

## Adaptive Defense Styles as Character Strengths: Exploring the Links

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### ABSTRACT

Defense mechanisms are coping techniques that people use to overcome stressors and conflicts in their lives. They may be adaptive or maladaptive. Adaptive defenses serve the function of channelizing the unacceptable impulses into socially acceptable forms in mature ways. The purpose of this research is to explore whether adaptive defense mechanisms and character strengths correlate with each other. For this purpose, two groups were studied. One group consisted of those who have been diagnosed with depression and anxiety and second group was healthy controls. Standardised measures of defense mechanisms and character strengths were used to evaluate the participants in both groups. This research has the potential to provide light on how character strengths and defence mechanisms might be related in different groups. Therapeutic strategies and treatment techniques may benefit from a better understanding of the interplay between defence mechanisms and character qualities in people with mental illnesses. This research has the potential to guide intervention plans that boost the mental health and coping of psychiatric populations by enabling them to bring forth their preexisting positive traits in better ways and encouraging greater use of adaptive defense mechanisms. This study intends to further enhance our understanding of the relationship between character strengths and defence mechanisms in psychiatric and control groups and add to the body of knowledge in the fields of positive psychology and psychopathology.

**Keywords:** *Defense Mechanisms, Character Strengths, Psychopathology, Well-Being, Coping*

Defense mechanisms are coping strategies used by people to deal with negative experiences like trauma, abuse, or interpersonal conflict. Stress, hardship, and difficulties in life are all manageable in part because of coping strategies like these. Although defence mechanisms have long been linked to disease, new studies in positive psychology have shown their adaptive potential and the ways in which they are related to personal qualities.

According to positive psychology, an individual's "character strengths" are the positive characteristics and attributes that contribute to their flourishing. Among the many good character qualities that fall under the umbrella of "strengths" are resiliency, self-efficacy,

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optimism, gratitude, and curiosity. They're linked to stronger mental health, more effective coping mechanisms, and the ability to bounce back from setbacks more quickly.

As psychologists examine the benefits of mature defense mechanisms, they have become more interested in the correlation between character strengths and defense mechanisms. Individuals' adaptive defense mechanisms may be mirrored in their character strengths, it is hypothesised. For example, people often use humour as a defense technique to help them deal with stressful events, and this may suggest a connection between strengths like hope, zest, humor, perseverance and the defense mechanism of humour.

Psychologists must comprehend the connection between defensive strategies and personality characteristics and how they affect one's happiness. A person's defensive mechanisms are their mental tactics to keep themselves safe from dangerous situations or negative emotions. These automatic processes function as defense systems when life becomes tough. Further, character strengths are the moral, ethical, and behavioural elements that make up a person's unique identity and direct daily behaviours.

Exploring the interplay between defensive mechanisms and character in the context of well-being provides valuable insights into how individuals navigate and cope with life's challenges. It sheds light on the psychological processes and attributes contributing to well-being and personal growth.

Mature defense mechanisms play a vital role in managing stress and mitigating emotional distress. They serve as adaptive strategies to shield individuals from overwhelming feelings and protect their self-esteem. Maladaptive defense mechanisms include neurotic and immature defenses like reaction formation, repression, denial, projection, rationalization, and acting out. While these mechanisms can be effective in the short term, overreliance on maladaptive defences may hinder emotional processing and impede personal development.

On the other hand, character strengths play a crucial role in shaping individuals' responses to the world around them. Traits such as perseverance, social intelligence, zest, love, perspective, and honesty influence how individuals cope with stress, regulate emotions, and engage in meaningful relationships. These positive traits contribute to adaptive and healthy coping strategies, leading to enhanced well-being and personal satisfaction.

The interrelation between defensive mechanisms and character in well-being extends beyond individual psychological processes. It also encompasses interpersonal dynamics and social interactions. Effective communication, empathy, and trustworthiness are some of the positive traits that facilitate positive relationships and contribute to overall well-being.

