

THE BEST DEFENSE IS THE ONE YOU KNOW

Episode Transcript

Intro

Lily: A lot of people talk about defense mechanisms and I'm wondering if that's a term that you use.

Man at Bar 1: Sure definitely.

Stuff that makes us uncomfortable, sad, angry, scared, hurt is happening all the time - both physically and emotionally. And what do you usually do? I'm guessing you try to make the bad feelings stop.

Man at Bar 2: It's the moments when I'm looking to disengage from whatever the threat might be.

For decades, the field of psychology has been interested in understanding the myriad creative strategies we employ to cope with this discomfort. But right now, I wonder if I can convince you that your defense mechanisms might be the key to knowing who you are as an individual and who WE are as a collective. And maybe, just maybe the ways we defend ourselves against the things that scare us are unfairly getting a bad rap.

Molly: Right so maybe we can kind of reframe that a little bit because we all have defenses. And I kind of want to backup a little bit and sometimes people hear defense mechanisms as though somebody's saying to them "you're just being defensive" which is kind of an accusatory - sort of what we say when we get into arguments. So we all actually have defenses.

I'm Lily Sloane and this is A Therapist Walks Into a Bar.

Bar Scene with Molly: dog barking, inaudible convo with dog owners

On a sunny California winter Sunday afternoon, on the patio of a bar in Oakland, I met up with my friend and colleague,

Lily: Can you say who you are?

Molly: Oh yeah! [laughing] I'm Molly Merson and I'm a psychotherapist in Berkeley. What else?

What Are Defense Mechanisms?

In an attempt to lay out all the defense mechanisms, Molly and I did what all experts do: we took out our phones and did some Googling.

[molly pulling up list and fade out]

SCENE: chatter while looking for defense mechanisms

[start music]

Ok, if you search for lists of you're not gonna find any two that look exactly alike. Since Freud, we've coined a whole slew of terms to describe specific types of defensive mechanisms. And you might recognize some of them.

<i>Denial</i>	<i>Compartmentalization</i>	<i>Rationalization</i>
<i>Regression</i>	<i>Projection</i>	<i>Undoing</i>
<i>Acting Out</i>	<i>Reaction Formation</i>	<i>Sublimation</i>
<i>Dissociation</i>	<i>Repression</i>	<i>Compensation</i>
<i>Devaluation</i>	<i>Displacement</i>	<i>Assertiveness</i>
<i>Splitting</i>	<i>Intellectualization</i>	<i>Fantasy</i>

There's also a lot of language out there that talks about which defenses are healthy or unhealthy or which one's are more mature or quote primitive. But I think all of that can sometimes sound a bit judgy. No matter how mature you are, you can use any of these defenses at different times, for different reasons.

[End music]

Molly: Emotions are overwhelming sometimes for all of us. Even for an infant the sense of hunger could potentially just be so completely overwhelming. So could something like a car accident. You get into a car accident and you might have to repress whatever that experience was in order to continue to go about your life. There's just some stuff we can't really process without going a little bit crazy or a lot crazy. So our minds are actually working really hard to get us to an equilibrium and sometimes that means leaving certain things out.

Like how we might kind of avoid talking about death.

Molly: To come to terms with your own mortality while you're still living and thriving is like this [explosion sound] like what? So we don't think about it very much and we use something like distraction or whatever to go about our lives. So the idea of a healthy defense, in a way it's all healthy, right? Like your mind is trying to help you get through your life. But sometimes some of the things that we do, some of the ways that the

defenses manifest can actually really hurt us. But sometimes they hurt us less then we would feel hurt to come into contact with the trauma.

So I don't know, the healthy defenses is kind of like - it's liking says who? You know? Who's the healthy police? [laughing] I kind of wonder about that.

[Music transition]

So I'm not gonna define every defense mechanism. There are...so many. But when I went to the Wooden Nickel, a bar in San Francisco near my therapy office, a few common defenses came up in the conversations I had. Starting with me trying to figure out if the tater tots I was eating were enough to constitute a meal (hint - they were not).

Lily: Tater tots make a balanced dinner right?

Man at Bar 2: Um if you put the same number in each hand. As if to jungle with them maybe.

Lily: Right. That's how a balanced meal works.

What my very complicit friend was helping me with there is rationalizing. Ok, we were definitely kidding, but most of us do this a lot. Sometimes we're conscious of it, sometimes not so much. For instance, let's say a package delivered to me from a VERY large online retailer - let's call them Schmamazon - doesn't show up. I contact Schmamazon who then proceed to resend the item. But then, the original shipment shows up too - turns out my next door neighbor accidentally got it. Rather than tell Schmamazon about it, I just keep the duplicate because... "they're a massive company and they do all kinds of unethical stuff so screw them". As if my passive stealing is actually rooted strongly in my values. I kind of know it's bs. But returning the thing would be such a pain...so I find a way to rationalize the decision I've already made.

