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## **UNIT 3 DEFENSE MECHANISMS**

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### **3.0 OBJECTIVES**

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After studying this unit, you should be able to:

- define and list the types of adjustment;
- define defense mechanisms;
- describe different defense mechanisms; and
- recognise abnormalities of behaviour and defense mechanisms being used.

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### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

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In Unit 2 of this block you have already read that individuals are described/ identified as normal or abnormal from the way they behave as per their culture and society. Individuals often use defense mechanisms so that their behaviour conforms to social expectations. Different types of defense mechanisms are utilised by every individual in the adjustment process.

The primary purpose in studying about defense mechanisms is to have a better understanding of both normal and abnormal behaviour. Life would be simple indeed if one's biological and psychological needs were automatically gratified. But, as you know, there are many obstacles, both environmental and personal, that may interfere. To protect themselves from hurt and disorganization due to unmet needs, individual uses defense mechanisms to help him/her to overcome such obstacles and adjust to demands made on them by society. In the present unit, the discussion is of adjustment process, types of adjustment and different defense mechanism.

## 3.2 ADJUSTMENT

Adjustment is the way which a person uses & adopt herself/himself in a particular situation.

### 3.2.1 Definition

Adjustment is the process by which a living organism maintains a balance between its needs and the circumstances that influence the satisfaction of these needs.

### 3.2.2 Adjustment Process

It can be described by the pattern shown in Fig. 3.1.

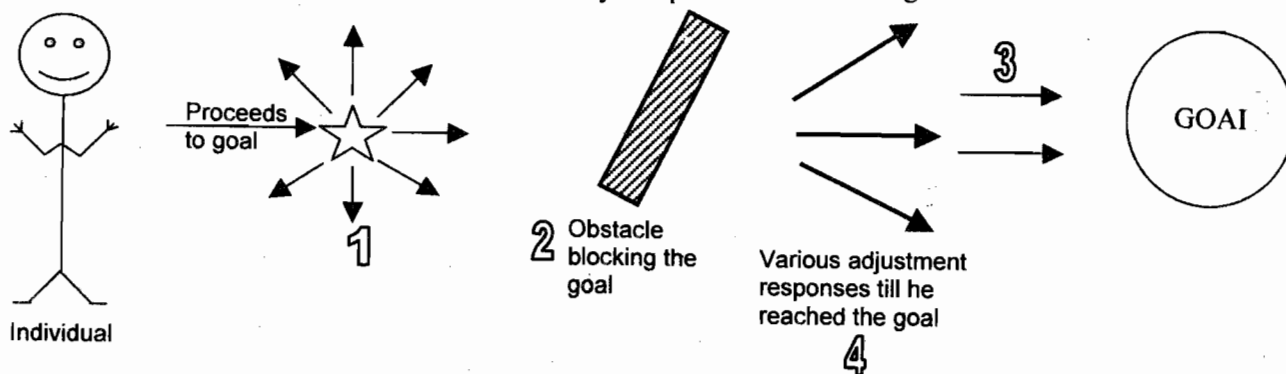


Fig. 3.1: Sequence of adjustment

From this figure we understand that an individual is proceeding on a course of action to achieve his/her goal. The achievement of his/her goal will satisfy a need. If an obstacle blocks individuals activity, leading to delay in satisfying his/her need, s/he comes out with various adjustment responses.

The concept of satisfaction of the individual needs is to be understood clearly. Psychologically an adjustive solution is an act that completes or reduces the motivation that started the sequence of action. When a need is unfulfilled, muscular or visceral tension keeps an individual stirred up and active, so that she/he makes one adjustive attempt after another, till the adjustive solution brings 'tension reduction'. Hence, adjustment is a process. It is an adjustment which satisfies a person's need. Therefore we say that all behaviour is to satisfy some or other needs of the individual, because every behaviour is purposeful.

### 3.2.3 Types of Adjustment

In coping with stress, a person faces two problems:

- i) To meet the requirement of the adjustive demand, and
- ii) To protect the self from psychological damage and disorganization.

When a person feels competent to handle a stress/obstacle, her/his behaviour tends to be task-oriented, that is aimed at primarily dealing with the requirement of the adjustive demand.

But when she/he feels unable to cope, her/his feelings of inadequacy are seriously threatened by the adjustive demands, individuals reactions tend to be defense-oriented, that is, primarily aimed at protecting the self from hurt and disorganization.