While previous research has explored the individual impacts of defensive mechanisms and character strengths on well-being, a comprehensive understanding of their interrelation is crucial. Recognizing the complex dynamics between these constructs can inform interventions promoting psychological well-being and personal growth. By fostering self-awareness, emotional regulation, authenticity, and positive interpersonal skills, individuals can build upon their strengths and capabilities that supports their well-being.

Conflicting research has been shown to exist between coping and defence systems [1, 2, 3]. Freud introduced the term "defense mechanisms" in 1926 to describe how people cope with pressure [4]. "Defense mechanisms are habitual ways of reacting emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally to threats (both internal and external)." [5, 6]. Cognitive processes [2] and

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intentionality [7] underlie coping techniques. The defence was often confused with coping, and the two terms were often used interchangeably or had overlapping meanings [2]. According to Lazarus [8], coping should not be confined to purposeful and conscious activities] and defence systems should be explored jointly. The connection between coping and defense processes may explain the controversy around these ideas and the uncertainty surrounding their language and definitions [8].

Symptoms and illnesses, such as depression, anxiety, and personality disorders, have been examined for coping strategies and defense styles [9]. The results demonstrated a commonality between these diseases and specific patterns of coping and defense, with some strategies, including avoidant coping, perhaps exacerbating future symptoms [10]. This is connected to the vulnerability-stress psychopathology paradigm [11], which describes two primary factors. All naturally occurring, non-adaptive systems and processes comprise the internal vulnerability component. Life experiences account for the external factor of stress [12]. The interplay between the two sets a precarious stage for the emergence of pathologies [13]. As previously indicated, coping and defence strategies may increase or decrease susceptibility. According to Perry and Carver et al. [14], there are seven tiers of defence mechanisms and [15] four tiers of coping techniques.

While studies have looked at defense mechanisms and character strengths separately, investigations into the relationship between these two concepts is needed, especially when comparing psychiatric populations to those without mental health issues. One possible way to get insight into the distinct coping methods used by people with mental health difficulties is to examine the relationship between individuals' defense styles and their character strengths. This study aims to add to the developing area of positive psychology and to further our knowledge of the adaptive potential of defenses by examining the association between character strengths and mature defense mechanisms.

The purpose of this research is to fill this knowledge gap by comparing psychiatric and control groups and examining the correlation between character strengths and mature defense mechanisms. By contrasting these two groups, we may learn more about the impact of mental health issues on the deployment and efficacy of protective strategies and their link to well-being. This information might be useful in developing therapeutic interventions and therapies that facilitate people with mental health issues in developing more adaptive coping strategies thereby making the most of their inherent capabilities.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

According to Ciocca et al. [16], the connection between attachment styles and psychological and behavioural consequences is mediated by a series of processes, including psychological defense mechanisms and attachment styles. Attachment style has been shown to be a significant predictor of defense mechanisms by Laczkovics et al. [17]. Internal working models of the self and intrapsychic (inwardly oriented) defense mechanisms, as well as internal working models of others and interpersonal (relational) defense mechanisms, are linked in the research of Laczkovics et al. [17]. Such links have also been discovered by other researchers. [18] According to Prunas et al. [19], the avoidant dimension is characterised by mechanisms like splitting (where mental content are disconnected from one another) and repression (where knowing certain mental content is prevented). On the other hand, the nervous aspect of attachment was linked to projection and making up stories.

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Treating patients effectively requires an awareness of defense mechanisms. Personality pathology may be diagnosed with the aid of defense styles. When it comes to depression therapy, defenses might be used as a predictor [19]. Therapists may keep tabs on progress by regularly evaluating coping strategies. For instance, research suggests that enhancing psychotherapy's attention on clients' defensive functioning leads to gains in experience and sociability.

