



**DON'T BE SO DEFENSIVE!**

*Heard any of these before?  
You're too sensitive...  
You're in denial...  
Stop making excuses...*

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Think more carefully about what the word “defensive” means. When we are defensive (for example, denial is a defense) we are actually protecting ourselves against something that is deeply painful and hurtful.

**And...** When we employ our psychological defenses, we usually do this without intention or conscious awareness. **We are not doing it on purpose**; it happens automatically. We feel attacked, criticized or misunderstood, so we fight back. Our retaliation—or defense—is made of carefully but unconsciously constructed processes to protect ourselves.

Before you are quick to reject the idea that you may be defensive, let’s consider an example.

David is a kind and very thoughtful man. Sometimes he gives so much, that others take advantage of him. He doesn’t mind, he prides himself on his non-confrontational approach to seeing the best in others. Most adults described him as sweet, gentle, and deeply caring; he is even passive at times. David is a 4th grade teacher. This year, David was reprimanded because some of his students said that he was “being mean.” Of course, David’s superiors were stunned, but consistent reports from students’ complaints to their parents, resulted in some concern. It was discovered that David was intimidating to his students. David was appalled and voiced his innocence and good intentions as an educator. Nonetheless, students described him as having a menacing and judging look on his face. David also made his students feel dumb by asking leading questions that were belittling.

Could it be true? Or was David wrongly accused or judged. Well, it turns out it was true. And therapy revealed that David was using a few defenses in life, the most identifiable was *SUBLIMATION*. Under David’s gentle exterior, he had anger. His whole life he felt that others lacked moral compass, were selfish, and had wronged him. Because he believed that anger was a negative emotion and characteristic, his mind made him believe that he was not an angry person. He actively behaved in such a way to believe that he was never angry. However, his anger leaked and his choice of career served to allow an opportunity whereby he could express it. With time and great courage and honesty, David came to discover that he had chosen the profession of 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher to feel powerful. He used (unconsciously) his position to express the anger he housed through intimidation of his students. Other defenses like *DENIAL* (David denied he was an angry man) also worked in concert with sublimation and *DISPLACEMENT* (defined on page 3).

#### Be respectful of your defenses

One of the most important parts of therapy can be an understanding of psychological defenses. We all have them, and we have them for essential reasons.

Have you ever heard, "You are just being defensive!" Or, "You are just in DENIAL."

While the use of denial may be commonplace, understanding how and why we use psychological defenses can be essential for successful therapy.

### List of the Most Common Defenses that surface through therapy:

#### \* Denial \*

the individual is completely unaware of a particular behavior, quality, belief, or characteristic. Example: a daily smoker denies that smoking causes cancer because acknowledging such a truth would be terrifying. Thus, she actually believes that the research on cancer and smoking is fabricated and false.

#### \* Externalization \*

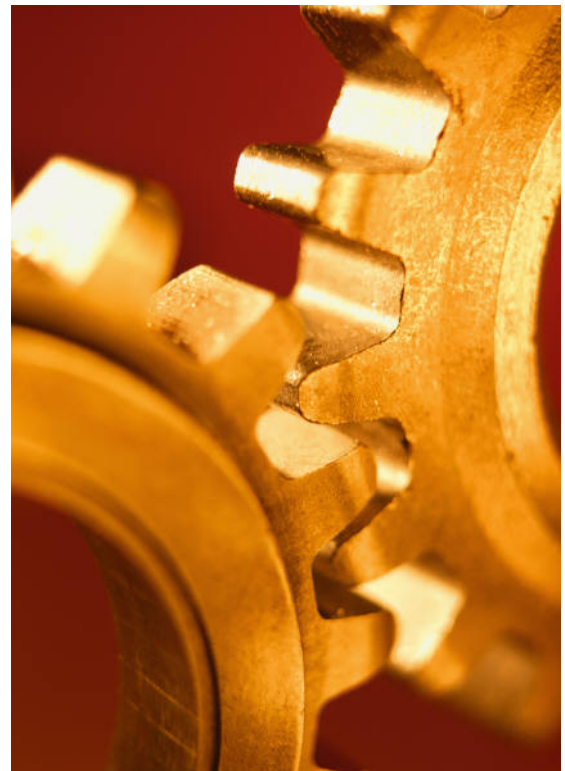
easily stated, this is blaming others. Externalization is perhaps most clearly seen in small children (who are still in the process of defining right and wrong) when they are caught doing something they shouldn't be doing, but blame a sibling or pet. When adults engage in the behavior, it can actually be quite convincing until a long pattern of failing to take responsibility for one's actions is identified. *Example:* Steven performed poorly in school. But he explains that his teachers just never appreciated his learning style and artistic intelligence. So his failure in school is really their fault, not his. **When this pattern is pervasive, it is very challenging because personal growth will not occur until a person takes responsibility for their own contribution to failures or problems.** Steven could grow in therapy if he ultimately admitted, "I am sometimes lazy, and that was not only my problem in school, but that is the truth about why I've been fired three times..."

#### \* Sublimation \*

the individual has feelings, desires, or urges that are unlikable, or morally unacceptable by his or her mind (conscience). Because these are morally judged in the mind (i.e., wanting to be rich, admired and selfish), the person finds a way to satisfy the desires in another way. *Example:* Derek needs to see himself as a genuine and a sincere person. But he is also a star and celebrity Country singer. He denies that he is self-centered, and states that his immense popularity and adorning female fans are simply a result of his career. (His desires are sublimated, or concealed in his career choice). He gets to act and even feel modest, when privately he needs and loves the ability to use and manipulate women to feel special.

#### \* Displacement \*

the individual takes powerful destructive or troubling feelings that should be directed at an identifiable person (e.g., boss or spouse) or situation (work), and expresses it on another target



or source. Ever heard, “bad day at work, kick the dog.” Another common example is marital frustration or conflict, resulting in moodiness with peers, siblings, or coworkers. *Example:* Steven is hurt because his marital sex life is unsatisfactory. He cannot confront his wife directly, so he is moody with his co-workers who find him edgy and difficult.

### \* Reaction Formation \*

the individual is **denying** (another defense) strong feelings, urges, beliefs, and/or wants and needs, so takes a stand that demonstrates the opposite of his or her true feelings. *Example:* Bill secretly finds pornography and nude magazines exciting. He could never admit this because he fears he would be judged by others, and in fact he judges himself when he feels the desire. Consequently, Bill constantly talks about being respectful to women, is exceedingly polite and chivalrous, and never looks at attractive women in public. He demeans and judges those who are interested in pornography and even started a petition against pornographic magazines.

### \* Projection \*

the individual has feelings, desires, or urges that are unlikable, or morally unacceptable by his or her mind (conscience). Because these experiences are judged by one’s conscience, they must be kept from conscious awareness, so they are “*projected*” (or sent) onto someone else—so ultimately they are seen in the other person, instead of one’s self. *Example:* Michelle can be selfish, moody, and demanding. Accepting these very unattractive characteristics in herself is painful, so she sees them in her boyfriend. When he purchases her a beautiful gift that she does not like, she finds a reason to make it his fault, i.e., “You [boyfriend] should know I don’t like green. You only bought this for me because YOU like green.”