Since the distinction between the task-oriented and defense-oriented adjustment patterns is crucial to the understanding of abnormal behaviour, before you proceed further, check your understanding of these concepts.

**Check Your Progress 1**

What is adjustment and explain the types of adjustments?

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### **3.3 CONFLICT**

Conflict and adjustment you have already read in General Psychology, BNS-105, Block 3. Among the various types of obstacles, conflict has more significance in the adjustment patterns, as it leads to greater maladjustments.

Conflict becomes a source of obstacles, when an individual has to choose between two or more incompatible needs that cannot be satisfied fully at the same time. Therefore, the individual is left with simultaneous arousal of opposing impulses, desires or motives. The choice of one alternative means frustration with regard to the other. When a person faces conflicting situations for long periods, this conflict acts as a precipitating cause of behaviour disorders. A strong, unsolved, conflict brings permanent change in personality.

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### **3.4 FRUSTRATION**

Frustration occurs when one's needs are delayed by obstacles that block progress towards gratification of a desirable single goal in a given time. Refer BNS-105, General Psychology, Block 3.

Obstacles, both environmental (very hot weather, to cold weather) and internal (high fever), can lead to frustration. This leads to anger in an individual with a tendency to attack and remove the obstacles. When frustration continues, anger may become hostility, characterised by desire to hurt or destroy the person / object viewed as the source of frustration. At the same time, if the individual's inner controls are poorly developed, or lowered by alcohol or other conditions, his attacks at obstacles may be impulsive and destructive in nature, such as in cases of assault or homicide.

From our explanations conflict and frustration, you may understand that an obstacle in the process of achieving the goal leads to different adjustment patterns which are either task-oriented or defense-oriented.

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### **3.5 DEFENSE MECHANISMS**

Defense mechanism are mechanism adopted by an individual to adjust to the situation in life.

#### **3.5.1 Meaning**

Defense mechanism is a pattern of adjustment through which an individual relieves or decreases anxieties caused by an uncomfortable situation that threatens self-esteem.

Since there are numerous defense mechanisms, we shall discuss only those that seem immediately relevant to an understanding of abnormal behaviour.

### 3.5.2 Characteristics of Defense Mechanisms

- a) The purpose of defense mechanism is to reduce anxiety.
- b) Defense mechanisms are used for to compromise the solutions.
- c) The pattern of defense mechanism depends on one's ability.
- d) The same individual may use varied mechanisms as per her/his need.
- e) Defense mechanisms may be used consciously, but usually act at the unconscious or subconscious level.
- f) Defense mechanisms are healthy only when one:

- i) uses them infrequently,
- ii) is able to form new acceptable behaviour,
- iii) is able to change the external environment positively,
- iv) is able to modify his needs,
- v) uses mechanisms like rationalisation, sublimation, compensation, etc.

- g) Defence mechanisms are unhealthy when one:

- i) does not develop ability to change or modify one's abnormal behaviour.
- ii) retreats from the problems or reality.
- iii) repeatedly uses the specific mechanisms that may interfere with maintenance of self-image, for example, in undoing, one repeatedly offers excuses but keeps making the same mistakes.
- iv) use mechanisms like regression, repression, denial and projection etc.

### 3.5.3 Type of Defense Mechanisms

There are various types of defense mechanism used by even healthy individuals.

#### i) **Compensation**

It is a defense against feelings of inferiority and inadequacy, growing out of real or imagined personal defects or weaknesses, as well as out of the individual's inevitable failures and set-backs. Compensation mechanism can lead to constructive, deliberate, task-oriented behaviour. For example an individual who is physically handicapped, through his increased effort, may develop an exceptionally pleasing personality. She/he attempts to substitute for the defect in some way in order to draw attention away from it.

Unfortunately, some compensation mechanisms are undesirable. For example, the person who feels frustrated may eat too much. In extreme cases, an individual may engage certain activities to get some concern from others, for example talking about ancestral properly.