Duan and Bu [20] used a cross-cultural (Asians vs. Westerners) and a cross-population (community participants vs. inpatients) sample to create a Three-Dimensional Inventory of Character Strengths (TICS). This research built on and replicated similar studies [21–23]. Studies conducted in Western and Eastern cultures have proven that TICS items are reliable and useful. The TICS assessed a person's level of kindness, curiosity, and self-discipline. Self-control implies self-regulation and self-discipline to attain one's life objectives and ideals; inquisitiveness displays curiosity and inventiveness to investigate the unknown outside world; and caring entails strength in sustaining pleasant interactions with others [20]. According to the theoretical criteria for mental disease that Seligman [24] outlined, weak individuals are more likely to have mental health problems than strong individuals. The results of a large number of empirical research agree with this idea. Li et al. [26] classified people into high and low character strength groups and found that strong character strengths alleviate psychological symptoms such as despair, anxiety, and stress. High-scoring individuals in other trials similarly reported more satisfaction and less depression symptoms after receiving a strength-based intervention.

### **METHOD**

#### *Objective of the study*

To explore the association between character strengths and mature defense styles in psychiatric and control groups.

#### *Hypothesis*

Mature defenses will correlate negatively with character strengths in psychiatric group and positively with character strengths in control group.

#### *Sample*

The total sample size of the present study was 120, which was further divided into 60 participants, each in the psychiatric group and control group. The psychiatric group comprised 30 patients suffering from depression and 30 patients suffering from anxiety, thus making it a total of 60 participants. The patients were chosen from outpatient services (OPD) of the Department of Psychiatry, KGMU, Lucknow. Further, 60 healthy controls were also chosen from the persons accompanying the patient to the OPD for comparison.

#### *Tools*

Participants were assessed on various tools, including the Mini International Neuropsychiatric Interview, Beck's Depression Inventory-II, Hamilton Rating Scale for Anxiety (for the psychiatric group), General Health Questionnaire-12 item measure (for the control group), Values in Action Inventory for Strengths- 72 items and Defense Style Questionnaire 40 items (both groups).

#### *Procedure*

Patients aged between 18-40 years were recruited from outpatient services of the Department of Psychiatry, KGMU, based on the selection criteria mentioned in the previous

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sections. A proper rapport was established with the participants, and the purpose of the study was explained to them. Informed consent was taken. The sociodemographic and clinical details of the participants were recorded on the demographic details questionnaire. This included age, gender, education, clinical history, and other relevant information. The participants were then assessed on various tools listed above. The data obtained from the assessments was statistically analyzed using correlation coefficients and interpreted to identify the existing relationships between character strengths and defense mechanisms.

### RESULTS

#### A. Reliability

In the study below, reliability has been reviewed for two variables. The first is character strengths, and the other is defense styles. Each variable has been assessed on 120 patients, wherein 60 patients are from the psychiatric group, and the remaining 60 patients are from the control group. In the character strengths questionnaire, there were 72 statements about 24 character strengths and in the defence styles questionnaire, there were 40 statements about 20 defence styles. Further, these 24 character strengths are categorized into six virtues: Wisdom & Knowledge, Courage, Humanity, Transcendence, Justice, and Temperance, and the 20 defence styles were classified into three defence categories- Neurotic, Immature, and Mature defence styles.

#### *Character Strengths*

In character strength, there are 24 virtues. Each virtue contains three statements within. Responses to each statement were collected on a 5-point Likert scale, where one stands for "Very Much Unlike Me" and five for "Very Much Like Me". Further mean values were calculated to get the numbers of each character's strengths. There are now 24-character strengths in the data, with 60 responses for each character strength. To get reliability, the study has been divided into two parts- a psychiatric group and a control group. According to the result at a 95% confidence level, the reliability value of the data for the psychiatric group is 0.731, and for the control group is 0.709. According to the statisticians, Nunnally J & Bernstein L (1994) & Bland J & Altman D (1997), alpha values between 0.70 to 0.95 are acceptable for internal consistency. A low alpha value could result from a small sample size, a lack of interconnectedness among the responses, or the presence of various constructs. Since both the alpha values range between the acceptable limit, it has been assumed that the collected data has a reliable internal consistency in the data.

