Defense Mechanisms

Purpose for Using Defense Mechanisms

As one of the appendices of the *DSM IV TR*, there is a systematic elaboration on the issue of unconscious defense mechanisms used by a client to “shield” themselves from unwanted or untenable facets of reality.

Defense mechanisms from levels 2 through 7 are impediments to the forward progress in counseling process due to unconscious, dysfunctional reasoning processes. These dysfunctional processes progress from minor distortions of reality on an occasional basis to complete dysfunction with severe psychotic symptoms.

Defense mechanisms will be used unconsciously by the client during therapy when they are confronted by facts associated with real events that the client cannot face in reality. They will use specific defense mechanisms to prevent themselves from acknowledging reality so that they are insulated from those facts of reality.

Thus, in order for a therapist to make any type of headway in the counseling process, the therapist must understand which defense mechanisms the client is using. All dysfunctional defense mechanisms much be addressed. Unless defense mechanisms are addressed, the client cannot resolve issues that cause non-productive behaviors. Their defense mechanisms will prevent them from confronting real issues.

The defense mechanisms found in the *MARETweb Project* are all found in an appendix from the *DSM IV TR*. In the new *DSM V*, however, those defense mechanisms are clearly absent. The philosophical underpinnings of the *DSM V* are completely different than that of the *DSM IV*.

From an analysis of the *DSM V*, it is apparent that the *DSM V* uses a biological marker-based model of psychological disorder. That means that there is a primary biological or physical reason for psychological issues. Psychological disorders are largely chronic and to a substantial degree they are physiological – including hereditary components through transmission via DNA.

1 Using this model, the potential for complete healing from any psychological disorder is dismal. If it is chemical, biological or physiological – especially if it is recorded in a person’s DNA – the prospect of
The most appropriate way to deal with biological/physical issues would be with medication management. Such a model has no use for defense mechanisms. At this point, the counselor or therapist has a decision to make: Will they accept a psychological model for psychological and/or mental issues or will the counselor accept the medical/biological model. For those who do not wish to accept the biological model, an understanding of defense mechanisms is critically important to the care of clients.

The most important effort of a counselor when encountered with the defense mechanism scores is to deal with the most significantly elevated level. The counselor should endeavor to deal with the client's inability to deal with their dysregulated views of reality.

A Summary of Defense Mechanisms

Defense mechanisms are organized into seven distinct groups or levels. The first level of defense mechanisms are the only mechanisms that are not dysfunctional. They exhibit proper ways in which a person, confronted by a stressing event, can deal with that event without distorting reality. All other levels exhibit some type of dysregulation between a client's stressing event and their means of dealing with that event.

Each successive level exhibits increasing levels of dysregulation. Thus, level 2 is only slightly dysfunctional but level 7 is nearly completely psychotic in its interpretation of stressing events. The higher the level of dysregulation, the more significantly the defense mechanism(s) will disrupt the therapist's ability to effectively deal with the client due to dysregulation of a client's interpretation of reality.

Below are a summary of the seven levels. There will be little explanation here, since substantial explanation is done at the end of this section.

- **Level #1** – *High Adaptive Level* – No compromise with reality
- **Level #2** – *Mental Inhibitions Level* – Formation of a compromise with reality
- **Level #3** – *Minor Image-Distorting Level* – Consistent minor distortions of reality
- **Level #4** – *Disavowal Level* – Keeping some reality out of awareness
- **Level #5** – *Major Image-Distorting Level* – Consistent major distortions of reality
- **Level #6** – *Action Level* – Outward actions to negate reality
- **Level #7** – *Level of Defensive Dysregulation* – Probable sustained psychosis

Scoring Methodology and Results

How to Use the Defense Mechanisms Tool

You will find the *Defense Mechanism* option on the main *QuikClient* screen after you load a client. In order to use the *Defense Mechanism* option, follow these instructions:

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complete healing is remote.
• Scroll down through the Client Summary items.
• Locate the Defense Mechanisms directly after the summary of Assessments.
• Click on Create/Edit Defense Mechanism List. You may only have one defense list per client. The system knows if it should edit or create a new one.
• Check off the items that best describe a client’s defenses. You may check as many as you feel are appropriate. If you are editing, some items will probably already be checked. You may leave them checked, or you may uncheck them if they no longer apply. Note: It is important that you only do the defense mechanism list after you have gotten to know the client to some degree. Appropriate choices for these items demands that you know the client.
• In order to view results that are already in the system, choose the Print/Preview Client Defense Mechanisms.

