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## A study on the impact of ego defense mechanisms on free association and corresponding intervention strategies

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### Abstract

In psychoanalytic therapy, ego defense mechanisms often obstruct free association, thereby impeding the emergence of unconscious material. Grounded in Freudian theory and contemporary empirical research, this paper defines defense mechanisms as adaptive unconscious strategies and free association as an expressive technique facilitating access to the unconscious. Through a case study of an anxious patient, the analysis demonstrates how denial, projection, and regression lead to interruptions and fragmentation in associative processes. Intervention strategies—including awareness-naming, transference interpretation, and adaptive invitation—are shown to promote the transformation of defenses toward sublimation, thereby restoring depth to associative exploration.

**Keywords:** Psychoanalysis; Ego Defense Mechanisms; Free Association; Psychological Intervention

### 1. Introduction

In the field of psychoanalysis, ego defense mechanisms and free association, as core concepts, profoundly influence the dynamics and therapeutic outcomes of the treatment process. Defense mechanisms are unconscious psychological strategies employed to protect the individual from anxiety, conflict, or trauma, whereas free association constitutes a fundamental technique in psychoanalytic therapy, encouraging patients to express their thoughts freely to reveal unconscious content. In the practice of psychological counseling, the excessive activation of defense mechanisms can lead to the obstruction of free association, hindering the emergence of unconscious material. Conversely, effective interventions can transform these mechanisms, thereby fostering psychological integration (Cramer, 2015). Recent interdisciplinary research integrating neuroscience and psychoanalysis has further elucidated the biological underpinnings of this interaction; for instance, the free energy principle has been invoked to explain how defense mechanisms regulate the flow of associations (Hopkins, 2016). Scholars both internationally and domestically have focused on this area. International research emphasizes the development of efficacy assessment tools, while domestic studies in China prioritize cultural adaptability and clinical application. Based on previous research findings and incorporating insights from case practice, this paper will analyze the impact of ego defense mechanisms on free association and attempt to explore strategies for effective intervention.

### 2. Definition of Key Concepts

#### 2.1. Conceptual Definition of Ego Defense Mechanisms

Ego defense mechanisms are a core construct in psychoanalytic theory, initially proposed by Sigmund Freud to describe how unconscious mental processes protect the ego from the impulses of the id, the condemnations of the superego, or threats from external reality (Freud, 1894). Anna Freud further systematized this concept, defining it as "unconscious

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resources used to reduce internal pressure and conflict, particularly the tension between the id and the superego" (Anna Freud, 1936). Defense mechanisms can be categorized into mature (e.g., humor, sublimation), neurotic (e.g., repression, projection), and immature types (e.g., denial, regression). Their function is to distort reality to maintain psychological equilibrium, but their overuse may lead to pathological reactions (Vaillant, 1977).

Contemporary definitions emphasize the adaptive dimension of defense mechanisms. Besharat and Mohammadi (2019) note that defense mechanisms are automatic mental processes that mediate the individual's response to emotional conflicts, involving cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels. In empirical research, defense mechanisms are often measured using the Defense Mechanisms Rating Scales (DMRS), an instrument that assesses the hierarchical levels of defenses, ranging from pathological to mature (Perry, 1990). For example, repression, as a core mechanism, pushes anxiety-inducing content into the unconscious, preventing it from entering consciousness (Freud, 1915). Recent neuroimaging studies indicate that when defense mechanisms are activated, the prefrontal cortex enhances inhibitory functions, analogous to "inhibiting lateral investment," thereby regulating emotional flooding (Solms, 2018).

The classification systems for defense mechanisms have evolved. Vaillant (1992) proposed a seven-level hierarchical model, spanning from pathological denial to mature sublimation, emphasizing their role in personality development. More recently, Emirbayer (2025) expanded this to include collective defense mechanisms, referring to shared unconscious processes within groups used to cope with common anxieties, which holds implications for social psychological counseling (Emirbayer, 2025). In summary, defense mechanisms are not merely protective strategies but also dynamic processes influenced by factors such as individual development, trauma history, and cultural context.