**Table 1: Overall VIA Alpha Values**

				Psychiatric Group		Control Group		
			N	%	Cronbach' s Alpha	No of Items	Cronbach' s Alpha	No of Items
Cases	Valid	60	100.0	0.731	72	0.709	72	
	Excluded	0	0.0					
	Total	60	100.0					

a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

#### *Defense Style*

In defensive style, there are 20 different types of defence styles. Each defence contains two statements. Responses to each statement were collected on a 9-point Likert scale, where 1 stands for "Strongly Disagree", and nine stands for "Strongly Agree". Further mean values were calculated for each defence style. To get reliability, the study has been divided into two

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parts psychiatric group and a control group. According to the result at a 95% confidence level, the reliability value of the data for the psychiatric group is 0.720, and for the control group is 0.835. According to the statisticians, Nunnally J & Bernstein L (1994) & Bland J & Altman D (1997), alpha values between 0.70 to 0.95 are acceptable for internal consistency. A low alpha value could result from a small sample size, a lack of interconnectedness among the responses, or the presence of various constructs. Since both the alpha values range between the acceptable limit, it has been assumed that the collected data has a reliable internal consistency in the data.

**Table 2: Overall DSQ Alpha Values**

				Psychiatric Group		Control Group	
		N	%	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
Cases	Valid	60	100.0	0.720	40	0.835	40
	Excluded	0	0.0				
	Total	60	100.0				
a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.							

### **B. Significant Results for Correlation Between Character Strengths and Mature Defense Styles**

#### **1. Results for Psychiatric Group.**

**Table 3: Correlation Between Mature Defense Styles and Character Strengths**

DSQ->	Suppression	Sublimation	Humor	Anticipation
<b>VIA Perspective</b>	-0.414*	-0.371*		
<b>Gratitude</b>		-0.437*		
<b>Curiosity</b>		-0.417*		
<b>Love</b>			-0.460*	
<b>Hope</b>				-0.416*
<b>Forgiveness</b>	0.412*			

From the values obtained above, it can be interpreted for each of the mature defenses that in the suppression defense style, character strengths that have shown significant negative correlation in the psychiatric group is Perspective ( $r = -0.414$ ,  $sig = 0.02$ ) and Forgiveness ( $r = -0.412$ ,  $sig = 0.02$ ). In the sublimation defense style, character strengths that have shown significant negative correlations in the psychiatric group are Perspective ( $r = -0.371$ ,  $sig = 0.04$ ), Creativity ( $r = -0.437$ ,  $sig = 0.02$ ), and Curiosity ( $r = -0.417$ ,  $sig = 0.02$ ). In the humor defense style, character strength that has shown significant negative correlation in the psychiatric group is Love ( $r = -0.460$ ,  $sig = 0.01$ ). In the anticipation defense style, significant negative correlation was found with character strength of hope in the psychiatric group.

To summarize, mature defenses, were significantly negatively correlated with character strengths like perspective, creativity, curiosity, love hope and forgiveness. These character strengths play a vital role in well-being of individuals and therefore it may follow that since the psychiatric group is not able to utilize their strengths in the best possible ways, they are

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also not able to adapt more mature ways of dealing with their conflicts and stresses thereby leading to negative mental health outcomes.

### 2. Results for Control Group.

**Table 4: Correlation between Mature Defense styles and Character Strengths**

DSQ	Suppression	Anticipation	Humor	Sublimation
VIA				
Love of Learning				0.310*
Perspective	0.165*		0.162*	0.120*
Creativity	0.192*	0.251*	0.249*	0.145*
Curiosity		0.250*		
Bravery	0.228*			0.141*
Perseverance		0.270*		
Love	0.318*			
Kindness	0.277*			
Social Intelligence				0.341*
App of Beau & Excel			0.297*	
Spirituality	0.222*			
Gratitude	0.198*			0.429*
Humor				0.157*
Hope		.265*		0.261*
Teamwork	0.236*	0.109*		
Leadership			0.199*	
Humility		0.115*		0.517*
Prudence				0.224*
Forgiveness		0.105*	0.121*	0.255*
Self-Regulation	0.218*		0.252*	

From the values obtained for correlation between mature defenses and character strengths in the control group, it was found for the suppression defense style, character strengths that have shown significant positive correlations in the control group are Perspective ( $r=0.16$ ,  $sig=0.02$ ), Creativity ( $r=0.19$ ,  $sig=0.01$ ), Bravery ( $r=0.22$ ,  $sig=0.00$ ), Love ( $r=0.31$ ,  $sig=0.01$ ), Kindness ( $r=0.27$ ,  $sig=0.03$ ), Spirituality ( $r=0.22$ ,  $sig=0.01$ ), Gratitude ( $r=0.19$ ,  $sig=0.01$ ), Teamwork ( $r=0.23$ ,  $sig=0.01$ ) and Self-regulation ( $r=0.21$ ,  $sig=0.04$ ).

