

SCIENTIFIC CONCEPTUAL STATEMENT

Foundational Architecture of Psychological Defence

Embodied, relational, and multiscale
protective reorganisation

Version 1.5 | July 2026

*Companion to Foundational Architecture of Psychological Functioning v2.2,
Continuous Inferential Flow v1.2, and Deep Orientation v2.2*

DOCUMENT FUNCTION — This statement develops the account of psychological defence whose detailed mechanism was deferred by the Foundational Architecture of Psychological Functioning, Version 2.2; Deep Orientation of the Psychological System, Version 2.2; and Continuous Inferential Flow in the Psychological System, Version 1.2. It specifies the proposed target, activation conditions, functional control surfaces, cross-cutting implementation layers, recurrent consequences, and scientific status of psychological defensive reorganisation. It does not provide a taxonomy of named defences, a diagnostic system, a complete theory of emotion or capacity, a region-by-region neural atlas, or an intervention manual. Version 1.5 preserves the recurrent multilevel architecture of Version 1.4 while removing residual target circularity from candidate identification, replacing premature subset language with candidate-family language, treating manageable contact as a potentially vector-valued regulatory objective rather than a demonstrated scalar variable, separating the axes underlying the protective distinctions, adding the nearest transdiagnostic and control-theoretic neighbours, and updating evidence through July 2026.

Executive scientific statement

The framework distinguishes basal viability protection, direct protective coping, and psychological defensive reorganisation without treating any of them as a unitary inner module or as mutually exclusive cells in a one-axis taxonomy. Basal viability protection comprises physiological, sensorimotor, nociceptive, reflexive, and action-organising processes that contribute directly to bodily integrity, viable regulation, and continued life. Direct protective coping changes the source, probability, or practical consequences of a threat while preserving sufficient sensitivity to relevant causal information. “Psychological defensive reorganisation” names the model’s proposed umbrella working class: a context-sensitive protective reorganisation of embodied organism–environment activity, recruited under an inferred adverse trajectory, that alters registration, inference, bodily regulation, action, or contact. Conventional defence mechanisms, safety behaviours, experiential avoidance, and related constructs are empirically studied candidate families or comparison classes; their inclusion is not assumed. A separate model-level target hypothesis proposes that independently identified candidates may converge on a common proximal regulatory objective: keeping contact with an anticipated, emerging, or current embodied phenomenal state within a capacity-relative manageable envelope. The objective may be vector-valued across intensity, duration, accessibility, controllability, and recoverability; no scalar common currency is assumed.

The term “psychological” does not denote a non-bodily origin, substrate, or controller. It marks the level at which an operation is individuated: by inferred relational significance, anticipated phenomenal trajectory, estimated capacity, and organised contact or action. Neural, synaptic, autonomic, endocrine, immune, metabolic, respiratory, sensorimotor, attentional, mnemonic, inferential, behavioural, environmental, and interpersonal changes may all participate in implementing or constraining the same operation. Bodily change can be a condition, constituent, and consequence of psychological defence rather than a downstream effect of a disembodied process.

The psychological unit of analysis is therefore not an isolated interior and is not the environment taken by itself. It is the organised, organism-relative relation through which bodily condition, another person, objects, places, institutions, material resources, social positions, cultural regularities, and possible futures acquire causal relevance. Family, organisational, economic, legal, cultural, technological, and built-environment systems can constrain threat trajectories, capacity, available action, and consequences. They enter the model only through specifiable coupling to the organism–environment process; unrelated features of the wider world are not thereby psychological. The field is relational and potentially multiscale, but it is not unlimited.

The proposed regulated target is embodied: a felt bodily-affective condition of pressure, pain, dread, shame, grief, helplessness, fragmentation, or another aversive quality. A weak embodiment claim states that human phenomenal experience is realised by a living organism and organised through bodily, neural, relational, and environmental processes. A stronger claim—that current peripheral or autonomic feedback is necessary for every such experience or defence—is neither required nor supported. Preserved social and motivational functioning in pure autonomic failure and preserved subjective stress under acute pharmacological suppression of autonomic and endocrine output show that peripheral output is not a necessary or complete index of experience (Heims et al., 2004; Ali et al., 2017). Current bodily information can still modulate threat and experience without being a single monitored signal or universal causal bottleneck.

A trigger is therefore not an intrinsically threatening object. At the target-neutral candidate-identification level, it is an event that, under the organism's current organisation, initiates or intensifies a projected adverse trajectory involving some presently relevant protected variable or valued possibility. The separate embodied-capacity hypothesis predicts a more specific chained form: X is registered; X makes Y more likely; Y makes Z more likely; and Z is expected to produce an embodied phenomenal state whose intensity, duration, uncontrollability, recurrence, or meaning is estimated to exceed available capacity. Protective weighting can rise before the predicted state is fully generated or consciously identified.

