

Defenses of the Heart: 12 Most Common Ways We Self-Protect

“Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the head, that is Christ. Therefore, each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body.” Ephesians 4:15,25

Defense mechanisms are walls or protective strategies we’ve learned to use to protect ourselves from pain when dealing with hurts or trauma. Most of these are patterns or automatic reactions to pain that we developed when we were children. They need to be rethought and updated now that we are more mature. Often when we find ourselves overreacting to current situations and pressure, it is because feelings of pain from past hurts are spilling over our defensive walls into our present reactions.

- How many defense mechanisms do you use?
- How might these be impacting those you love or those you are wanting to serve?

Once you’ve become aware of your defenses but they don’t seem to lessen with time, that might be a helpful indicator that you have more healing to do.

1. Denial

The person who denies the reality of their own actions toward someone else. They not only deny the truth when confronted, they deny the truth for themselves.

Examples: "That never happened!" Or, "Why would you say something like this?"

2. Minimization

The tendency to make light of significantly painful events or memories.

Examples: "I don't think I belong here; everyone else's stories are so much worse than mine."

Or, "My parents weren't really abusive, they just were not always home to cook us dinner or get us to school."

3. Spiritualization

The tendency to offer pious sounding advice or even Scripture for the purpose of making oneself more comfortable. To lift a heavy or sad mood, to make others or ourselves feel better versus feeling pain. Spiritualization is a close relative to intellectualization.

Examples: In response to someone who has just shared something painful: "You know God works all things together for the good of those who love Him." Or, "You know the Bible says that we are supposed to honor our parents. I don't think God wants us to be angry at our parents."

4. Intellectualization

The tendency to analyze, explain, or talk about feelings rather than feeling them. This happens when our head (thinking self) is separated from our heart (feeling self).

Examples: "It is not that my dad does not care what is going on in my life. I don't call him very much because he lives out of town and we don't have anything in common. Plus, phone bills are expensive." Or, "I am sure my mom did not mean to neglect me. She was one of twelve kids and her parents did not have time for her. I am sure she did the best she could with having five children."

5. Rationalization

The tendency to substitute "good" reasons for real ones. It is difficult for any of us to be ruthlessly honest about our motives and feelings. This is why healthy people give permission to those living in their inner community to give them honest feedback even when it hurts to hear it.

Examples: "He didn't mean what he was saying; he just had a bad day." Or, "It is not my mom's fault that she was abusive, that is just the way she is. She's just a direct person."

6. Projection

Attributing unwanted feelings or traits that I struggle with, that are too painful to look at in myself, onto someone else. Strong hatred or dislike for someone else in the group may be evidence of my own shame.

Examples: "I can't open up in this group, someone here reminds me of my abusive mother. It's too hard for me." Or, "I really struggle with judgmental people."

7. Anger

Anger is a secondary emotion that typically masks fear, hurt, or sadness. A person "venting" is able to stay in a position of outward strength and thus can successfully defend against feeling their own vulnerability and pain.

Examples: "There is no way I am going to confront my mother, that's just ridiculous!" Or, "I hate how harsh you were with her, it seemed like you were attacking! Why are you so difficult?"

8. Passive Aggressive

When anger is denied as "unspiritual" or "unkind" then it is repressed and often expressed in passive ways, such as through body language and/or behavior.

Examples: Behaviors such as: chronically late, non-responsive, pushing chair back from the group, and other group disruptions; body language such as: arms folded during group, face covered by hat or scarf, slouching, tapping/shaking foot, etc.

9. Competition

The person who struggles to control or "out do" others may be attempting to prove his/her significance to others and to defend against internal feelings of shame and worthlessness. In essence, they are saying, "Look what I know! I can help you! I have significance! I have worth!"

Examples: If a group participant seems particularly shut down, we may be tempted to become more of the “expert.” Competitiveness can increase the possibility of a power struggle, which can leave a participant feeling very unsafe. “I am a good Christian with very few problems who is just trying to help people who are in need” (which is an incredibly shaming stance).

10. Interrogation

A barrage of probing questions to keep someone on the defensive. Interrogation can also be manifested as a focus on the insignificant details or data of a story. Such as an individual who habitually cross-examines others under the guise of “trying to understand.” This might be a way of avoiding vulnerability by keeping the spotlight away from oneself.

Examples: “Why do you put up with your brother being so abusive? Where does your brother live? Why don’t you just tell him to stop calling you? Why don’t you just change your phone number?”

11. Withdrawal

Through silence or physical distancing or removal you separate yourself from pain or intensity. This defense may vary in intensity from what appears to be boredom to someone appearing to “shut down” to someone leaving a conversation.

Examples: You may withdraw when you feel overwhelmed! It can feel like you are frozen or slipping away. You may not be able to speak or just find yourself walking away. You may also withdraw emotionally but still be talking (which starts to look like rationalization, intellectualization, etc.). If a survivor begins to withdraw from you, pay attention to see if you withdrew first!

12. Cynicism

Cynicism is a harsh but more subtle form of aggression. It’s a form of attacking another person. When cynical, in essence we are saying, “If I can discount you OR if I don’t have to risk trusting in a process, then I won’t have to feel or do the hard work involved in healing.”

Examples: “Nothing helps these survivors. They are lost, and we can’t do anything more for them.” Or, “It doesn’t matter what I do, he will just keep rejecting my group. What’s the point?”