Coping Strategies and Defence Mechanisms: Basic and Intermediate Defences

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Apart from personality traits, people also tend to develop habitual modes and methods of managing stress and coping with upsetting emotions. By and large, these habitual methods do help people to manage and defuse stressful situations they find themselves in, but they are not all equally efficient at this task. Some work better than others. While some really do succeed in helping people to manage upsetting emotion, the lesser quality methods generally end up causing more problems than they solve.

Perhaps not surprisingly, there is a relationship between people's emotional maturity and the sort of coping methods they prefer. Less emotionally mature people tend to prefer rather primitive and often inefficient coping methods, while more mature folks lean towards more sophisticated and more useful methods. The less mature methods also tend to have in common that their use is not premeditated or conscious in nature, but rather fairly reactive, not well thought out, and unconscious. As coping methods increase in maturity and sophistication, they become correspondingly more deliberate and conscious in nature, and also tend to be used more proactively, rather than simply reactively.

The study of coping methods has a long history. The topic was originally described by psychodynamic psychotherapists (including Dr Freud) who called them defence mechanisms. The defence mechanism literature was largely focused on mental illness and the ways that various primitive mechanisms served largely to maintain serious illness rather than help reduce it. Later, more cognitively oriented researchers began a separate study of coping that focused more on mental health, and ways that mature coping methods could be taught to enhance health. Though some authors suggest that the term defence mechanisms should be reserved for describing primitive, immature coping strategies, and the term "coping methods" for more mature, useful coping efforts, it doesn't really matter what label is used to describe the different coping methods from our perspective; they are all just people's attempts at coping.

The most primitive of the defence mechanisms are considered to be primitive because they fundamentally rely on blatant misrepresentation or outright ignoring of reality in order to function. These mechanisms flourish in situations (and minds) where emotion trumps reason and impulsivity rules the day. Children use them naturally and normally, but then again, children are by definition emotionally immature and not held to a higher standard as are adults. When adults use these methods on a regular basis, it is an indication that their emotional development is at some level delayed.
• **Denial;** an outright refusal or inability to accept some aspect of reality that is troubling. For example: "this thing has not happened" when it actually has.

• **Splitting;** a person cannot stand the thought that someone might have both good and bad aspects, so they polarize their view of that person as someone who is "all good" or "all bad". Any evidence to the contrary is ignored. For example: "My boss is evil", after being let go from work, when in reality, the boss had no choice in the matter and was acting under orders herself. Splitting functions by way of Dissociation, which is an ability people have in varying amounts to be able to wall off certain experiences and not think about them.

• **Projection;** a person's thought or emotion about another person, place or thing is too troubling to admit, and so, that thought or emotion is attributed to originate from that other person, place or thing. For example: "He hates me", when it is actually the speaker who hates. A variation on the theme of Projection is known as "Externalization". In Externalization, you blame others for your problems rather than owning up to any role you may play in causing them.

• **Passive-aggression;** a thought or feeling is not acceptable enough to a person to be allowed direct expression. Instead, that person behaves in an indirect manner that expresses the thought or emotion. For example: Failing to wash your hands before cooking when you normally would, and happen to be cooking for someone you don't like.

• **Acting out;** an inability to be thoughtful about an impulse. The impulse is expressed directly without any reflection or consideration as to whether it is a good idea to do so. For example: a person attacks another person in a fit of anger without stopping to consider that this could seriously wound or disfigure that other person and/or possibly result in legal problems.

• **Fantasy;** engaging in daydreams about how things should be, rather than doing anything about how things are. For example: Daydreaming of killing a bully, instead of taking concrete action to stop the bully from bothering you.

An intermediate level of defence mechanisms (the “neurotic” mechanisms) is defined by a more ambivalent relationship with reality. Reality is recognized here to a larger extent, even if it is put off or avoided.

• **Displacement;** An unacceptable feeling or thought about a person, place or thing is redirected towards a safer target. For example, it may feel unsafe to admit anger towards a parent, but it is perfectly safe to criticize the neighbourhood he or she lives in.

• **Isolation/Intellectualization;** Overwhelming feelings or thoughts about an event are handled by isolating their meaning from the feelings accompanying the meaning, and focusing on the meaning in isolation. For example, you cope with the recent death of a parent by reading about the grieving process.

• **Repression;** A milder form of denial; you manage uncomfortable feelings and thoughts by avoiding thinking about them. You are able to admit that you feel a certain way (unlike in denial), but you can't think of what might have led up to that feeling, and don't really want to think about it anyway.

• **Reaction Formation;** You react to uncomfortable, unacceptable feelings or ideas that you have (but aren't quite conscious of really), by forming the opposite opinion. For example; you unconsciously hate your parent, but your experience is to the contrary; you are only aware of loving feelings for your parent.
To this historical list of intermediate, "neurotic" mechanisms, we can add a few modern ones as well:

- **Rationalization;** where you choose to do something on emotional grounds (because it feels good) but you don’t want to admit that, so you make up reasons after the fact to justify your choice.

- **Workaholism;** where you avoid dealing with problems by burying yourself in work. Workaholism could be considered a form of Distraction, but distraction is something you choose to do, and many workaholics don’t perceive their devotion to the office as a choice so much as a duty.

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