



SHIFTING FROM DEFENSE MECHANISMS TO COPING SKILLS

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*“Dysfunctional defense mechanisms allow us to **avoid** reality,
while functional coping skills help us **deal** with reality.”*

Four year old Ashley was awakened by her mother, so Ashley could get up and dressed for pre-school. Upon hearing her mother's voice, Ashley hid under the covers and said, "Ashley's not home right now. Please leave a message after the beep. Be-e-e-e-p!" What a creative, humorous, defensive move on Ashley's part. Of course she went to pre-school, yet she felt safe enough express her resistance. Not all situations are this functional.

Most families have some degree of dysfunction and in response the children develop some defense mechanisms to counter realities that feel uncomfortable or threatening. If we grew up with any dysfunction, (i.e. an emotionally shaming mother, or a workaholic father) we found ways to help us cope. The situation becomes even more serious when the family-of-origin is *severely* dysfunctional, i.e. by being neglectful, or physically, emotionally or sexually abusive. The defense mechanisms that are then employed become a matter of emotional (and sometimes physical) survival.

As children we were dependent and defenseless, so when hurtful things happened, our anxiety became overwhelming. In response we created techniques to help us emotionally avoid our childhood reality, i.e. by allowing us to disassociate from reality, or by believing we had some control. The more unpredictable or hurtful things were, the more we employed these defenses to help us deal with what was unacceptable and frightening. The degree to which we developed these skills determined how emotionally or physically safe we felt. (I encourage you to read a powerful and incredibly well-written memoir, [The Glass Castle: a Memoir](#) by Jeannette Walls, which illustrates some great examples of childhood defenses.)

A child is totally dependent on their parents for survival, but clearly this is not true once we leave home and become independent adults. However, our childhood experiences still leave an impact on our personality and the choices we make. As an example, if a child is being physically abused by their father, a very helpful defense is to disassociate – that is to emotionally “leave” and pretend to be somewhere else. However if that individual continues to use the same defense mechanism when they are an adult, it will inhibit their ability to function at the highest possible level. For example the child who was physically abused by their father might, in adulthood, continue using this same defense with a male authority figure and in turn hinder the current relationship.

Reacting to our adult reality with old child-like patterns of behavior assumes that we feel as vulnerable as a child. We would be seeing the world through the eyes of our “inner child”. In addition, when we react defensively, as we did as a child, we are not dealing with our current reality in a pro-active, mature way. (Except as I teasingly say to some of my clients, that this is a great skill to have when we are sitting in a dentist chair having a cavity filled, and can *consciously choose* to disassociate.)

As adults it is helpful to convert our childhood defense mechanisms, into mature coping skills. *Dysfunctional defense mechanisms allow us to **avoid** reality, while functional coping skills help us **deal** with reality.* The purpose of this article is to discuss some of the defense mechanisms I encounter most frequently in adults, and then to describe what constitutes healthy, mature coping skills, as well as how to develop them.

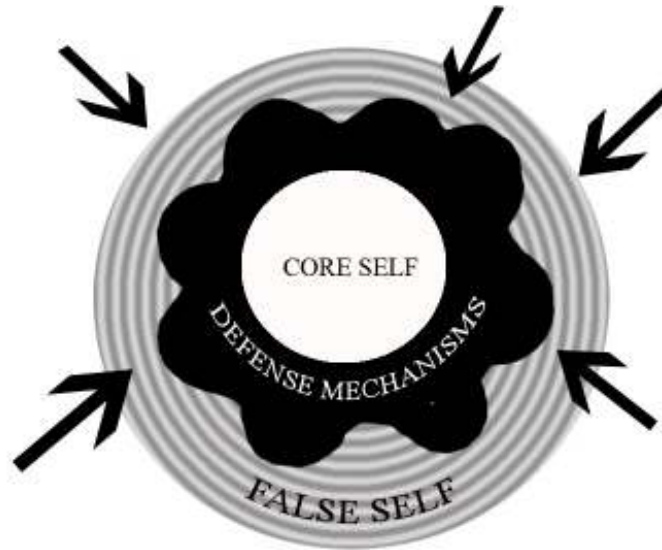
There are many “defense mechanisms” considered basic in human psychology. Depending on which text book is being consulted, there are about twenty-five. A few of these, along with the definition and an example of each are:

- **Denial:** A thought, feeling or reality is being totally rejected; for example, “I am *not* eating too many sweets”.
- **Projection:** Subconscious thoughts or feelings about ourselves that we assign to another; for example, “I don’t like him because he is too materialistic.”
- **Rationalization or intellectualization:** Explanations are created to justify the situation; as in, “I know he hurt my feelings, but that is only because he is sick.”
- **Regression:** Old behaviors as resorted to; for example, “When I go back home, I never argue with my mother’s opinion.”
- **Isolation of affect:** A feeling is talked about, but neither felt, nor seen on the person’s face; for example, a woman smiles as she says, “My husband is always late for dinner, but I don’t mind”, even though she is angry.
- **Minimizing:** Writing off the feelings as not being important; for example, “I failed my exam, but it’s no big deal.”
- **Perfectionism:** Making sure everything is done as perfectly as possible in the eyes of the other; for example, “I became a straight A student to get on my father’s good side, so he wouldn’t abuse me like he does my sister.”