After protective weighting rises, contact and sampling, early registration, attention, memory access, inference, target- and capacity-related weighting, policy selection, neural and bodily regulation, action readiness, overt activity, bounded covert activity, interpersonal or environmental engagement, and contact with the eliciting information may be reweighted. The target-specific hypothesis predicts that candidate psychological defence alters the projected route into, duration of, or contact with the unmanageable state. This generic architecture does not decide whether the operation is distraction, avoidance, suppression, intellectualisation, control of another person, dissociation, attack, appeasement, withdrawal, or another named defence. Such a taxonomy is deferred.

These loci are analytic control surfaces, not sealed stages and not a claim that neuroscience has discovered a natural number of defensive steps. Neural and synaptic inhibition, disinhibition, transmitter release and clearance, autonomic and endocrine feedback, immune and metabolic condition, sensorimotor organisation, interoceptive feedback, social co-regulation, and material or institutional constraint can operate in parallel across several loci. Biological counter-regulation is therefore not placed in one late box, and relational regulation is not reduced to an external input followed by an internal response.

The architecture distinguishes three online causal layers without postulating three substances or controllers: organism-relative psychological organisation; neural and peripheral biological implementation; and current social-material-environmental coupling. Developmental, learning, cultural, and biological history calibrates all three across slower timescales. Evolutionary history constrains the available architecture but is not treated as an online participant deciding a particular episode.

Psychological defensive reorganisation does not protect survival or bodily integrity unconditionally. In most ordinary conditions, basal viability protection, psychological security, and enrichment are compatible. They can nevertheless conflict. Self-injury, substance use, starvation, dangerous avoidance, or suicidal action may reduce or promise to terminate unbearable experience while degrading health or survival. Evidence supports the existence of affect-regulatory conflict, but its direction, timescale, and function are heterogeneous. The stronger claim that all candidate psychological defensive reorganisations share one proximal regulatory objective or target family is an abductive integration of converging components and remains a direct empirical hypothesis rather than a definitional truth.

Within the parent architecture, survival, security, and enrichment are best treated as nested, co-present emphases rather than fixed stages. Basal viability protection contributes most directly to survival. Psychological defence contributes most directly to security understood as maintaining experience within an inhabitable or manageable range. Where sufficient preservation and security are available, relative influence may widen toward enrichment. None of these relations establishes a single linear ladder, a central score, a conscious purpose, or a moral hierarchy.

1. Purpose, relationships, and restraints

1.1 The narrow problem addressed

The parent architecture already states that recurrent inference maintains a dynamic organism-relative self-world-future orientation; that processing can alter bodily regulation and action readiness; that background organisation constrains later threat estimation; and that inferred threat relative to

estimated capacity increases protective weighting. It intentionally stops before answering eight downstream questions:

1. What distinguishes psychological defence from basal biological protection and direct coping?
2. What is the immediate variable that psychological defence protects?
3. How can a trigger activate defence through a multistep prospective trajectory rather than direct stimulus-response pairing?
4. What changes at the architectural level when defensive weighting increases?
5. How can a defensive operation reduce immediate pressure while damaging viability, agency, relation, or future openness?
6. Why does “psychological” identify a level of embodied organisation rather than a non-bodily origin?
7. How can social, material, institutional, and cultural systems constrain a local defensive episode without making everything psychological?
8. How can psychological organisation, biological implementation, external coupling, and developmental history be mapped without collapsing them into a cortex-to-amygdala-to-body chain?

This document answers those questions at the minimum mechanism level required for the document family. It does not reopen the full foundational architecture.

1.2 Division of labour within the document family

Document	Function	Relation to the present statement
Foundational Architecture of Psychological Functioning, v2.2	Canonical fifteen-proposition skeleton	Supplies recurrence, DSWFO, bodily regulation, limited capacity, local preferability, PED, threat-relative-to-capacity weighting, and the boundary between protection and psychological defence.
Continuous Inferential Flow in the Psychological System, v1.2	Event-centred mechanism clarification	Supplies the recurrent event → inference → bodily/action organisation → activity/consequence → update sequence and locates defence within that flow rather than in a parallel monitor.
Deep Orientation of the Psychological System, v2.2	Detailed elaboration of DSWFO, relational updating, BSS, and PED	Supplies the bounded multiscale relational field, background organisation, mixed updating, sentience boundary, and preservation-to-enrichment direction.

Document	Function	Relation to the present statement
Present statement	Architecture of psychological defence	Specifies the working defensive class, abductive target hypothesis, nonexclusive protective distinctions, embodied and bounded multiscale field, trigger trajectory, target-relative activation, functional control surfaces, cross-cutting implementation layers, conflict with viability, and recurrent effects.
Later Protective Operations statement	Taxonomy and operation-specific implementation	Must classify particular operations and their characteristic multilevel realisations only after the present architecture is stable.
Later Capacity statement	Structure and measurement of capacity	Must distinguish tolerance, regulatory skill, resources, support, flexibility, and bodily constraints.

1.3 Functional, not homuncular

“The system” denotes the functioning organism. No hidden observer watches the relational field, notices that a threshold has been crossed, and orders a defence. Threat estimation, capacity estimation, bodily change, selection, and defensive reweighting are analytic descriptions of distributed and recurrent organisation. The present theory does not require a central monitor, a scalar alarm value, explicit propositions, Bayesian computation, a unitary neural circuit, or conscious access.