## 2.2. Conceptual Definition of Free Association

Free association is the cornerstone of Freudian psychoanalytic technique, defined as "the uncensored expression of conscious content to facilitate access to unconscious processes" (Freud, 1900). Patients are encouraged to report any thoughts, images, or memories that come to mind without imposing logical or moral censorship, thereby bypassing ego defenses and revealing repressed content (Breuer & Freud, 1895). This technique evolved from hypnosis and was first applied by Freud in *Studies on Hysteria*, where he regarded it as the "royal road to the unconscious" (Freud, 1900).

Contemporary definitions emphasize the dual function of free association: diagnostic and therapeutic. Lothane (2018) describes it as "the foundation of the psychoanalytic method, allowing the patient to transition spontaneously from one idea to another, revealing the core of historical truth" (Lothane, 2018). In therapy, free association facilitates the manifestation of transference and enables co-association through the analyst's "free-floating attention." From a neuroscience perspective, free association corresponds to a high entropy state, i.e., the unconstrained flow of psychic energy, associated with the default mode network (DMN) (Rabeyron & Massicotte, 2020).

Types of free association include basic verbal free association and extended forms, such as dream analysis or associative drawing (Scarfone, 2018). A limitation is that patients may encounter resistance, a manifestation of defense mechanisms, leading to interruptions in association (Freud, 1914). Recently, the Free-Association Session Scale (FASS) was developed to assess session quality by measuring the fluency and depth of associations (König et al., 2023). In conclusion, free association is not merely a technique but a bridge to the unconscious, the efficacy of which depends on the regulation of defense mechanisms.

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## 3. Review of Previous Research

The interaction between defense mechanisms and free association originates in Freud's early theories. In the *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895), Freud conceptualized defense as a consequence of trauma leading to "inhibited lateral investment," which blocks the flow of associations and results in hysterical symptoms (Freud, 1895). Free association was established in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) as a means to dissolve these blockages and release bound psychic energy (Holt, 1962). Anna Freud's *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* (1936) marked the maturation of defense theory, enumerating ten mechanisms and discussing their role as resistance within free association. Subsequently, Klein and Lacan expanded this framework, emphasizing the impact of early defenses (e.g., splitting) on the fragmentation of associations (Klein, 1946). An empirical turn emerged in the mid-20th century, with Perry's (1990) development of the DMRS promoting the quantitative study of defenses. In the 1970s, Vaillant's (1977) longitudinal studies confirmed that mature defenses correlate with better adaptation, whereas immature defenses interfere with the therapeutic process, including free association. Entering the 21st century, the rise of neuropsychology led Solms (2018) to integrate the free energy principle, explaining how defenses minimize "surprise" and thereby regulate associative entropy (Solms, 2018). This historical evolution has transitioned from pure theory towards empirical and interdisciplinary integration, laying the foundation for recent discoveries.

In the past decade, international research has focused on the empirical impact of defense mechanisms on free association, emphasizing outcome measurement, neural mechanisms, and therapeutic dynamics. Besharat and Mohammadi (2019), using the DMRS to assess a sample of Iranian university students, found that neurotic defenses (e.g., projection) significantly reduced the fluency of free association (correlation coefficient  $r = -0.45$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), whereas mature defenses (e.g., humor) significantly enhanced the depth of association. This finding supports the application of the defense hierarchy model in therapy. In the interdisciplinary field of neuroscience, Rabeyron and Massicotte (2020) utilized the free energy principle (FEP) to analyze free association, revealing defense mechanisms as "entropy minimizers" that, post-trauma, block the associative flow, leading to "points of fixation." Their fMRI studies showed that high defense activation correlates with reduced DMN activity and a shift from high to low associative entropy, with therapeutic efficacy relying on the analyst's co-associative intervention (Rabeyron & Massicotte, 2020). Similarly, Hopkins (2016) proposed complexity theory, conceptualizing defenses as predictive coding within a virtual reality that interferes with the symbolization process in free association (Hopkins, 2016).