There are some that are not listed in many text books:

- **Control:** Trying to maintain authority over an issue, in order to feel safe; as in, “I do all of the financial planning for our family because I don’t trust my wife to adhere to the budget I set.”
- **Co-dependence:** Stuffing feelings, thoughts, and needs in order to keep the peace and avoid conflict; as in, “My husband watches TV every night while I clean the kitchen and get the kids ready for bed, but I don’t discuss it with him because he will get angry.”

When I work with clients who come from dysfunctional families, they often experience a lot of shame, and fear. In response to these feelings they maintain their old defense mechanisms. I have created this diagram to illustrate what happens when we protect ourselves with dysfunctional defenses:



The center circle represents the “*core self*” – who we are at birth, our true nature, our essence. When we entered this world we were like pure uncut gems, diamonds in the rough. Then life – our parents, living conditions, culture, emotional/physical traumas, or health issues – impacted us in both a positive and negative way. The arrows in the diagram represent the *negative* influences. As hurtful things happened we formed an emotional barrier protecting us from the onslaught of pain. This protective shield, indicated in the diagram by the black shape, is representative of the “*defense mechanisms*” we built around ourselves, like a sheet of armor. The more dysfunctional, frightening or unsafe our environment, the thicker this barrier became.

Eventually our defense mechanisms, i.e. perfectionism and control, became a strong part of our personality, and in turn they became a part of our identity. We experience them as a part of our true self. The reality is that these defenses are a part of our “*false self*”. For example if we feel defective, and not deserving compared to those around us, we will be vigilant and watch for proof of this belief. We will have been conditioned to look for shaming messages. This protective “*false self*” is represented in my illustration by the stripped circles emanating from the core.

When our old defenses (and the behaviors associated with them) no longer work for us, we realize that we are projecting a false self. This is scary, because when we become aware that the “us” we are presenting to the world is

not who we really are, we will (deep down inside) feel like a fraud. What if someone finds out who we really are? For example, if we appear to have everything under control and thrive on perfectionism in order to cover over our shame, we will be terrified that we will be found out. At first we may try to shore up our façade by being even more perfect and thus feel more in control. The problem is that eventually we can't keep up the facade. Things begin to collapse. The good news is that when this false self becomes uncomfortable enough, we may decide to change.

Let's look at the case of Sandra, who was the youngest child, with an older brother. As a young girl she watched her brother being physically abused by her father and also witnessed her mother vacillate between ignoring and shaming the brother. Sandra was very smart and learned to stay under the radar screen by being the "good girl". She achieved excellent grades and was mother's little helper. She never disobeyed nor questioned her parents.

As Sandra grew up, she became the "teacher's pet and always helped her friends as a way to get attention and feel connected. If they needed her she felt safe in the relationship. She rarely asked for anything for herself. So even if someone hurt her feelings, she kept quiet. Referring to the earlier list of defense mechanisms, she employed denial, minimization, and isolation of affect, perfectionism, control and co-dependence.

Sandra married after she obtained her undergraduate degree. She was hired as an elementary school teacher, where she became very successful and held up as an example for other teachers in her department. Sandra was also an excellent wife, effectively employing her ability to look perfect. However she was very co-dependent. Unfortunately her husband also came from a severely dysfunctional family. His primary coping mechanisms were control and narcissism, which he demonstrated by criticizing, shaming and ordering Sandra around. This triggered her subconscious fear that she was defective – not as perfect as she pretended to be. Because of her co-dependence she neither challenged, nor stood up to her husband. (There is an interesting website www.voicelessness.com, by Dr. Richard Grossman who writes about becoming voiceless as a defense mechanism.)

As time went on, Sandra's professional pressure increased and her emotional stability became shaky. Her façade of perfectionism, and "having it all together" crumbled. She became exhausted because she couldn't keep up the perfect pace – she couldn't run any faster. Feeling like a fraud, she became very depressed. She was terrified that if she weren't seen as perfect, and didn't do what others wanted, they wouldn't like her. Then they would leave, and she would be alone. *An underlying link in the perpetuation of all defense mechanisms is the fear of being emotionally and/or physically abandoned.*

During therapy Sandra realized that she had been using several defense mechanisms from her childhood that were no longer serving her. They were in

fact getting in her way. Her core self had been buried underneath her need to please. These defensive attributes became so familiar that she thought of them as a part of her true self. In fact they were only a mask that she hid behind. Once her mask no longer worked, she saw that the way she had constructed her life was at risk. Sandra needed to develop new coping skills to help her not only survive, but to thrive.