1.4 “Psychological” identifies organisation, not origin

The term “psychological” does not locate the origin of defence in a separate psyche and does not contrast mental causation with bodily implementation. It identifies a pattern at the level of inferred significance, anticipated experience, capacity-relative organisation, and organism–environment engagement. The same operation may be realised through central and peripheral neural activity, synaptic inhibition or disinhibition, transmitter regulation, autonomic and endocrine activity, immune and metabolic condition, nociceptive and analgesic processes, respiration, posture, movement, attention, imagery, language, overt action, environmental alteration, and interpersonal exchange.

The direction of influence is recurrent rather than psyche → body. Bodily condition can alter registration and inference; inferred significance can alter autonomic, endocrine, motor, immune, metabolic, and analgesic organisation; action changes the environment and other people; other people can directly alter expected effort and bodily threat responding; and all these changes supply new bodily and

relational information. “Psychological defence” is therefore an embodied organisational description, not a claim about a non-bodily source.

Nor is neural implementation adequately represented as cortex → amygdala → body. Cortical, subcortical, brainstem, cerebellar, spinal, peripheral, endocrine, immune, and sensorimotor processes interact recurrently. The amygdala is neither a unitary alarm nor the sole route to defensive physiology; cortical influence can facilitate as well as inhibit; and activation can occur through disinhibition—the removal of an existing brake—as well as through added excitation. Molecular, cellular, circuit, organ, behavioural, and relational descriptions answer different questions about the same episode and must not be mistaken for serial stations.

1.5 Nonlinguistic operation

The bounded online sequence may occur without words or reflective thought. X can alter the expected probability of Y, Y can alter the expected probability of Z, and Z can alter anticipated bodily-affective pressure without the organism formulating any of these relations verbally. Language can later describe, distort, intensify, inhibit, or reorganise the sequence and can itself become a trigger or defensive operation.

Nonlinguistic does not establish full innateness. Some protective reflexes and regulatory capacities are biologically prepared; specific trigger trajectories, meanings, thresholds, and operations can also be shaped by prenatal and postnatal learning, relationship, culture, language, repeated action, and consequence.

1.6 Sentience boundary

Criteria for attributing sentience remain independent of and outside the scope of this framework. Basal viability protection and functional regulation can be described without assuming phenomenal experience. “Psychological defence,” as defined here around an embodied phenomenal state, applies only where phenomenal experience is independently warranted. For organisms lacking such a warrant, only functional protective regulation should be claimed.

This boundary is substantive. A system can classify social rank, predict damage, or select avoidance without suffering shame, dread, or pain. Computation about threat is not identical to experienced threat. The present model concerns the latter only under an independent sentience warrant.

1.7 No complete emotion, capacity, or intervention theory

The document uses bodily-affective state as an integrated functional and phenomenal term. It does not decide whether emotions are basic, constructed, appraisal-based, predictive, enactive, or mixtures

across explanatory levels. Capacity is retained only as an explicit higher-order shorthand for actual and estimated capacity, accessible resources, action-and-control options, and expected recoverability as specified in Section 2.5; it is not one reservoir, and this document does not supply a complete capacity theory.

No diagnosis, individual formulation, or treatment recommendation follows from the architecture alone. A behaviour cannot be classified as defensive merely because it resembles a familiar clinical defence.

1.8 Epistemic classes

Class	Meaning
E1 — Direct component evidence	A bounded component has been directly studied with relevant behavioural, physiological, experiential, or neural measures.
E2 — Convergent construct support	Several literatures support close component processes but not necessarily the present synthesis.
F — Framework integration	Supported components are organised into the proposed architecture; the arrangement itself is not established by component evidence.
H — Direct empirical hypothesis	The claim specifies contrasts or observations capable of counting against it.
A — Framework axiom	A declared interpretive commitment, not an empirical finding.

E1 and E2 describe relevance to a component, not overall certainty. Every evidential claim must also be appraised on independent axes:

Axis	Required question
Directness	Does the study test the present claim, a close component, or only a remote analogue?
Causal leverage	Is the evidence experimental, longitudinal, momentary, cross-sectional, case-based, or purely correlational?
Population and species	Is the evidence human, nonhuman, cellular, clinical, community, developmental, or culturally bounded?
Precision and replication	What are the sample size, uncertainty, reliability, replication status, and synthesis-level support?
Generalisability	What target population, timescale, context, and defensive class can the result legitimately cover?

Evidence for self-injury as affect regulation does not establish the function of every defence. Evidence for defensive responding to imminent lethal threat does not establish that every psychological defensive

reorganisation protects survival. A direct component result from a small or nonhuman study can therefore remain E1 while receiving low certainty or narrow generalisability. The exact common-objective or target-family claim must remain F/H until discriminating tests are conducted.