Scoring Methodology

The scoring methodology used for the defense mechanisms in the MARETweb Project is very complex. This complex scoring matrix has been employed so that the most important facets of a client's responses to stressors can be dealt with effectively by the therapist. The scoring methodology was engendered to accent the most dysfunctional facets of a client's responses.

In summary, each of the seven levels of defense mechanisms has a different multiplier used to score the items within that level. The higher the defense level, the greater the multiplier. Thus, items within level 5 have a higher multiplier than level 2. And, items within level 7 have a higher multiplier than level 5. The multipliers are based on the Fibonacci sequence of numbers.²

After all items are assessed, the are summed together. That final total is used to standardize results for ease of understanding. The total is based on a maximum of 100 percent. Each of the levels are scored in relation to their proportion in relationship to each other.

Understanding Results

This system has been created so that the highest scoring level of dysregulation will almost always score “on top.” When we consider the information that is visualized through the examination of defense mechanisms, we want to see the highest scoring level since that is the most dysregulated and brings about the most significant inability of the client to deal with reality.

Using this scoring matrix, any score in (say) level 6, will score higher when scores are completed than all scores combined in level 2. A score in level 5 will score higher than all scores in level 4 combined so that level 5 will be seen as the most influential score. It is

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² Leonardo Fibonacci Bigollo (ca. 1170-1250) – Fibonacci was a famous mathematician responsible for a sequence of numbers that create the golden spiral. That sequence is 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, and 34, etc. This sequence generates a symmetrical objectification of one point related to another giving increasing weight to the next item in sequence while still preserving a relationship between all points.
necessary for us to see the highest level wherein dysregulation occurs since that level distorts reality most significantly.

Look at this example. Let's assume that a client has three level 2 items:

- **Intellectualization** – The client uses excessive abstract thinking or intellectual reasoning to minimize emotional discomfort.
- **Isolation of Affect** – The client separates ideas from feelings originally associated with them. Once the separation is made, only cognitive elements remain.
- **Reaction Formation** – The client substitutes actual behaviors and thoughts with those that are not from the client’s reality.

Let's also assume that the same client has one level 7 item:

- **Psychotic Distortion** – The client makes internal efforts to reshape the external world with hallucinations and delusions. The client creates a new reality.

When it comes to counseling the client, which of the four items above is most important for you to know about the client? Even if we combine the three level 2 items, we must realize that understanding the single level 7 item is more important – and of a higher impact in the counseling experience – than all three of the level 2 items combined. If we do not confront and relate to the level 7 indicator, we will not progress in our dealings with the client since the client is experiencing a psychotic event.

In short, you should understand that each progressive defense mechanism level is weighted above the previous one to a significant degree (using the Fibonacci sequence of numbers). The results are conveniently displayed in a pie chart that visualizes the proportion of scoring levels in a standardized format.
A Complete Listing of the Defense Mechanisms

Presented here is a complete listing of all of the DSM IV Defense Mechanisms. This list includes a summary of what the level implies and the name and description of each of the criteria under the defensive level.

Level 1 Mechanisms

High Adaptive Level – No compromise with reality

This level of defense functioning results in optimal adaptation to environmental stressors. These defense mechanisms usually maximize gratification and allow the conscious awareness of feelings, ideas, and their consequences. They also promote an optimum balance among conflicting motives and resolutions of stressors.

- **Anticipation** – The client experiences emotional reactions in advance. They anticipate consequences. They consider realistic alternatives.
- **Affiliation** – The client is able to turn to others for help and support. The client is able to share problems without making someone else responsible.
- **Altruism** – The client is dedicated to meeting the needs of others even when faced with a stressing event.
- **Humor** – The client emphasizes the amusing and ironic aspects of current stressing events.
- **Self-assertion** – The client uses non-coercive and non-manipulative expression of feelings and thoughts.
- **Self-observation** – The client is able to effectively reflect on personal thoughts, feelings, motivations, and behavior. The client is able to respond appropriately.
- **Sublimation** – The client channels potentially maladaptive feelings into socially acceptable behavior.
- **Suppression** – The client is able to intentionally avoid thinking about disturbing problems, wishes, feelings or experiences.
Level 2 Mechanisms

**Mental Inhibitions Level** – Formation of a compromise with reality

Defense functioning at this level keeps potentially threatening ideas, feelings, memories, wishes, or fears out of awareness. All of these defense mechanisms will inhibit the therapeutic process somewhat. The general effect of these defense mechanisms results in avoidance of stressors. These defense mechanisms may also inhibit the proper and complete recognition of stressors. They obstruct the therapeutic process by inhibiting mental processes and diminishing the ability of the client to focus directly on the stressing event.

