Defense Mechanisms

How do we deal with anxiety-producing situations?

Background

• Freud thought we had specific ways to
prevent anxiety.
• He felt these mechanisms were automatic.

• Most Freudian ideas are now discredited;
defense mechanisms, however, are still quite current.
• Anna Freud did a lot of work on these.

Denial

• This occurs when you know something is true, but pretend it isn’t.
• VERY common among drug and alcohol addicts.
– Weight/physical characteristics.
– Terminal illnesses (cancer, etc).

Displacement

• This occurs when we relieve our anxieties by
taking them out on something/someone else.
• “Scapegoating” is similar to this.
• Examples:
– Stubbed your toe? Just hit a wall!
– Get yelled at? That’s okay! Yell at someone else!
– Parents had a rough day? They’ll take it out on their
kids!
– Teacher stayed out too late last night? Give the kids
a pop quiz!

Projection

• Assuming everyone else shares your
anxieties.

• As a projector throws an image onto a
screen, you are throwing your anxieties onto others.

• Example:
– “I’m cold! Put on your jacket!”
– Expecting friends to agree on subjective matters (movies, favorite foods, etc).

Rationalization

• Taking a ridiculous situation and trying to force it to make sense.

• Example: you hear a gunshot. You tell yourself it’s…
– A tire popping.
– Fireworks.
– A door slamming.
– A popping balloon.

Regression

• Dealing with your anxieties by acting like a child.

• Having immature reactions to things you don’t want to cope with.
– Fetal position while getting a beat-down.

Reaction Formation

• Having the opposite reaction to the one you’re supposed to have.
• “Laughing at a funeral” is a prime example.
– Happens a lot when dealing with grief.

Sublimation

• Finding a positive outlet for negative feelings.
• Examples:
– Rap/hip-hop
– Kurt Cobain
– Eminem
– Adele/Taylor Swift (songs about boyfriends who dumped them)
– Country music
– Poets: Sylvia Plath, Jewel, Poe…

Repression

• The act of subconsciously “forgetting” about events we cannot cope with.
• Your mind can later recall these very painful memories.
– Girl in CA who witnessed her father murder her friend, and repressed it for 30 years.