1.9 Construct scope and relation to established terminology

The present construct is proposed as a broader umbrella than the conventional term defence mechanism, but that set relation has not been empirically established. Classic and contemporary defence-mechanism literature usually emphasises automatic, largely unconscious cognitive processes that protect against anxiety, negative affect, loss of self-esteem, or loss of self-integration; coping is more often distinguished by conscious and intentional action (Cramer, 1998, 2008). Observer-rated and self-report DMRS traditions operationalise named defence mechanisms and show useful reliability and validity at aggregate levels, with weaker precision for some individual defences (Prout et al., 2022; Di Giuseppe et al., 2025; Martino et al., 2025). The present architecture must therefore connect to, but cannot silently redefine, that literature.

For this statement:

- **psychological defensive reorganisation** is the proposed umbrella functional class to be validated;
- **psychological defence** is retained as a shorter contextual label for that class;
- **defence mechanism** refers to the narrower established traditions and their named operations unless explicitly stated otherwise;
- consciousness, intention, and behavioural form can aid description but do not alone determine membership in the proposed class.

This terminological choice creates an empirical obligation. Conventionally coded defence mechanisms, safety behaviours, experiential avoidance, and other neighbouring constructs remain candidate families or comparison classes until bridging studies show that they satisfy the independent class criteria and share the proposed objective. Failure of either test means partial overlap or non-membership, not an exception absorbed after the fact.

2. Core terminology

2.1 Trigger

A trigger is an internally or externally generated event that, relative to current prior organisation, initiates or intensifies an inferred adverse trajectory. For target-neutral candidate identification, “adverse” means a prospective disturbance to some presently relevant candidate protected variable, valued possibility, goal, relation, bodily condition, or expected outcome; it does not yet specify what is ultimately regulated. The event may be an environmental occurrence, another organism’s activity, a

bodily change, a memory-related reactivation, the organism's own overt activity, a realised covert operation, language, or a consequence of prior activity.

A trigger is a relational role, not an intrinsic property. The same event may trigger defence in one context but not another, or in the same person under low capacity but not high capacity.

2.2 Prospective threat trajectory

A prospective threat trajectory is an organised expectation that the current event can lead through one or more intermediate transitions to an adverse change in a candidate protected variable or valued possibility. Its simplest target-neutral form is $X \rightarrow Z$. The separate embodied-capacity hypothesis predicts the more specific form $X \rightarrow Y \rightarrow Z \rightarrow$ embodied pressure relative to a manageable envelope. Each transition can be uncertain, learned, context-sensitive, rapidly revised, and only partially accessible to report. Candidate identification uses the target-neutral formulation; target testing must not presuppose the embodied one.

2.3 Embodied phenomenal state

An embodied phenomenal state is the felt bodily-affective condition of the sentient organism. It may include pain, constriction, pressure, dread, shame, grief, helplessness, agitation, emptiness, fragmentation, or another aversive quality. It is not identical to one peripheral symptom, one emotion label, one autonomic measure, or reflective narrative. Central prediction, interoceptive information, exteroceptive context, learned meaning, action readiness, and relational organisation may all contribute.

The framework separates two embodiment claims. Weak organismic embodiment holds that human experience is realised within living organism-environment activity; this is a level-of-analysis commitment. Strong online peripheral embodiment holds that contemporaneous autonomic or other peripheral feedback is causally necessary for a specific experience or defence; this is an empirical claim that may hold by degree in some episodes but cannot be presumed universally (Heims et al., 2004; Ali et al., 2017; Khalsa et al., 2018).

2.4 Predicted experiential pressure

Predicted experiential pressure refers to the estimated demand imposed by the anticipated, emerging, or current embodied phenomenal state. Target dimensions may include intensity, duration, rate of escalation, accessibility, controllability, reversibility, and expected recoverability. Uncertainty, relational significance, status, attachment, identity, agency, and expected instrumental consequences may influence that pressure, but must remain separately measured rival or pathway variables rather than being folded into pressure by definition. No common numerical currency is assumed.

2.5 Tolerance and regulatory capacity

Capacity is a family of distinguishable variables rather than one reservoir of psychological energy:

- **actual capacity:** the organism's present ability to remain in contact, regulate, act, integrate, and recover under the tested conditions;
- **estimated capacity:** the capacity currently predicted or attributed by the organism, which may be inaccurate;
- **accessible resources:** skills, energy, support, information, material means, and regulatory tools presently available;
- **action and control options:** credible means of influencing, escaping, repairing, or sharing the demand;
- **expected recoverability:** anticipated duration, reversibility, and cost of returning to viable organisation.

These variables can covary but must not be treated as interchangeable. Sleep, illness, pain, hunger, intoxication, learning, social support, perceived control, context, and prior background organisation can alter several at once. "Capacity" is retained only as an explicit higher-order shorthand after the relevant components have been specified.

2.6 Protective weighting and the security hypothesis

Protective weighting is the target-neutral relative causal influence of preventing, limiting, escaping, or controlling an inferred adverse trajectory. It is an analytic aspect of preservation-oriented organisation, not a separate module. The security hypothesis makes the additional target-specific prediction that, for psychological defensive reorganisation, this weighting is organised around keeping contact with embodied experience within a capacity-relative manageable envelope. Candidate identification requires evidence for protective weighting; it must not assume security weighting in this target-specific sense.