When I asked one guy about his defense mechanisms, he described how he sometimes responds when a person gives him some feedback he doesn't really want to hear.

Man at Bar 3: Um...ignoring people is definitely one. Or feigning acceptance in a way. I'm like "yeah of course totally" but I'm like actually "fuck you I'm not gonna do that at all". Oh god -

Lily: When you fake it on the outside, what are you doing on the inside to cope with whatever is going on?

Man at Bar 3: Just telling myself that I'm right or that I know better. Obviously. I'm like I don't need this person's opinion. I'm fine.

Lily: Oh so maybe you kind of dismiss the value of what they have to say

Man at Bar 3: Absolutely.

This one is also super common. It's called devaluation. Molly and I talked about this too.

Molly: Basically devaluation is like, when you really really want something, like I really really wanted to win first prize for your art project but you won third prize or you won nothing and you go pshh I didn't really want that anyway.

Lily: That contest is totally dumb and rigged and it's not even the really important one in the art world and those judges are idiots.

Molly: Exactly. So then you can understand how a defense mechanism is actually a protection against huge amounts of "unpleasure", as Freud would say. That would really be disappointing to lose something that you really wanted so to mitigate that, it's like eh I didn't really want it anyways.

Sound familiar? No? Don't worry - if that one doesn't fit you, we've got more to choose from. Let me just check my inventory...oh right! Intellectualization!

Man at Bar 3: I was always raised to be very logical. It's just how my mother was. She's like "this means this and this is this."

Man at Bar 2: I will tend to - I'll try to think forward - I'll be like "ok this is happening or this has happened, what next?" Like, what do I or what do we do to progress from this moment

So intellectualizing is about using our brains to solve problems, getting in our heads about it rather than feeling the feelings. Like every person I spoke with at the bars, Molly told me, she also intellectualizes - she's been going right to using her brain to make sense of things - since she was young.

Molly: I was always very smart so I could always think about something. It's actually a huge part of who I am and I really love that about myself. So when I was young, like in my teens and twenties, that was probably my biggest defense mechanism. Because it was so soothing. I would have these really intense emotions and not know what to do with them but I could think about it so I could work it out that way.

So yeah, you can see how great it is to be able to think through things. But, Molly says sometimes, this goes to far. Sometimes, thinking instead of feeling becomes the only choice because at some point she learned to be afraid of the feelings. And when that happens, Molly says:

Molly: I know I'm leaving a huge part of myself out. And that makes me sad. So I want to be able to bring in all of myself into my life because that's how it gets to be the richest life I could possibly live.

On one hand, your experience of your strategy could be that it works great for you and you wouldn't change a thing. Like this guy who tends to stay out of conflict.

Lily: Do you feel like there's been any downsides to that strategy?

Guy at Bar 1: Uh, hmm. Not really. No. If anything, it's actually been positive. One hundred percent positive. Yeah. It's great.

But more likely, your defenses are a mixed bag. Like the way my friend will get quiet and go inside himself to try to sort through an experience he's having with the people around him instead of telling the other people involved how he's feeling. This may help maintain the piece, but something else gets lost.

Guy at Bar 2: I think the negative consequence of that is that skips over giving myself the space to be emotional. It's not that I deny what I'm feeling inside, but I skip over communicating that in the rawest way in favor of wanting a constructive solution.

By keeping it all inside himself, ultimately -

Guy at Bar 2: People don't necessarily know how I feel or often I'm not expressing what I actually want. What I'm thinking in the moment is if I'm having an argument with a friend or anyone or if I'm frustrated by a family member, I'm being like well this is someone I have a relationship with and I don't want that relationship to be ended and I think I flip to some fatalistic extremes. If I allow this to escalate, this friendship could - what if it breaks?

[abrupt shattering type noise]

Yeah, what if it breaks? Often this fear is at the heart of how we try to cope with the uncertainty in our relationships with others. We know, on some level at least, we depend on our relationships to survive. We're social creatures. So losing others becomes an existential threat. Ironically, this will sometimes lead us to act in ways that actually keep us a bit distanced from others or from ourselves in order to preserve the relationship.

Guy at Bar 2: Yeah, I will put myself second. I will come to a conclusion in most cases that the mere fact that this interaction is happening means that I should be invested in protecting the underlying relationship rather than expressing myself.

[Music Transition]

Defense mechanisms can present as really wonderful qualities in us and we shouldn't be too quick to right them off as foibles, or even worse - character defects. At the same time, they can be limiting, holding us back from a fuller emotional experience of our lives.

