

WHY DO I DO THAT?

Psychological Defense Mechanisms and the Hidden Ways They Shape Our Lives

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Synopsis

Why Do I Do That? adapts the basic strategies of psychodynamic psychotherapy to a guided course in self-exploration, highlighting the universal role of defense mechanisms in warding off emotional pain. With easy-to-understand explanations, the first part teaches the reader about the unconscious mind and the role of psychological defenses in excluding difficult feelings from awareness. Individual chapters in the longer middle section explore the primary defense mechanisms one by one, with exercises to help readers identify their own defenses at work. The final part offers guidance for how to “disarm” those defenses and cope more effectively with the unconscious feelings behind them. Psychological defense mechanisms are an inevitable and necessary part of the human experience; but when they become too pervasive or deeply entrenched, they may damage our personal relationships, restrict our emotional lives and prevent us from behaving in ways that promote lasting self-esteem.

Throughout the book, clinical vignettes from the author’s practice, examples from daily life, and personal accounts of grappling with his own defense mechanisms are used to illustrate the discussions.

Part I – Understanding Our Psychological Defense Mechanisms

Chapter One introduces the reader to Freud’s notion of an unconscious mind, using everyday examples to show how his views have been incorporated into our shared understanding of human nature. *Psychological defense mechanisms* are then explained as the means by which we exclude parts of our experience from consciousness; they are defined as “lies we tell ourselves to evade pain.” Chapter Two examines “our primary psychological concerns”: what it means to experience *need and dependency* in all our relationships, how to manage *intense emotions*, and the drive for feelings of *self-esteem* and a sense of personal worth in relation to others. The final chapter in this section explores the broad range of emotions all human beings experience in connection with their primary psychological concerns, adopting the view that certain emotions usually considered “negative” are in fact *inevitable*. Defense mechanisms typically come into play when we experience these painful and socially undesirable feelings.

Part II – Identifying Your Own Defense Mechanisms

The long middle section takes a look at the most important defense mechanisms individually and shows how our culture has incorporated many of Freud’s insights about them into our shared understanding of human nature. For example, we regularly refer to defense mechanisms such as *denial*, *displacement* and *projection* in everyday speech. Each chapter includes a section that explains how readers may recognize that particular defense mechanism at work in relation to their *primary psychological concerns* – Need and Dependency, Emotions

and Self-Esteem – concluding with a set of exercises to help them identify the potential role played by that particular defense in their emotional lives.

Chapter by chapter, the defense mechanisms discussed are grouped as follows:

Repression and Denial (Chapter 4)

Displacement and Reaction Formation (Chapter 5)

Splitting (Chapter 6)

Idealization (Chapter 7)

Projection (Chapter 8)

Control (Chapter 9)

“Thinking” – i.e., rationalization and intellectualization (Chapter 10)

Defenses against Shame – especially narcissism (Chapter 11)

Each chapter concludes with a section entitled ***Now What?*** that briefly summarizes what has been learned and suggests ways to make use of new insights going forward.

Part III – Disarming Your Defenses

Unlike most self-help books, ***Why Do I Do That?*** does not offer a cognitive-behavioral set of techniques for changing behavior or thought processes but instead emphasizes the necessary *mindset for change* (Chapter 12) and the role ongoing *choice* plays in authentic growth and development (Chapter 13). The final chapter, *The Future of Your Defenses*, presents a realistic view of “mental health,” emphasizing that defense mechanisms don’t simply disappear but play a continuing role in our lives. While struggling with our defenses remains an ongoing challenge, increased self-knowledge and the ability to make better choices leads to a

richer, more satisfying emotional life, deeper relationships and the kind of self-esteem that lasts.