2.7 Psychological defensive reorganisation and operation

A candidate psychological defensive reorganisation is a realised, inferred-adverse-trajectory-sensitive protective reorganisation of attention, inference, bodily regulation, action readiness, overt activity, bounded covert activity, environmental contact, relational contact, or experiential contact. An operation is one locally realised component or pattern within such reorganisation. Candidate status requires current functional sensitivity and discrimination from direct coping, basal protection, habit, reward, and other plausible causes, but it does not by itself settle the exact regulated target or regulatory objective.

The separate target hypothesis predicts that candidate reorganisations function to prevent, attenuate, terminate, distance from, or regulate contact with an embodied phenomenal state estimated to exceed a presently estimated manageable envelope. This is a **candidate proximal regulatory objective or target**

family, potentially vector-valued across intensity, duration, accessibility, controllability, and recoverability; it is not yet a technically established controlled variable. A controlled-variable claim would additionally require evidence of disturbance resistance, a reference condition or range, error-sensitive output, and a formal control test for each proposed dimension (Marken & Mansell, 2013). The working class is functional and context-sensitive; no defence is identified from behavioural form, conscious report, social undesirability, irrationality, or clinician preference.

2.8 Basal viability protection

Basal viability protection refers to physiological, nociceptive, sensorimotor, reflexive, and action-organising processes that contribute directly to viable regulation, bodily integrity, and continued life. Withdrawal from heat, respiratory regulation, thermoregulation, energy regulation, and rapid orientation to physical danger are examples at different levels. This label does not claim one unitary biological system.

2.9 Direct protective coping

Direct protective coping is activity that addresses the source, probability, or practical consequences of a threat while maintaining sufficient sensitivity to relevant causal information. It need not preserve sensory exposure to the danger itself. Leaving a burning building, seeking medical treatment, obtaining food, setting an effective boundary, and requesting help may be direct protective coping. The same outward activity may become defensive when its dominant current function is to alter contact with an unmanageable embodied state rather than address the source; causal organisation must be established independently.

2.10 Organism–environment field

The organism–environment field is the current organised relation through which bodily condition, environmental structure, other organisms, learned history, available action, and possible trajectories constrain one another. It is not a container surrounding an internal psychological process. Nor does it make every feature of the environment psychological. A factor belongs to the operative field only insofar as a specifiable informational, material, relational, or historical coupling gives it causal relevance to current registration, inference, capacity, action, experience, or consequence.

2.11 System-scale constraint

A system-scale constraint is a relatively wider organisation—such as a family pattern, organisational hierarchy, economic condition, legal arrangement, cultural regularity, technological platform, or built environment—that changes local probabilities, meanings, resources, costs, permissions, social

responses, or available actions. Such systems need not be consciously represented to shape the field. They are not additional psychological agents and do not enter every episode equally; their influence must be traced through a plausible local pathway rather than invoked as an unrestricted background explanation.

3. The end-to-end recurrent defensive architecture

3.1 Functional logic, not a natural stage count

The proposed logic is written linearly only so that causal claims can be inspected:

1. Current bodily condition, learned history, relationship, material circumstances, and wider coupled systems constrain what can be encountered, sampled, and acted upon.
2. An external or internally generated event is selectively contacted and registered within that organisation.
3. Sensory gain, attention, memory activation, and constructive perception organise what is occurring and which information becomes available for wider use.
4. Broader nonlinguistic inference organises what may follow; the event acquires a trigger role if it initiates or strengthens an adverse trajectory involving a presently relevant candidate protected variable or valued possibility.
5. The trajectory projects one or more possible bodily, environmental, social, and relational transitions. Candidate identification remains neutral about which consequence is the operative target.
6. The embodied-capacity hypothesis separately predicts that the trajectory prospectively organises an embodied phenomenal objective across dimensions such as intensity, duration, accessibility, controllability, and recoverability, in relation to estimated capacity and resources.
7. As the projected adverse trajectory gains importance, protective weighting gains relative causal influence in policy competition; under the target hypothesis, the relevant weighting is security-related and capacity-sensitive.
8. Contact, sampling, registration, attention, memory access, inference, target- and capacity-related weighting, bodily organisation, action readiness, overt or covert activity, interpersonal engagement, environmental arrangement, and temporal horizon may be reweighted.
9. One or more realised operations may prevent, delay, attenuate, terminate, substitute for, distance from, or control the adverse trajectory; under the target hypothesis, they specifically alter the route into, duration of, or contact with the projected embodied state.
10. Neural and peripheral counter-regulation, interoceptive feedback, actual bodily change, action outcomes, other people's responses, and environmental changes continuously modify the process rather than waiting for its completion.
11. Immediate relief, effort, residual arousal, failure, backlash, or renewed threat supplies information and may change the operation during the same episode.

12. Consequences update relational orientation, bodily and regulatory condition, learning, developmental organisation, later trigger sensitivity, capacity estimates, defensive accessibility, and future selection.

The number twelve has no ontological status. These are functional discriminations at one useful grain, not twelve neural modules or universally ordered stages. A finer analysis can divide sensory, mnemonic, inferential, synaptic, endocrine, motor, immune, or social processes further; a coarser analysis can combine them. The architecture is adequate only if each proposed causal influence can be located and tested without inventing a separate controller.