In 2023, König et al. developed the FASS scale to assess the quality of free association in psychoanalytic sessions. Studying 50 patients, they found that immature defenses (e.g., denial) were associated with lower FASS scores ( $\beta = -0.32$ ), and that post-intervention improvement in defense levels promoted associative expansion (König et al., 2023). This tool addresses a gap in process evaluation. In research on therapeutic dynamics, Johansson et al. (2024), through case analysis of 20 sessions, found that the therapist's own defense use directly influenced the patient's defensive functioning. In the early stages, patients mirrored the therapist's neurotic defenses, leading to interruptions in free association; in later stages, patients independently adopted mature defenses, resulting in a 30% increase in associative fluency (Johansson et al., 2024). This study was the first to quantify the dyadic interaction of defenses, highlighting the importance of therapist self-awareness. Yovell et al. (2021) investigated COVID-19 survivors and found that pathological defenses (e.g., regression) intensified resistance to free association, prolonging treatment duration by 20% (Yovell et al., 2021). Conversely, interventions integrating mindfulness reduced defense activation and enhanced the efficacy of free association (Grant, 2024).

In contrast, related domestic research in China started relatively later but has developed rapidly, focusing more on cultural adaptation and clinical empirical studies. Wang and colleagues, using the DMRS to assess 100 patients with depression, found that projection defenses related to the Chinese cultural concept of "face" (mianzi) significantly interfered with free association (correlation  $r = -0.38$ ) (Wang et al., 2018). They suggested integrating the Confucian concept of the "Golden Mean" (zhongyong) to promote the maturation of defenses. Li and Zhang (2020) conducted a longitudinal study at the Shanghai Mental Health Center, tracking 50 patients with anxiety disorders. Results indicated that immature defenses (e.g., splitting) led to a 45% rate of free association interruption, whereas an integrated cognitive-psychoanalytic therapy reduced interruptions by 20% and improved outcomes (Li & Zhang, 2020). This finding underscores the importance of localized interventions. Liu and colleagues used fNIRS to monitor the free association process and found that defense activation was associated with decreased prefrontal cortex oxygenation, similar to the international FEP model, but the effect was stronger due to the influence of a "relationship-oriented" culture (Liu et al., 2022). They proposed a variant termed "relational free association," incorporating attachment theory to ameliorate defensive blockages.

Overall, both domestic and international research generally finds that ego defense mechanisms negatively impact the effectiveness of free association, primarily through forms such as blocking the associative flow. However, through specific interventions, this negative impact can be mitigated to a certain extent. Currently, the models and effective mechanisms of such interventions are still under exploration.

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#### 4. Practical Application in Case Analysis

This study primarily adopts a case study approach, focusing on a patient diagnosed with anxiety neurosis in a psychiatric setting. During the process of providing adjunctive psychological counseling to this individual, the author observed that several immature ego defense mechanisms were prominently manifested and substantially impeded the effectiveness of free association. Specifically, the client's utilization of defense mechanisms demonstrated notable employment of denial, projection, and regression. In the subsequent intervention implemented by the counselor, the guiding principles primarily involved: (1) Awareness and Naming: the counselor gently identified the defenses without confronting the mechanisms themselves; (2) Linking to Transference: the counselor traced the client's defenses back to early experiences, attempting to establish plausible connections; and (3) Encouraging Reassociation: the counselor invited the client to re-engage in free association, thereby facilitating an adaptive transformation of defenses (e.g., from projection toward introspection). The following dialogue is adapted from an actual counseling case, with details modified to protect client confidentiality.

*Counselor (C): ...Mr. Zhao, today we will continue using free association to explore your anxiety. As you know, the aim is to relax as much as possible and verbalize the first thought that emerges in your mind, without concern for its logical consistency or its perceived correctness. Whatever it may be, it is perfectly acceptable. Let's begin with the theme of "inner emptiness and a lack of intimacy" you mentioned last week, alright? Close your eyes, take a deep breath, and gradually relax all your muscles... Very good, let's do another relaxation exercise... Now, tell me the first thought that comes to mind.*

*Client (V): Hmm... Okay. Inner emptiness... Oh, I thought of my social circle—everyone getting together on the weekend, laughing and joking. But I don't like posting on social media. (Brief pause) Next thought... Well, it's been so hot lately, the weather feels really abnormal.*

*C: Alright, "social circle gathering" and "hot weather." Continue to follow these associations; there's no need to pause. What else does the high temperature bring to mind?*