Further, in the **anticipation** defense style, character strengths that have shown significant positive correlations in the control group are Creativity ( $r=0.25$ ,  $sig=0.05$ ), Curiosity ( $r=0.25$ ,  $sig=0.00$ ), Perseverance ( $r=0.27$ ,  $sig=0.00$ ), Hope ( $r=0.26$ ,  $sig=0.04$ ), Teamwork ( $r=0.10$ ,  $sig=0.04$ ), Humility ( $r=0.11$ ,  $sig=0.03$ ), and Forgiveness ( $r=0.10$ ,  $sig=0.04$ ).

In the **humor** defense style, character strengths that have shown significant positive correlations in the control group are Perspective ( $r=0.16$ ,  $sig=0.03$ ), Creativity ( $r=0.24$ ,

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sig=0.00), App of Beau & Excel (r=0.29, sig=0.02), Leadership (r=0.19, sig=0.04), Forgiveness (r=0.12, sig=0.03) and Self-Regulation (r=0.25, sig=0.05).

In the **sublimation** defense style, character strengths that have shown significant positive correlations in the control group are Love of learning (r= 0.310, sig=0.04) Perspective (r=2.12, sig=0.00), Creativity (r= 0.14, sig= 0.03) Bravery (r=0.14, sig=0.02), Social Intelligence (r=0.34, sig=0.00), Gratitude (r=0.42, sig=0.01), Humor (r=0.15, sig=0.00), Hope (r=0.26, sig=0.01), Humility (r=0.51, sig=0.03), Prudence (r=0.22, sig=0.00) and Forgiveness (r=0.25, sig=0.01).

Overall, in the control group, mature defenses were significant positively correlated with character strengths like perspective, kindness, hope, creativity, forgiveness, gratitude, spirituality, to name a few. It may be logically concluded that these character strengths play a vital role in the well-being of an individual and also facilitate in coping in mature ways whenever faced with a stressor. In the light if the results found in this study, the proposition by Vaillant (2000) that mature defenses when used habitually may be construed as character strengths might hold true.

To summarise, it was hypothesized that mature defenses will correlate significantly negatively with character strengths in psychiatric group and significantly positively with character strengths for control group. In light of the aforementioned results, the hypothesis stands accepted.

## CONCLUSION

This is the first study to examine the relationship between mature defense styles and character strengths. The study also compared the pattern of relationship between the two variables in psychiatric and control groups. In view of dearth of studies assessing these two variables together and no study examining the association between defense mechanisms and character strengths till date, this study provides crucial evidence that individuals with psychopathology are neither able to bring forth enough of themselves nor are they able to handle stressful situations in appropriate ways resulting in negative mental health outcomes. From this it may follow that by helping such individuals build upon their strengths and capabilities, they might be facilitated to enhance their positive traits and coping mechanisms to make them more adaptive. On the other hand, individuals in control group used mature defense mechanisms and character strengths adequately leading to positive mental health outcomes.

Furthermore, this study highlights the importance of identifying defence mechanisms and character strengths in clinical practice, as they are crucial factors in understanding the development and maintenance of mental illness. The results of this study can be used to inform interventions aimed at promoting the use of character strengths and fostering the development of mature defense mechanisms in individuals with mental illness.

This study emphasizes the need for a holistic approach to mental health treatment focusing on character strengths and defense mechanisms alongside other traditional treatment modalities. By addressing these factors, clinicians can help individuals enhance their overall well-being ultimately leading to positive mental health outcomes.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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