Discovering and developing our true Self, requires that we develop new coping skills. Fortunately this is a process that is never complete because as we grow older everything keeps changing. I say fortunately because I think challenge and change make life interesting. We are never bored when we continue the emotional growth process. Yet, just because we become aware of our old defense mechanisms, it is impossible to instantaneously strip them away and substitute them with new and more functional skills. To do so would make us feel too vulnerable. Sandra's task in therapy was to gently and slowly substitute her old behaviors with new ones. She needed to discover new and healthy ways to cope with an unpredictable world. In doing so Sandra also wanted to discover who she really was at the core of her being – her feelings, needs, interests, truths, and her mission in life. In short, she wanted to uncover the true Self behind that old mask.

Remember that *while defense mechanisms helped us cope as children, they become dysfunctional when we are adults, because they obscure our inner and outer awareness of reality, and thus impede the development of our true Selves.* For example how could we possibly develop an intimate relationship if we use denial, projection and co-dependence as ways to cope? It won't work.

Going back to Sandra, her next mission was to develop stronger, more authentic ways of being. She first needed to learn what her truth was – what gave her pleasure, what she needed, believed in, valued, felt, etc. – and then to “speak her truth” as a way to honor and validate her core self. As it turned out, Sandra was tired of being voiceless and a “people pleaser”. Over time, she ended up revamping her entire life.

There are many stories illustrating defense mechanisms. For example Neal, who was so spoiled by his quilt-ridden mother that his defense was to become egocentric and felt “entitled” to anything he wanted. What he wanted was total control. The world was there to serve him. His fantasy of control evaporated when he developed cancer. At first he was irate at being let down by his body and blamed the doctors for not “fixing” him. Over time he mellowed, and learned to be gentler with both others and himself.

Another example would be the case of Elizabeth who turned to drugs and disappeared from her family for a number of years. She coped by being in denial about her fearful/angry feelings, “hiding out” by using drugs and alcohol, and running from one place to another (a “geographic cure”). Eventually she became

tired of running, admitted herself into an excellent rehab program, and found a job so she could support herself.

Then there was Tim, the latch-key child. Both of his successful professional parents worked long hours. This left Tim to his own devices after school, but he learned to accumulate friends and be the center of attention by being the “class clown”. He made everything into a joke, and as he grew up his jokes took the form of sarcastic humor. He had no idea how to relate on an adult level. This dysfunctional behavior kept him from finding a woman who would take him seriously, or who would trust him. Tim eventually craved more and after going through counseling was able to start dating.

Many people have no idea who they really are. People who have not learned healthy coping skills can often act honestly for a brief period of time, but they can't hold onto it. Look what happens to people who have affairs. They can “act as if” they are perfect and hold together a façade because they are not living intimately with the other. Once they do move in together, the dark side of their old defense mechanisms often comes out. (For a great read about the “shadow side”, I highly recommend The Dark Side of the Light Chasers, by Debbie Ford.)

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HEALTHY COPING SKILLS

As mature individuals we need coping skills that face reality head-on. So, how do we develop these mature coping skills, especially when life continually slings arrows at us – whether in the form of illness, accidents, betrayals, traumas, or just the influence of a toxic environment? The older we become, the more we will experience these “arrows of misfortune”. The good news is that now as independent beings, we have many more options. There are many functional ways to cope with the on-slot of hurtful arrows coming at us from all angles, so it is to our benefit to develop as many of these positive coping skills as we can. Just think how freeing it would be to no longer hide behind a mask, but to act in response to our unique truths.

There are many positive and empowering coping skills to choose from, which include: developing and trusting our intuition, employing our creativity, learning to be light on our feet, increasing our ability to surrender, thinking positively, experiencing gratitude, being proactive not reactive, and speaking our truth with compassion. It also helps us to cope when we have defined the meaning and purpose of our lives, and are making conscious choices reflecting this purpose. (I have written about some of these in previous “Pathways” articles. These include: “Developing Intuition” September 1997, “Living as a Creative Visionary I & II” June and September 2004, “Dancing Through Life With Light Feet”, September 2006, “Surrender!” December 2002, and “The Control Fantasy”

September 2001.) There are many functional coping skills that allow us to be our authentic selves, by cutting and shaping that raw, uncut gem of the core self, into the beautiful rare, unique gem of the true Self.

However in my mind there is one important coping skill that stands out above others and that is the ability to be self-aware. If we do not have self-awareness, and thus are unaware of our old, dysfunctional defense mechanisms, then how can we possibly convert them into something new and positive? We cannot and will not.