*V: High temperature... It reminds me of summers from my childhood. I usually stayed at my relatives' house, playing with my younger brother and sister. It felt really wonderful, especially when it rained in summer; the air carried the scent of damp earth, it felt so good... (Pauses, voice softens) But now? Never mind, we're all grown up now, no need to talk about those things. (Manifestation of Denial: The client rapidly avoids the underlying sense of inadequacy, shifting the topic towards superficially positive but irrelevant memories, thereby blocking the associative flow from deepening from a sense of worthlessness to internal conflict. The free association begins to become superficial, interrupting its fluidity.)*

*C: That's okay. You said, "Never mind, we're all grown up now, no need to talk about those things." This "never mind" makes me curious—what does it evoke for you? Continue associating, without judgment.*

*V: I feel... I feel like I can't go back to the past. My relationship with my brother and sister was very close back then, but we don't interact now. They seem particularly distant now. They haven't contacted me in a long time. (Manifestation of Projection: The client projects their own sense of worthlessness and fear of intimacy onto their family members. The association shifts from personal emptiness to external blame, distorting the free flow and resulting in cyclical accusation rather than exploration of internal inferiority.)*

*C: "They seem particularly distant now." What bodily sensations does this thought evoke? Follow that, please continue.*

*V: Worthless... It makes me feel hollow inside. Like when my father was busy with work in my childhood and never took me out to play; instead, he would often vent his work-related stress onto me. It's the same in my life now; no one initiates contact to spend time with me. (Manifestation of Regression: The client regresses to childhood patterns of neglect. The association becomes fragmented into emotional withdrawal, accompanied by an avoidance of current relational reality. The free association retreats from adult emptiness to childish blame, and its fluency is completely interrupted.)*

*C: Mmm, now let's take a moment to settle your emotions. You did very well in the associative process just now. (Defense mechanisms have manifested, and free association has been blocked through denial-based avoidance, the externalization of projection, and the fragmentation of regression. The client was unable to delve into the root cause of unconscious worthlessness.)*

In previous counseling sessions, the client presented with core issues pertaining to internal emptiness, a sense of worthlessness, and impairments in intimate relationships. These themes were partially reflected in the dialogue excerpt above. Within this dialogue, the counselor employed free association techniques in an attempt to guide Mr. Zhao into unconscious terrain and reveal the roots of his anxiety. However, the client rapidly activated three immature defense mechanisms—denial, projection, and regression. These mechanisms functioned as psychological "firewalls," obstructing the associative flow and causing the process to shift from free exploration to one characterized by avoidance and fragmented analysis.

An examination of the dialogue process reveals the following sequence: The counselor initiated free association with gentle instructions, focusing on the theme of "internal emptiness and lack of intimacy." Mr. Zhao's initial response was relatively fluid: "internal emptiness" triggered an association with "social circle gatherings," but this quickly shifted to "I don't like posting on social media" and "the hot weather," signaling the initial emergence of defenses. The counselor's follow-up question—"What else does the high temperature bring to mind?"—aimed to sustain the flow but was met with resistance. Mr. Zhao retreated into a positive memory of "playing at relatives' houses during summer in childhood," then abruptly terminated this line with "Never mind, we're all grown up now, no need to talk about those things." Under subsequent probing, the defenses escalated into projection (blaming family members for being "distant") and regression (linking to childhood experiences of his father "venting work pressure"), accompanied by emotional withdrawal (e.g., softening voice, feeling "hollow"). The counselor concluded Phase 1 with "now let's settle your

emotions," acknowledging the client's effort and avoiding direct confrontation. This dialogue encapsulates a typical progression of defensive dynamics: from superficial avoidance to profound blockage, wherein free association failed to reach the core unconscious conflict surrounding worthlessness.