#### ii) **Denial**

It is the simplest and most primitive of all self-defense mechanisms. An individual refuses to face reality. She/he protects herself/himself from unacceptable pain or conflicts by rejecting reality. For example, a mother may turn away from unpleasant sights, refuse to discuss unpleasant topics, faint when confronted with a traumatic situation, deny criticism or become so preoccupied with work that there is no time to deal with personal problems when the neighbours complain against her alcoholic son.

iii) **Sublimation**

It is the mechanism by which a primitive or unacceptable tendency is redirected into socially constructive channels. An individual selects substitutes for satisfaction that is healthy. For example, a man who has strong sexual drives may utilize that energy in painting nude women and do it well. This way he contributes to the field of art.

iv) **Projection**

Placing blame for own difficulties upon others or attributing one's own unethical desires to others are fairly common examples of projection even in normal people. Others are seen as responsible for one's own shortcomings, mistakes, and misdeeds.

The student who fails an examination may feel that the teacher was unfair; the delinquent teenager may attribute her problems on a rejecting and non-understanding parent. In extreme cases, an individual may become convinced that other persons or forces are systematically working against him. Such ideas may develop into delusions of persecution, focussing on the supposed plots and conspiracies of the enemy.

v) **Repression**

It is often referred to as selective forgetting. This is a defense mechanism by means of which threatening or painful thoughts and desires are excluded from consciousness. An individual prevents painful or dangerous thoughts from entering her/his consciousness. Although the material that is repressed is denied admission to conscious awareness, it is not really forgotten.

A student, who is caught for her malpractice by the invigilator in the examination hall, may find the experience so terribly painful that she/he excludes it from consciousness, and become 'amnesic' with regard to the guilty experience.

vi) **Regression**

It is an immature way of responding to a stress. In this the adult resorts to an earlier developmental level in order to deal with reality. It is sometimes used to an extreme degree by the mentally ill, who may regress all the way back to infancy. They are no longer able to dress, feed or otherwise take care of themselves.

Regression is also commonly seen in normal children. When a new addition to the family has seemingly undermined his status, a little boy may revert to bed-wetting and other infantile behaviours that once brought him parental attention.

vii) **Fantasy**

Gratifying frustrated desires by imaginary achievements and wishful thinking, one tries to meet one's needs. Day-dreaming or fantasy is both an escape and a compensatory mechanism.

Two common behaviour pattern of wish-fulfilling fantasies are (i) the 'conquering hero' and (ii) the 'suffering hero' patterns. In 'conquering hero' pattern a person imagines any of the satisfactions that he does not attain more directly, including vocational success, money and possessions, sex satisfaction, intellectual brilliance and beauty, etc., by anticipating the pleasure of gain.

In the 'suffering hero' pattern, an expression of self-pity, in which the dreamer pictures himself as injured, is really satisfying since it is an adjustment to a lack of appreciation from others.

But for the fact that fantasy mechanism consumes times due to day dreaming, it is a means of tension reduction and it helps the individual in imaginative planning, invention, literature and art.

**viii) Rationalisation**

An individual justifies his maladaptive behaviour by faulty logic, with socially acceptable reasons for it and thus worthy of self and social approval.

Typically, rationalisation involves thinking of logical, socially approved, reasons for past, present or proposed behaviours. A nurse who is late for her work gives many excuses, such as she was not feeling well, or her breakfast got delayed at the hostel. These are simple rationalisations of blaming incidental factors for which she cannot be held responsible.

**ix) Undoing**

When specific action is performed that is considered to be the opposite of a previously unacceptable action, it is said to neutralise or be the original action. Apologising for wrongs, repentances, asking for forgiveness, and undergoing punishment are all forms of undoing.

For example, when a child commits a mistake, she/he apologises to her/his parents, and thinks that she/he can start all over again with a clean slate and with renewed parental approval. As a consequence of such early learning, people commonly develop methods of undoing their misdeeds and methods to avoid punishment and self-devaluation.

**x) Suppression**

Suppression is a device where a conscious effort is made by the individual to dismiss the impulses, feelings and thoughts that are unpleasant, to the preconscious mind. So unacceptable or unpleasant feelings and thoughts are consciously kept out of awareness. For example, a student taking an examination is upset about an argument with her friend but puts it out of her mind so that she can finish the test.

**xi) Conversion**

It is a mechanism by which strong emotional conflicts are expressed as or converted into physical symptoms. For example, the boy who hates his father and is torn between the desire to strike at him and fear of the consequences if he does so, develops a paralysed arm. The conflict is resolved, he cannot strike his father even if he wishes to, and the situation carries no threat of retaliation. In addition the boy secures sympathy and attention for his symptom. The mechanism of conversion operates wholly on an unconscious level.

