution of illustrious standing. Say, you are watching a movie, and you flow with the movie. Say, the lead character is punching the villain and you also feel extra blood flow in your arm. And when the lead character suffers you too feel sadness. This is Identification.

Identification can be seen in other cases as well when one shows extra degree of attachment for somebody whose present experiences matches with you earlier experiences. For example, say, you were once asked to stand on the chair by your teacher and you found it

very insulting. Later on you also became a teacher and you ensure that you will never ask any child to stand on the chair. And whenever disciplinary actions are being discussed you vehemently come forward to say that the right of the child should be protected and in the name of discipline, one cannot insult a child. You identify strongly with the cause but it is not like you are fighting for a big cause, but the reason is suddenly you identify yourself with the situation. This is very common to all of us. Taking pride in joining alumni association of prestigious institutes and becoming members of esteemed social groups are all associated to identification.

## **Undoing**

Undoing involves atoning for and thereafter counteracting immoral desires or actions. One might adopt it to handle an immoral desire that is just sprouting and one is not consciously aware of it. Long back, I read a very interesting news item in which somebody who was employed for 7-8 years wrote to the Indian railways that he had been travelling from one point to the other using the local trains in Bombay without ticket since approximately 7-8 years. As this was the time when he was struggling to make his career and had limited resources, he never bought a ticket. He wanted the railways to give him an estimate of the total cost of tickets including interest as he wanted to pay the due. His letter was greatly uncomfortable to the Indian railways because they do not have a system of charging somebody retrospectively. He did it in the past because of some compulsions but now the man was trying to undo that.

## **Introjection**

Introjection involves incorporation of external values and standards in the ego structure in order to get rid of the external threats. Say, you have been living with a certain set of values, you have certain standards for evaluating the self and the world and when you realize the mismatch between those values and the situation you might add some of those external values to your existing set. You start incorporating certain external values which were not part of your own value-belief system and therefore the standard criteria that you have set for evaluating the self and the world gets modified in the process. The major benefit of this is that you will realize that you have developed certain degree of competence and you are not at mercy of others and your ego gets boosted as you realize that you are self-sufficient to certain degree. The environment was too demanding but the introjection that was adopted has helped you a lot. This is the process that all of us adopt at certain point in life, especially those who move from one geographical territory to the other.

For instance, you have lived in a remote area and after passing the higher secondary exams you are sent to a place which is different from the place where you have spent your life till now. You try to acclimatize and then once again you have to shift to another place for your higher education. You realize that none of the things matches your taste, neither the food nor the language. You do not find the new place friendly as several practices do not fit into your concept of morality. Say, for example, watching pornography, having alcohol at the roof of the hostel, adopting a life style where you keep on bunking successive classes, getting engaged with websites which are socially forbidden, or indulging and deriving pleasure out of virtual interaction at the cost of real-life interaction.

Most of these things may not be congruous to your value-belief system but given the fact that you have been dislocated because of your educational requirement and so have been

others who also bring various beliefs and practices, you start introjecting new values, adopt certain things, show tolerance to few, compromise to certain things and tend to avoid few others. This is how you modify your own self so that tomorrow nobody declares you a misfit. Comments like these might be threat to your ego. Introjection helps you in that way. When you get dislocated, the social norms that define your achievement, your abilities and hence your acceptance might change because the changed contemporary social environment. Human beings, by default, get tempted to adapt.

### **Compensation**

This is the technique when one covers up one's weaknesses by emphasising certain desirable traits or one tries to make up for the frustrations in one of the area by over gratifying another area where he or she has the competence. Say for example, you realize that you can play football better but your performance in many of the academic subjects is extremely poor. If you prove your ability in the sports field you still have certain degree of acceptance. If you look at the acceptance of students in the school scenario you will observe that students who are very good in terms of their verbal expression and/ or numerical abilities are accepted and celebrated more owing to their eloquence and competence. Someone who might not be so linguistically sophisticated and promising but is very good at numerical abilities enjoys certain status in the school. The degree of acceptance is very dynamic in these situations. Difficulty with proving one's numerical ability is that this takes time. In the first few months you may not even get the chance to show that you are good at it. You have to wait till the first assessment is over. Unlike academic endeavours, in sports you get instant chance, you have to prove your abilities within say, 50 minutes or so depending on the rules of the game. Very interestingly, the medals given out of academic endeavours are much

smaller compared to the trophies you get for excellence in sports. Except for individual medals which are of the same size which you get for academic achievement, the trophies you get in sports are of much bigger size. In matter of sports, in 50 minutes you prove your ability and you get a huge cup. If you see the principal's room in the schools you will notice all such medals and trophies on the walls. It is all to prove how good the school is. Few photographs of students who topped in the examinations and rest all are huge cups. Your ego gets boosted. Now imagine a situation, you realize that although you have come to the school to study, it is not your cup of tea and you perform average or below average and you say to yourself that your performance score is low despite your efforts and hence you will be more vigorous towards your participation in the sports events. Now, there is also the option of sports quota in schools and jobs. The number is small but you tell yourself that you could still be thinking of more participation in sports events so that you over gratify your desire to get accepted and be a celebrated student. Even today if you recollect your batch mates with whom you have shared your school years, you would remember the top scorers in sports, dramatics and studies but rest all are very difficult to remember if you did not have intense friendship with them.

Now compensation basically is that you realize your weakness and the gifted potential you have in a given area and you try to exploit that area to the maximum so that you over gratify that in order to compensate for something where you lag behind. The very fact that you are not good at mathematics, language or science subjects and visual arts and music are not considered to be very celebrated in the school, you have no choice but to over participate in the sports events as that is the area of your strength. So, you try your hand in every sport, cricket, soccer, kabaddi and so forth.

Another interesting aspect of life is that if you look at people who are supposed to be man of achievement in their respective domains, you would recognize that many of them



would have realized something that they lacked and then maximized the outcome in the area in which they were competent. So, you could be a scientist who is over indulged in the projects. The truth might be that you over gratify yourself through your lab engagements but in reality you have great difficulty maintaining friendship and meeting social obligations. You might be compensating the lack of social skills. Interestingly, people will largely not accept that their achievement is an outcome of compensation. Many people, who are extremely successful in their chosen area, like politics, science, R&D activities and even in sports, have over gratified themselves by achieving in their area of strength without realizing that they have compensated for something that they lacked. If you have a trench in your garden but you build a wall right next to it and you build it so high that you stop noticing the trench. The abilities that you do not possess are like the trench and the abilities that you do excel in are like the tall wall built right next to the trench and therefore whenever you look at your achievements and your weaknesses you will always look at the wall and the trench will not be visible to you. This is what compensation does to us.

This was all about defense mechanisms. We have discussed three sets of reactions that human beings come forward with— task oriented reaction patterns wherein one exactly encounter need of the situation by tackling it right on its face, then we came to damage repair mechanisms where hurt to the ego and techniques to repair the damages were discussed, and then the set of defense mechanisms which act at the unconscious levels and safeguards the ego.