- **Displacement** – The client transfers feelings and responses from an appropriate object, person, or incident to a less threatening object, person or incident.
- **Dissociation** – The client experiences a breakdown in usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, perception of self or the environment. This may involve sensory and/or motor behaviors.
- **Intellectualization** – The client uses excessive abstract thinking or intellectual reasoning to minimize emotional discomfort.
- **Isolation of Affect** – The client separates ideas from feelings originally associated with them. Once the separation is made, only cognitive elements remain.
- **Reaction Formation** – The client substitutes actual behaviors and thoughts with those that are not from the client’s reality.
- **Repression** – The client expels disturbing wishes, thoughts, behaviors or experiences from consciousness. Emotional states may remain.
- **Undoing** – The client uses words or behaviors that are designed to negate or make amends for unacceptable thoughts, feelings, or actions.

Level 3 Mechanisms

**Minor Image-Distorting Level** – Consistent minor distortions of reality

This Level is characterized by distortions in the image of oneself, their body, or other people that may be employed to regulate the client’s self-esteem. At this Level, the client is dangerously close to a break from proper reality testing. While the client may still have substantial reality processing abilities, the client's maladaptive defense mechanisms involve significant distortions and/or exaggerations of objective reality.

- **Devaluation** – The client attributes grossly exaggerated negative qualities to self or others.
- **Idealization** – The client attributes grossly exaggerated positive qualities to others.
- **Omnipotence** – The client projects the image that they possess special powers or abilities. The client projects the image that they are superior to others.
Level 4 Mechanisms

Disavowal Level – Keeping some reality out of awareness

This level is characterized by keeping unpleasant or unacceptable stressors, impulses, ideas, emotions, or responsibility out of awareness with or without a misattribution of these to external causes. Maladaptive defense mechanisms at this level are a marked progression beyond those of level #3. In level #3, the client slightly distorted reality as his/her primary means of dealing with stressors. In level #4, however, the client has moved to dismissing negative aspects of reality.

- **Denial** – The client refuses to acknowledge some painful aspect of external reality or subjective experience that is apparent to others.
- **Projection** – The client falsely attributes to another person unacceptable feelings, impulses, or thoughts.
- **Rationalization** – The client conceals the true motivations for thoughts, actions, or feelings through incorrect, elaborate, reassuring, and self-serving but incorrect explanations.

Level 5 Mechanisms

Major Image-Distorting Level – Consistent major distortions of reality

This level is characterized by gross distortion or misattribution of the image of oneself or other people. The client is employing at least some minimal tactics that can be characterized as significant distortions of reality.

- **Autistic Fantasy** – The client engages in excessive daydreaming as a substitute for human relationships, more effective action, or problem solving.
- **Projective Identification** – The client engages in initial projection of feelings, impulses, or thoughts onto another person (simple projection). Eventually, those feelings, impulses or thoughts are fulfilled by the person upon whom they have been projected - identification with the projection.
- **Splitting** – The client compartmentalizes opposite affects. The are not able to see good and bad in something at the same time.

Level 6 Mechanisms

Action Level – Outward actions to negate reality

This level is characterized by defensive functioning that deals with internal or external stressors by action or by withdrawal. At this point, the client’s emotional state is no longer easily accessible by the therapist. The emotions associated with internal or external stressors are acted upon in such a manner that the emotions cannot be directly accessed.
• **Acting Out** – The client engages in outward physical action that is taken in response to internal reflections or feelings. The behavior being acted out is a direct response to internal emotional cues.

• **Apathetic Withdrawal** – The client withdraws from any attempts to deal with internal or external stressing events or emotional states. The client gives up.

• **Help Rejection** – The client makes repeated requests for help and then rejects help when it is offered.

• **Passive Aggression** – The client engages in indirect and unassertive aggression toward others. Their overt and visible compliance masks covert resistance, resentment and hostility.

**Level 7 Mechanisms**

**Level of Defensive Dysregulation** – **Probable sustained psychosis**

This level is characterized by failure of defensive regulation to contain the client's reaction to stressors, leading to a pronounced break with objective reality. Use of defense mechanisms from this level may indicate that the client is suffering from some sustained psychotic symptomology.

• **Delusional Projection** – The client uses projection with the added component of belief that the event or situation being projected is part of objective reality when in fact it is not.

• **Psychotic Denial** – The client uses denial with the added component of belief that the event or situation being denied can be verifiably proven to be false.

• **Psychotic Distortion** – The client makes internal efforts to reshape the external world with hallucinations and delusions. The client creates a new reality.