**xii) Displacement**

By this mechanism, an emotional feeling is transferred to person or objects who are less dangerous than those who initially aroused the emotion. For example, a student who has received a low grade in a terminal examination, can't show anger on the teacher but gets angry with her sister when she asks about his grade.

xiii) **Reaction Formation**

By this mechanism, unacceptable real feelings are repressed and acceptable opposite feelings are expressed. For instance, a woman who actually dislikes her mother-in-law hides her feelings by being always very nice to her.

xiv) **Substitution**

Substitution is a mechanism which may be employed to reduce tension resulting from frustration. To get satisfaction and reduce tension, resulting from frustration, the substitutive action must have certain similarities to the frustrated one. For example, a student who has not been able to get admission to the MBBS course may try to substitute it with a course of physiotherapy.

You will understand this concept well while learning obsessive compulsive conditions wherein a patient might rub and wash her hands repeatedly as an act to neutralise or get rid of guilt feelings of taking bribe.

xv) **Introjection**

It is closely related to the act of identifying with others values and norms. This mechanism seems to follow the principle of 'if you cannot beat them, join them'.

An individual makes of this mechanism, when she/he fears social retaliation and punishment. For example, when an Indian army officer enters into the enemy's land because he has lost his way he introjects the enemy's values and beliefs as a protection for himself. However, it is evident that introjection may lead to seriously distorted and maladaptive behaviour when his guilt feeling starts functioning.

**Check Your Progress 2**

1) Define conflict.

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2) Define frustration.

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3) Define defense mechanism.

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4) List any five defense mechanisms and define them.

a) .....  
 b) .....  
 c) .....  
 d) .....  
 e) .....



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### 3.6 LET US SUM UP

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Adjustment is a continuous process as the satisfaction of one need gives place to the arousal of another need. Adjustment techniques are used by individuals when an obstacle delays the gratification of goal achievement. They can be either task-oriented or defense oriented. The latter pattern is used when a person perceives the situation as a conflicting one. Compensation is a defense against feelings of inferiority or imagined or real personal defects.

Defense mechanisms are patterns of adjustment. Most often, they are used in combination rather than singly. They are used for softening failure, alleviating anxiety and hurt, and protecting one's feelings of adequacy and worth. Defense mechanism may be characterised as a conscious process that usually takes place at an unconscious level. These are healthy as long as the individual makes use of them infrequently and stops using them as soon as she/he finds a new form of behaviour to tackle the problem. However, frequent use of the defense mechanisms results in the individual retreating from reality and interference with the effective resolution of the stress situation. This unit also described some of the common defense mechanisms. You have also read in detail about these defense mechanisms in BNS-105, Block-3.

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### 3.7 KEY WORDS

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- Amnesic** : Partial or total loss of memory either for a specific period of time or a loss of all past memories.
- Delusion** : Firm false belief, opposed to reality, but maintained in spite of strong evidence to the contrary.
- Self esteem** : Feeling of personal worth.
- Stress** : Any adjustive demand that requires coping behaviour on the part of individual or group.

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### 3.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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#### Check Your Progress 1

Adjustment is the process by which a living organism maintains a balance between its needs and the circumstances that influence the satisfaction of those needs.

- a) Task-oriented adjustment takes place/ occurs when an individual feels competent to handle a stress and attacks the obstacle directly.
- b) Defense-oriented adjustment occurs when the individual's capability to handle a stress is inadequate, and so he aims primarily to protect his self from hurt and disorganisation.

#### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Conflict is a source of stress when an individual has to choose between two or more incompatible needs that cannot be satisfied fully at the same time.
- 2) Frustration is also a source of stress. It occurs when obstacles delay or block progress towards gratification of a single need in a given time.
- 3) Defense mechanisms are the patterns of adjustment which an individual adopts to relieve or decrease anxiety caused by an uncomfortable situation that threatens self-esteem.



- 4) a) Sublimation is directing the unacceptable motives into socially constructive channels.
- b) Repression is often a selective forgetting wherein the individual excludes painful thoughts from consciousness.
- c) Projection is placing blame for difficulties upon others.
- d) Fantasy is imagined achievements of one's unmet needs.
- e) Rationalisation is justifying one maladaptive behaviour by socially acceptable reasons.

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### 3.9 FURTHER READING

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Kapoor, Bimla (1994, 2001), *A Text Book of Psychiatric Nursing*, Vol. I and II, Kumar Publishing House, Pitampura, Delhi.