3.2 Threat assessment occurs within the field

No second system waits outside the relational field to inspect completed conclusions. The same recurrent organisation that estimates self-condition, a present other, wider-world affordances and constraints, and possible trajectories also organises threat relative to capacity. “Monitoring” is acceptable only as shorthand for ongoing sensitivity within that field.

3.3 The field is relational, multiscale, and bounded

Psychological organisation cannot be specified adequately from an isolated brain, body, report, or behaviour when the relevant possibilities are partly structured by the environment. The same bodily event or interpersonal cue can organise different trajectories under different material resources, relationship histories, institutional powers, cultural meanings, legal constraints, or available exits. Wider systems can therefore influence defence by changing what can happen next, how costly it would be, what help is available, how another person is likely to respond, and what the organism has learned to expect.

This does not make the environment itself psychological or turn the framework into a theory of everything. A macro-level condition counts only when its pathway into the local organism–environment organisation can be specified or tested. The relevant pathway may involve exposure, information, learned regularity, social position, material constraint, resource distribution, available possibility for action, sanction, support, or recurrent consequence. If changing the proposed wider condition produces no change in registration, trajectory, capacity, action availability, experience, or consequence under valid measurement, its relevance to that episode is weakened.

3.4 Protective reweighting can precede conscious distress

Because the architecture is prospective and nonlinguistic, protective reweighting need not wait until the full state is consciously felt. A cue can activate a learned adverse trajectory and alter attention or action readiness before the person can name fear, shame, grief, or bodily pressure. This does not imply that

candidate psychological defence always precedes affect. Operations may also respond to an already present state.

3.5 Chained inference

The trigger need not directly predict intolerable experience. For example:

X: a supervisor frowns.

Y: negative evaluation becomes more likely.

Z: humiliation, rejection, or loss of standing becomes more likely.

Embodied projection: shame, constriction, heat, agitation, helplessness, or another aversive state is expected.

Capacity relation: the state is estimated to exceed current ability to tolerate, regulate, repair, or remain effectively engaged.

Operation: attention shifts, the interaction is attacked, the evaluator is devalued, the task is abandoned, or another defensive alteration occurs.

The verbal reconstruction is explanatory. The online process need not contain sentences or a conscious syllogism.

3.6 Capacity can be constitutive of target-specific threat organisation

The target-neutral candidate class does not require every protected variable to be capacity-defined. The embodied-capacity hypothesis makes the narrower prediction that capacity is not checked only after an otherwise complete psychological-threat verdict. A projected embodied demand can be organised as manageable under one bodily condition, social context, or resource configuration and unmanageable under another. Sleep loss, illness, pain, hunger, previous failure, isolation, intoxication, or absence of escape can narrow the field of manageable trajectories. Credible support, skill, control, recovery experience, and available alternatives can widen it.

Actual capacity, estimated capacity, accessible resources, action-control options, and expected recoverability must nevertheless remain distinguishable. A support manipulation may simultaneously reduce the predicted state, increase estimated capacity, add an action option, and improve expected recovery. Experiments that call this a pure “capacity effect” without measuring these pathways cannot identify the mechanism. Factorial designs, manipulation checks, temporal mediation, and prespecified causal diagrams are required where the components cannot otherwise be separated.

3.7 Protective and defensive influence are graded

The model does not require one universal threshold or binary switch. Protective influence can increase gradually, fluctuate, compete with other aims, or become dominant rapidly. “Defensive” influence is the target-specific classification applied only after the independent candidate and target tests are satisfied. “Activation” denotes a detectable increase in causal influence, not necessarily an all-or-none event.

3.8 Functional control surfaces

At the architectural level, defensive operations may alter:

- field contact and sampling: which situations, people, objects, words, memories, bodily signals, or possible futures are encountered or repeatedly checked;
- early registration and gain: the amplification, attenuation, masking, habituation, sensitisation, or competition of incoming information without assuming complete pre-neural exclusion;
- attention: what is selected, sustained, ignored, or interrupted;
- memory and internally generated content: what is retrieved, suppressed, substituted, rehearsed, imagined, or made available to ongoing construction;
- inference: which relations, explanations, probabilities, or consequences receive greater weight;
- target, pressure-capacity, and policy weighting: how the candidate protected variable, importance, imminence, controllability, escape, support, available resources, expected recovery, and competing actions influence selection;
- central and peripheral bodily regulation: excitation, inhibition, disinhibition, arousal, mobilisation, freezing, analgesia, respiration, endocrine output, autonomic balance, immune-metabolic condition, numbing, expression, or other regulatory organisation;
- action readiness: approach, withdrawal, freezing, control, appeasement, attack, or restraint;
- overt activity: changes to the environment, other people, or the organism’s location and conduct;
- bounded covert activity: realised shifts in imagery, inner speech, attentional deployment, inhibition, or cognitive control;
- interpersonal and environmental coupling: seeking or preventing contact, recruiting support, reassurance, controlling another person, arranging distance, using an object or substance, changing a setting, or exploiting an institutional pathway;
- experiential contact: the degree to which eliciting bodily-affective information remains available for integration;
- temporal horizon: narrowing toward immediate pressure reduction or widening toward later repair and enrichment.