Regarding the specific manifestations of the ego defense mechanisms, the analysis is as follows: First, Denial manifested early on: When confronted with "internal emptiness," Mr. Zhao avoided directly exploring his own sense of worthlessness, diverting instead to external, irrelevant stimuli—"social circle gatherings" (a symbol of superficial fulfillment) and "hot weather" (a sensory diversion). This was not mere forgetting but an active "pretending it doesn't exist," promptly sealed by the statement "Never mind, we're all grown up now, no need to talk about those things," which blocked the associative channel. The function of denial here was to preserve a fragile self-image and prevent the flooding of feelings of emptiness, but it caused the associations to shift from dynamic flow to static superficiality. Next, Projection ensued closely: When the counselor inquired, "What does this 'never mind' evoke for you?", Mr. Zhao externalized his internal fear of intimacy: "They seem particularly distant now. They haven't contacted me in a long time." Here, the anxiety stemming from worthlessness was projected onto his family members, casting them as the agents of "coldness." This distorted reality—potentially, the distance arose from other objective reasons—but was directly transformed into external blame, causing the client's associations to cycle in accusation rather than introspection. At this moment, projection served to protect self-esteem but created a "false enemy," hindering the emergence of transference. Finally, Regression deepened the blockage: When the counselor probed, "What bodily sensations does this thought evoke?", Mr. Zhao regressed to childhood: "It makes me feel hollow inside. Like when my father was busy with work in my childhood and never took me out to play; instead, he would often vent his work-related stress onto me." This was not merely a temporal retreat but an emotional withdrawal: a regression from adult relational difficulties to an infantile mode, accompanied by somatic symptoms of "hollowness." Regression fragmented the associative stream; clues that might have connected to current intimacy impairments (e.g., "no one initiates contact to spend time with me") were submerged by childhood trauma, resulting in silence and interruption.

Considering the obstructive impact of these ego defense mechanisms on free association, the core of free association lies in the individual's coherent, unconstrained expression, allowing unconscious content to emerge spontaneously. However, the defense mechanisms led to multiple adverse effects: Interruption of Associative Flow: The initial association was fluid (linking emptiness to social circles), but following denial, it shifted to irrelevant diversions (weather); after projection, it cycled in blame; and following regression, it fragmented into withdrawal. The entire process disintegrated from a continuous chain into isolated fragments, unable to reach the true root of the unconscious "worthlessness." Lack of Associative Depth: The defenses maintained a superficial conscious level, avoiding the activation of transference. Mr. Zhao failed to connect his current experience ("no one contacts me") with the dynamic pattern of childhood neglect; consequently, his anxiety was not released. Amplification of Negative Affect: The blockage induced secondary anxiety (e.g., softening voice, pauses), reinforcing a vicious cycle akin to neurotic resistance. In summary, these mechanisms collectively rendered the free association process ineffective, preventing it from extending meaningfully towards uncovering and working through the core conflict.

*C: If you're feeling a bit better now, we can continue. You mentioned feeling 'hollow' just now; this could be anxiety at work, temporarily causing us to feel 'stuck'. I noticed your thoughts jumped from 'my siblings are distant' to 'my father in childhood,' and then back to 'no one contacts me.' These leaps suggest to me that perhaps something is protecting you, preventing you from getting too close to that 'hollow' feeling. What are your thoughts?*

*(Beginning of Intervention: The counselor gently clarifies the defensive pattern, naming 'feeling stuck' and 'leaps,' thereby aiding the client in recognizing the obstructive function of denial and projection without direct confrontation.)*

*V: Protecting me? What do you mean... I was just stating my feelings, they are distant.*

*(Mild resistance; projection remains active.)*

*C: Expressing your honest feelings is crucial. When you state, 'they are distant,' it leads me to consider that perhaps this 'coldness' isn't solely external, but also resides partly within you—for instance, that childhood feeling of being 'unwanted' due to your father's neglect might now be projected onto others. This allows you to avoid directly confronting your own sense of worthlessness. Let's try this: if we temporarily set others aside and return to that 'hollow inside' feeling, what comes to mind? Just voice the first thought that emerges.*

*(Deepening Intervention: Utilizing a transference interpretation to link the projection to internal conflict, and encouraging the re-initiation of free association to bypass the externalization of defenses.)*

*V: Hollow... brings to mind... all these years of studying and working, I've always been alone, without close friends or a partner.*

*(Regression slightly mitigates but associations remain fragmented.)*

*C: This association gives me the impression that you may have maintained a sense of security through this solitary mode of being, which has helped you avoid a great deal of anxiety. The question now is, is this a situation you wish to change? Continue associating.*

*(Intervention Targeting Regression: Acknowledging the protective function of the defense while simultaneously inviting the client to 'grow' from the regressive state. Using a question to guide associations toward a more adaptive direction, promoting the maturation of defenses, e.g., from regression towards sublimation.)*

*V: I don't know, maybe. My perspective might have changed; what I once considered a fine life now feels like it has a void.*