Molly: We all have defense mechanisms. That's part of what helps us survive. So we also want to think about when you're in a position to be able to do more than survive, then that might be a good opportunity to start to investigate what those defense

mechanisms are, just so you can decide whether you want to keep them or not. And if you do want to keep them, do you want to modify them in some way? Also, do the defense mechanisms tell you something about yourself that you might not have known about yourself - like you might have known too afraid to know about yourself or that you might have felt too afraid to know about yourself.

Stepping back from trying to categorize our defenses as bad or good, we get to a much more fascinating question: what can our defenses tell us about ourselves? I asked myself this question ten years ago. Walking to catch the bus, I had an experience one of my go to defenses: Fantasy.

[Music/city and walking sounds]

I was 23 and didn't live in the city yet. I'd *never* even spent much time in a city. Still adjusting to commuting to San Francisco for school, I was walking through the South of Market neighborhood, and I noticed a little question about my safety lead me down this rabbit hole. It started with

"What if I got shot right now?"

From there, I imagined being in the hospital and family, friends, loved ones, exes gathering around to love me, apologizing for anything mean they ever did or said. Suddenly I caught myself, like waking up from a dream. I decided to ask, "what am I feeling right now that I'm having this fantasy?" and my immediate response -

"I'm afraid I'm not lovable. If I was in trouble, would anyone care?"

I felt the very familiar sensations of sadness and grief, eyes welling up with tears, while at the same time, a tension was lifted. I felt and acknowledged my pain and moved on with the day.

Because of this experience, I now know that when fantasy takes over, there are deeper emotions I need to address. It's been really useful. End scene.

[pretty music abruptly cuts off]

Just kidding. That's not how it works. Yes, this has been useful. But those aha moments are often later replaced with new layers of understanding. Which literally happened during my interview with Molly. I told her this story and what she said blew the lid off this whole thing.

Molly: I believe that people have unconsciousness and there is a field of unconscious material out there that you can be picking up on at any time that can be group oriented, it can be socially oriented. So you're walking down the street in that part of Mission street and there's so much unconscious material. There's so much going on there because of

all the different people who live there on the streets or the SRO's or in the million dollar lofts.

See, Western psychology has been so focused on the individual for so long that we've often neglected how our unconscious experiences are connected to the world around us.

Lily: Was I just feeling my own fear of not being loved, but was I feeling the way that so many people there are neglected by society.

Molly: I see fantasy or reverie as a way of connecting and actually it's in my work quite a lot, it's in my daily life quite a lot but I used to think of it as something that was just personal. But I'm coming to understand that it isn't. That we have a social unconscious. That we have - and so we have social defenses. So what are the defenses, if we were to imagine our social structure right now, what are the defenses of our social structure? Money is a big one. Denial is a big one.

Lily: And I've heard people talk about our culture having more of a manic defense. So like I'm gonna do do do in response to fear of death or whatever it might be - I'm gonna not age and I'm gonna control my body and I'm gonna make more money and I'm gonna keep going.

Just to pause here, I imagine you've heard the word manic used to describe someone with Bipolar disorder having a manic episode. But manic can also describe a feeling state of being frenetically busy or frantic. And this is an experience I think most people have had. Molly makes a really interesting point about our culture - how that kind of frantic business and filling our lives up with stuff can serve to distract us from things that are too painful to face.

Molly: I have a suspicion that it has a lot to do with racism because the manic do do do get more get more is sort of a running away from the kind of injustice that has created this entire country and the way that it's been built on black bodies and brown bodies who have not been fairly compensated. To reconcile that again with this things don't match up inside my mind so I have to repress something - that proximity to I could lose everything is so real here. That manic defense is all about accumulate and be more and do more and whatever - and that's capitalism in the way that we do it here anyway.

This is something, as a society, we're having to examine much more closely. How have we treated people of color. How have we treated women. How have we treated immigrants. Anyone different - in order to maintain our own standing. And if you've been on the receiving end of these defenses, you've probably been aware of what's happening, at least on some level, for a really long time.

So back to my fantasy, it seems like a strong possibility that I was tapping into a fear that's not just my own, but something present in our larger social unconscious. The fantasy was both a distraction from the anxiety I feel about this and at the same time, it was a potential way in.

Molly: I think too the way our society is structured at the moment, where if you don't accumulate if you lose everything, then no one will help you. No one will be there. No one WILL visit you in the hospital after you've been shot.

Along with that kind of manic defense against slowing down and looking at what we're actually doing, Molly says denial - an incredibly powerful defense mechanism - factors into how we carry this stuff around in our social unconscious.

The field of epigenetics is trying to understand if traumatic events, like the Holocaust, have actually affected the DNA in survivors in such a way that symptoms of that trauma are inherited. Some really interesting studies suggest this may be true though results are still inconclusive. But, it's still fairly obvious to me that our trauma impacts how we interact with one another, how we raise our children, and how our children raise their children.