This list specifies channels, not a taxonomy of defences. No channel is defensive by form alone.

3.9 Cross-cutting implementation layers

The control surfaces above are not implemented by one level. A defensively organised change may be constituted across several layers at once:

Layer or scale	Possible contribution in the current episode	Classification restraint
Psychological-organisational	Relational significance, predicted trajectory, embodied pressure, capacity-sensitive weighting, selection, and contact	Identifies function and organisation; it is not a non-bodily substance or executive.
Neural and synaptic	Sensory gain, circuit inhibition or disinhibition, presynaptic release control, reuptake, receptor adaptation, network configuration, motor and autonomic commands	No region, transmitter, or direction of influence is defence by itself. Much causal detail derives from nonhuman work.
Peripheral and systemic biological	Autonomic, endocrine, respiratory, cardiovascular, immune, metabolic, nociceptive, analgesic, muscular, visceral, and clearance processes	May implement, constrain, compensate for, or merely follow defence; function must be established independently.
Relational, social, and material	Co-regulation, another person's action, threat or support, power, objects, spaces, technology, substances, resources, exits, sanctions, and institutional response	The wider environment is included only through a specifiable local coupling.
Developmental and learning history	Calibrated priors, trigger sensitivity, circuit and receptor development, attachment expectation, habits, cultural learning, available policies, and recovery estimates	Shapes present organisation but does not by itself establish current defensive function.
Evolutionary history	Species-typical preparedness, bodily constraints, and inherited regulatory possibilities	Explains design constraints across generations; it is not an online agent in the episode.

These are explanatory and causal layers, not additional protective modules. Psychological description individuates an operation by its current organisation and function; biological description specifies how it is realised or constrained; relational description specifies the coupled field in which it succeeds or fails; developmental and evolutionary descriptions specify how the relevant possibilities came to exist.

3.10 Biological braking, counter-regulation, and recovery

The body does not passively receive a completed message from a cortical decision. Biological activity is continuously limited, amplified, terminated, and recovered through mechanisms operating at several scales. Relevant examples include inhibitory interneurons and circuit inhibition; disinhibition through

removal of an existing brake; presynaptic autoreceptor and heteroreceptor control; retrograde endocannabinoid suppression of transmitter release; transporter-mediated reuptake and enzymatic degradation; receptor desensitisation, internalisation, and altered expression; glucocorticoid negative feedback on the HPA axis; baroreflex and vagal buffering; opposing sympathetic and parasympathetic influences; local vascular, respiratory, immune, metabolic, analgesic, and tissue-level counter-regulation; and clearance and recovery after an output.

These mechanisms are cross-cutting. Synaptic braking can alter sensory registration, memory activation, inference, action selection, or central output; peripheral counter-regulation can begin while an effector response is still rising; interoceptive consequences can immediately change the next neural and behavioural state. A threat response may increase because excitation rises, because inhibition falls, or because both occur. Therefore “the amygdala activates and then the body resists” is not an adequate architecture.

Most such mechanisms belong to basal regulation unless current inferred relational significance recruits or reorganises them as constituents of a candidate psychological defence. Muscle contraction, for example, does not generally prevent neurotransmitters or hormones from being released. It may instead mask expression, alter respiration and proprioception, participate in freezing or action restraint, or generate new interoceptive information; sustained isometric contraction can itself increase sympathetic activation.

3.11 Distributed social and material regulation

Regulation can be partly implemented outside the individual body. Familiar supportive contact can reduce subjective and neural threat responding; another person can provide information, action, protection, permission, restraint, validation, or coercion; objects, spatial arrangements, technologies, substances, money, transport, and legal or organisational procedures can alter exposure, control, available action, and recovery. The organism can also attempt to regulate itself by changing another person or the field—for example by reassurance seeking, appeasement, intimidation, withdrawal, concealment, or arranging the environment.

This does not imply that every successful support or situation change is defence. Leaving objective danger, obtaining accurate information, using lawful protection, or asking for proportionate help may be direct coping. External activity becomes a candidate psychological defence only when independently identified protective reorganisation is organised around altering contact with a state estimated beyond capacity.

3.12 Slower-timescale calibration

Current defence is shaped by processes that do not occur as online steps. Development, attachment, trauma, repeated relief, culture, sleep history, illness, chronic inflammation, nutritional state, medication or substance exposure, gene expression, synaptic plasticity, and recurrent social or material conditions can alter registration thresholds, priors, expected consequences, capacity estimates, accessible policies, biological responsiveness, and recovery. These factors can be causes of the present configuration without being the currently selected operation.

The gut microbiome is included, where relevant, within biological and developmental modulation through immune, metabolic, endocrine, neural, and vagal pathways; it is not proposed as a separate psychological controller. Human evidence linking microbiome composition to fear remains early and partly correlational, so it should be treated as a candidate modulator and rule-out domain rather than a settled implementation layer.

