

Reflections on the Emotional Impact of
our Clinical Work:
Anxiety and Defences Mechanisms in
Mental Health Practice and
Organisations

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Definitions

- **Psychoanalysis:** So, what is psychoanalysis? Although initially developed as a therapy, it has become known as an open-ended effort to understand all of one's central unconscious thoughts, wishes, fears, conflicts, defences, and identifications (McWilliams, 2004).
- **Defence Mechanism:** a defence mechanism is an unconscious psychological process that protects an individual from anxiety provoking thoughts and feelings resulting from internal and external stressors. There are several types of defence mechanisms such as denial, disavowal, dissociation etc but the one I will focus on today is splitting. I will provide a more in-depth understanding of splitting later in this speech.
- **Social Defence Mechanism:** Although defence mechanisms are experienced by the individual, Menzies Lyth (1960) and Foster (2001) applies the concept of defence mechanism to teams and organisations, which they call social defence mechanisms.

Anxiety

- **Persecutory anxiety** – may cause us to overlook our patients' good points while projecting all the bad things into them.
- To retreat from emotional involvement with difficult patients is both a form of self-protection and a danger.
 - Retreating does not hold the patient in mind as a whole person, running the risk of not seeing what we need to see and consequently of not doing what we should be doing (e.g. focusing on paperwork and not seeing patient; or not doing any paperwork and just staring into space or chatting).

- **Depressive anxiety** - find different ways of splitting off part of our experience, often colluding with our patients by focussing on the good aspects of the relationship while overlooking their destructiveness.
 - This leads to clinicians having a sentimental view of their relationship with a patient.

Defence Mechanisms

- **Splitting** – a desire to turn away from awareness of aspects of the work which increase our levels of discomfort.
- **Social Defence Mechanism** – a social defence mechanism develops over time through collusive interactions and agreement, often unconscious, between members of the organisation as to what form it shall take.

Integration

- **Depressive Anxiety** - Reflective spaces to process emotions.
- **Persecutory Anxiety** – Use of external consultants to re-establish boundaries in the workplace.
- **Goal** - To achieve a sense of integration and togetherness in the workplace by supporting clinicians to regain their ability to hold onto painful, ambivalent feelings and are able to feel in touch with themselves and their work.

The End

Questions?