So, how do we develop self-awareness? There are helpful techniques we can use, including meditation (both through the forms of stillness and movement), dream analysis, watching for synchronistic signs, talking with trusted family members and friends, individual and/or group therapy, or by engaging in spontaneous creative acts of writing, painting, music, and dance.

Personally, I love to watch for synchronistic signs, and feel energized when something synchronistic (a simultaneous occurrence with meaning) occurs while I am writing about a particular subject. On this occasion, I was synchronistically sent a powerful essay illustrating the use of healthy coping mechanisms. This essay was written by 16 year old Sarah Dubow, about Mackenzie, a 10 year old who has a rare disease that doesn't allow her to keep any food down and so she must obtain sustenance through a feeding tube. Sarah, the author who has the same illness, shows us that we do not have to be of any particular age to understand and employ the benefits of positive coping skills. Sarah's insightful essay is printed here, in full, with her permission.

Finding Beauty

I have found it. What we are eternally searching for, grasping for, in life. I discovered what it means to be truly beautiful. Change your clothes, hair, or make up if you wish, but beauty is not measured by what you see on the surface. Shopping at the best stores with the most expensive clothing does not result in becoming beautiful. Your popularity and your amount of friends reveal only how well you fit into a mold. Beauty does not lie within these things.

When afflicted with a severe stomach disease, I met a little girl named Mackenzie in the hospital. With long blonde hair and sharp emerald green eyes her features were small but her personality was so big. In the early stages of my disease, I saw this diminutive spit-fire blonde in the hallway, I was getting yet another test done and she was in the hospital for more extensive work. Two weeks later I was surprised to find her again two doors down from me when we both became inpatients. I found her in the game room, playing connect four with her mom and laughing. I came in and sat down next to her, our

matching IV poles side by side. As the minutes passed by we chatted about everything from our stomachs to shopping, I began to like this audacious little girl more and more. Before the hospital discharged us, we exchanged email addresses and phone numbers. She slipped her contact information under my hospital door and the bright blues and pinks on the card she gave me were a welcome contrast from the stark hospital walls.

Throughout the next year as our symptoms worsened from the disease we shared, our bond strengthened and I was continually amazed at the strength and courage of this small girl. Although going through hell, she'd always manage to laugh at the terrible things going on and held such maturity and perspective about her illness that was completely unexpected for a girl her age. She entertained me with funny anecdotes about feeding tubes and hospital stays and we gave each other the strength needed to get through our rough times. Every triumph of Kenzie's became my triumph too, and every setback just another reason to talk more often. One day I received an email; it was a picture of Kenzie, her feeding tube protruding from her nose, holding up the furry brown bear I sent her with a huge smile on her face. At that moment it became clear to me what beauty is. The sadness behind her eyes told her story but the smile on her face showed her bravery. My realization was immediate.

Beauty is not the color of your skin, nor the outfit you choose to wear. Your beauty can't be determined from a number on the scale, or the color of your hair. It's the smile on your face and the story behind your eyes. The scars of your past and your dreams for the future. To fall into step with a friend as you walk hand in hand, to pretend promises are never broken. Beauty is to find the great in the terrible, it's the tears from our sadness and the laughter from our joy. In the most unexpected way I discovered a lesson I hadn't intended on learning. No magazine or book could teach me this lesson. But a little 10 year old girl showed me what it meant to be truly beautiful.

Sarah and Mackenzie both illustrate – as young and yet very wise individuals – the power of employing healthy coping mechanisms. Their demonstration of self-awareness, coupled with humor, creativity, courage, friendship, honesty and a positive attitude, illustrates the potent effects of healthy coping mechanisms.

I believe John O'Donohue, an Irish priest, poet, and philosopher, who passed away this January, would have appreciated Sarah's essay. O'Donohue wrote several inspiring books, and among them is Beauty. On his website (which I encourage you to check out) is the essay, "Reflection from Conamara". In it he wrote, "It takes us so long to see where we are. It takes us even longer to see who

we are. This is why the greatest gift you could ever dream is a gift that you can only receive from one person. And that person is yourself.”

Life will continue to present great challenges for all of us. I believe we are in for a rough, emotional, political, environmental ride in the coming years. If we have any belief in the predictions of Nostradamus, the Ancient Egyptians, or the Mayans, in astrology, or even if we just have an intuitive awareness that the intensity of everything in our world is heightening, we will realize that we are approaching even more challenging times. According to Guru Rattana, an astrologer, “Pluto moves into Capricorn on January 25th 2008 and stays through 2024...” This is a sixteen year period of time. She goes on to say that “...the last time Pluto was in Capricorn was November 1762 through December 1778. This was the time of the Boston Tea Party, the American Revolution, and the beginning of the Industrial Revolution...” Once again, profound changes seem to be in the wind. Let’s give ourselves the gift of becoming the best we can be, so our positive coping skills will be in place to face whatever fate brings us.

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