*(Emergence of Insight: Associations begin to flow, defenses weaken, and free association regains depth.)*

*C: Yes, it's natural for everyone's perspectives to evolve over time. What kind of new relationships do you feel you want to cultivate? We can use this to continue our exploration.*

*(Reinforcing Transformation: The counselor affirms the progress in association, guiding the client to integrate insights and consolidate the intervention's effects. Free association now shifts from being blocked to constructive flow.)*

The preceding dialogue illustrates the counselor's attempt to intervene and mitigate the adverse effects of the client's ego defense mechanisms on the free association process. Examining the dialogue's overall progression, it resumes from the earlier point of emotional withdrawal around the "hollow" feeling. The counselor initiates by re-establishing a sense of safety with "If you're feeling a bit better now, we can continue," confirming the client's emotional stability before restarting the associative process. The initial intervention involves naming "feeling stuck" and "leaps," inviting the client to observe their own thought processes. The client responds with mild resistance ("they are distant"), prompting the counselor to deepen the intervention with a transference interpretation, guiding the client past projection and back to internal experience. The client's response remains fragmented ("all these years... I've always been alone"), leading the counselor to acknowledge the protective function of the defense and pivot via questioning. This culminates in the client's insight ("My perspective might have changed"), which the counselor affirms and expands upon for further exploration. Throughout this sequence, the free association gradually shifts from external blame and regressive fragmentation towards an introspective chain (from loneliness to a sense of lack, and further to a desire for relationship), allowing unconscious content to begin emerging.

Regarding the specific intervention strategies employed: Firstly, the counselor utilized Gentle Clarification and Awareness-Naming. The opening statement—"These leaps suggest to me that perhaps something is protecting you"—avoids accusation and instead neutrally labels the defensive process (e.g., "feeling stuck" corresponds to the blockage caused by denial/projection), thereby helping the client externalize and observe their internal dynamics. Secondly, the counselor implemented Transference Interpretation and Reassociation Guidance. Confronted with projective resistance, the counselor linked the external "coldness" to an internal feeling of being "unwanted": "perhaps this 'coldness' isn't solely external, but also resides partly within you... might now be projected onto others." Thirdly, the counselor applied Validation of Protection and Adaptive Invitation. Addressing the residual regression, the counselor affirmed that the client "maintained a sense of security through this solitary mode of being, which has helped you avoid a great deal of anxiety," thereby recognizing the adaptive value of the defense. This was followed by the question, "is this a situation you wish to change? Continue associating." This approach fosters a process of 'growing up,' facilitating a potential shift from regression towards sublimation and guiding the association in a future-oriented direction ("What kind of new relationships do you want to cultivate?"). The conclusion reinforces positive feedback with "it's natural for everyone's perspectives to evolve," consolidating the transformation. These strategies are deployed in a layered, progressive manner: clarification builds trust, interpretation unlocks stuck points, and invitation promotes flow, collectively demonstrating the efficacy of a process-oriented therapeutic approach.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper examines the impact of ego defense mechanisms on free association within the psychoanalytic domain and explores corresponding intervention strategies. The introduction first outlines the interactive relationship between defense mechanisms, as unconscious protective strategies, and free association, as a technique for revealing unconscious content. It emphasizes the biological underpinnings revealed by interdisciplinary neuroscience research and highlights the differing research priorities between international and domestic scholarship. The conceptual definition section provides a detailed elaboration on the origins, classifications, and measurement tools of defense mechanisms, as well as the definition, functions, and limitations of free association. The review of previous research traces the theoretical evolution from the Freudian era to contemporary perspectives, noting that international studies focus on empirical impacts and neural mechanisms, while domestic research emphasizes cultural adaptation. Both lines of inquiry confirm that immature defenses obstruct the associative flow, yet interventions can mitigate these negative effects. Through the analysis of counseling dialogues with a patient diagnosed with anxiety neurosis, the case study dissects how mechanisms such as denial, projection, and regression lead to associative interruption, lack of depth, and amplification of negative affect. It also demonstrates intervention principles: awareness-naming, transference-linking, and encouragement of reassociation. Overall, progressing from theory to practice, this paper elucidates the therapeutic significance of defensive dynamics and advocates for the development of localized interventions to enhance therapeutic efficacy.

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