If you believe in this idea that we're all interconnected - like one big organism - then our defense mechanisms may not just be our own. We might be responding to intergenerational trauma, systemic oppression or privilege, culturally transmitted ideas about what's safe and what's dangerous, what's acceptable to feel and what's not.

[Transition Music]

Molly: I would caution against anyone feeling like they have to tear down their defense mechanisms

Our defenses our sometimes truly keeping us safe. Sometimes they once served a purpose and we do them out of habit even though they aren't really working anymore. It's just that changing is hard and scary. In movies or television, and this is big in reality television, we see people have big cathartic experiences - maybe someone delivers some tough love that wakes someone up. Or a previously highly defended person has a big emotional breakdown and they're changed forever. There are even self help programs out there that promote this sort of approach to change. But this can be dangerous.

Molly: I think in terms of assembling a self and getting in contact with yourself, you need to be able to have consent at every part of the process and some of that thing where it's about breaking down your defenses, from my perspective you lose an element of consent because you can't consent to something in the beginning before you know what it's gonna be. You have to consent all along the way. And whenever a patient tells me something like "no I don't see that" or "no you're wrong" that's actually you telling me no. That's saying you don't consent to this element of the process so I'm gonna back off. That doesn't mean I have to change my mind. It just means, cool you're giving me some edge here. And that's how we develop a self is an edge - it's creating our edges and finding out where they are and I think investigating defense mechanisms can be really

useful in finding out where our edges are, finding out where our pain is and then being able to heal that.

[FADE MUSIC]

Change usually comes in the form of first understanding and then having these little experiences of trying out another way. Over a long period of time. Like, I recognize I'm doing my fantasy thing. I understand more about what's going on there. I can even appreciate how it serves me (sometimes) and then I can ask myself if I want to try something different in this moment. Sometimes the answer will be yes. Other times it will be...mmmm no, I'm good. And over time we develop more tolerance for other experiences that might have felt threatening in the past. Or other ways of being we just didn't even know were a thing.

Guy at Bar 3: Sometimes I need to learn to sit with my feelings more as opposed to trying to sort them out and make them stop because maybe it's a feeling I don't want to feel. So I've definitely been working on that. Just like I'm sad and today I'm gonna let myself be sad and there isn't really anything I can do to fix it today.

Lily: What made you decide that was something you wanted to work on?

Guy at Bar 3: I got a really bad DUI and had to go to rehab and I actually learned it in rehab. But it's really good. it's actually really great. Just sitting with your feelings and accepting how you feel.

Like my friend earlier, this guy also bumped up against the limitations of a purely intellectual understanding of himself.

Guy at Bar 3: I mean, if someone hadn't introduced the idea of sitting with your feelings I probably would have kept trying to logic my way out of them. But I guess I do both to some degree now.

[Music starts]

Lily: Is there anything else that you want to say about your defense mechanisms?

Guy at Bar 3: I can be a real bitch sometimes [laughing] I don't know. They're something I'm working on also. I probably can't even list all of them. I probably don't know I'm doing them sometimes. But they're just a way to keep me from feeling things I may not want to feel but sometimes it's probably better to just feel those things and acknowledge them.

Credits

This episode was produced by me Lily Sloane and edited by Emily Shaw with help from Reuben Ly and Keith Men-Kou-Nee. Thank you Molly Merson for pondering this topic with me. You can learn more about Molly's work and read her fantastic blog at mollymerson.com. You can get links to all these fantastic people at a.therapist.walks.into.a.bar.dot.com

Thank you to the strangers and friends at the bar who talked with me about their defense mechanisms and to the Wooden Nickel in San Francisco for letting me hang out with my microphone.

Please subscribe to A Therapist Walks Into a Bar and leave a review wherever you listen to podcasts. To stay in the loop, go to [a therapist walks into a bar dot com](http://atherapistwalksintoabar.com) and sign up for the newsletter. While you're there, you can easily become a patron of the show by visiting patreon.com/atherapistwalksintoabar. Many gifts await you.

And speaking of gifts, here's a little bonus discussion about how superman got his powers.

Guy at Bar 2: Superman's powers develop like they do in puberty. Sort of like when you voice breaks and it's sort of like while that's happening it will sometimes catch you out and be like [makes voice crack sound] and I think it's a little bit like that but with massive abs.

Lily: So in a way it isn't just gradual. It can be kind of sudden like when you're like ooh that hair was not there before.

Guy at Bar 2: yeah. I think it's - but you know obviously it's superman so it's happening a little bit faster.

Lily: Right, superman is gonna do everything faster.

[Fade Music]