3.13 The architecture is a recurrent matrix

The resulting model has two orthogonal descriptions:

- a functional trajectory running from current field and contact through registration, memory and inference, target and capacity organisation, policy and operation, embodied and environmental consequence, relief, and learning;
- implementation and constraint layers running through that trajectory: psychological organisation, neural and peripheral biology, relational-material coupling, and slower developmental history.

Flattening these dimensions into a single cortex → amygdala → body → recovery chain creates category errors. Neural braking is active across several functional loci; social support can alter registration, capacity, action, and bodily response simultaneously; and learning can begin before an episode has clearly ended. The matrix does not claim molecular completeness or causal-class closure. It offers provisional coverage at the current grain: any proposed factor should be located, where possible, by how it changes the operative field, registration, inference, target and capacity organisation, policy, implementation, consequence, or learning. A factor that cannot yet be located remains an open mechanism rather than evidence that the architecture is complete.

3.14 Recurrence and local relief

An operation that reduces predicted or actual pressure can become more available in similar contexts through learning, even if it worsens longer-term viability, agency, relation, or future openness. Immediate relief is therefore information and a possible reinforcer, not proof that the operation was

globally beneficial. Failure, backlash, shame about the defence, bodily exhaustion, or social consequence can instead intensify the next cycle.

4. Protective forms, psychological security, and enrichment

4.1 Three nonexclusive protective distinctions, not a one-axis taxonomy

Protective organisation admits at least three useful but cross-cutting analytic distinctions within one embodied organism–environment process:

- basal viability protection distinguishes processes by their most direct contribution to physiological viability and continued life;
- direct protective coping distinguishes activity by its source-directed relation to a danger or practical consequence while preserving sufficient sensitivity to relevant causal information; sensory exposure itself need not be preserved;
- psychological defensive reorganisation distinguishes a candidate function by adverse-trajectory-sensitive reorganisation of processing, bodily organisation, action, or contact, with manageable embodied contact proposed as a separate target hypothesis.

The three labels do not occupy one exhaustive axis: basal viability identifies a protected level or possibility, direct coping identifies a relation to the source, and psychological defence identifies a proposed experiential-regulatory function. They are therefore nonexclusive, nonexhaustive, and not separate organs, agents, or sealed systems. A single episode can instantiate all three, and the same bodily, neural, behavioural, or interpersonal channel can participate in different relations under different causal organisation.

4.2 Candidate proximal regulatory objective or target family and wider consequence

“Proximal” identifies what the operation most immediately appears to regulate; it does not deny wider biological, relational, developmental, or evolutionary consequences. Basal protection may immediately regulate oxygenation or withdraw tissue from heat and thereby support survival. Direct coping may immediately remove a threat source and thereby reduce both bodily danger and fear. Psychological defence may immediately change contact with an anticipated unmanageable state and thereby support, ignore, or oppose survival. Calling the embodied objective proximal prevents the ambiguous claim that it is the final evolutionary purpose of every defensive process. Calling it a candidate regulatory objective or target family prevents an equally premature claim that a single scalar variable, disturbance resistance, and a reference value have already been demonstrated. Intensity, duration, accessibility, controllability, and recoverability may prove to be separable targets rather than commensurable components of one quantity.

4.3 The nested direction

Emphasis or form	Proximal protected possibility	Typical information	Possible conflict
Survival / basal viability	Continued life, bodily integrity, viable physiological regulation	Tissue threat, hypoxia, pain, temperature, energy, acute external danger	Can be overridden by an operation promising escape from intolerable experience.
Direct protective coping	Reduced objective exposure, probability, or practical impact	Source conditions, causal structure, available tools, exits, support, and consequences	Can resemble defence outwardly; may also carry defensive weighting.
Psychological security / defence	Continued contact with experience within an inhabitable or manageable range	Anticipated or actual bodily-affective pressure relative to capacity, resources, relation, and context	Can preserve immediate security while degrading health, relation, agency, or future openness.
Enrichment	Expansion of viable quality, flexibility, connection, differentiation, agency, and meaningful possibility	Opportunities for exploration, competence, care, creation, relation, integration, and presence	Can require tolerating short-term discomfort and can be narrowed by defensive dominance.

These emphases are co-present and nested. Survival commonly supports the possibility of future experience; security supports the possibility of inhabitable engagement; enrichment expands the viable quality and range of that engagement. They are not fixed developmental stages and need not align in every event.

4.4 Why psychological defence is not unconditional survival protection

If survival were the immediate protected variable of every psychological defence, actions that knowingly damage bodily integrity or increase lethal risk in order to end psychological pain would be anomalous. They are not rare theoretical curiosities. Self-injury is frequently reported to regulate negative emotion, and unbearable psychological pain is strongly associated with suicidality. These findings do not establish one universal motive, but they demonstrate that pressure reduction can compete with bodily preservation.

The defensible conclusion is asymmetric:

- lethal or injurious threat can activate basal and psychological protective organisation;
- psychological defence can support survival;
- psychological defence does not protect survival unconditionally;
- the exact claim that independently identified candidates converge on one proximal regulatory objective or target family concerning manageable embodied contact remains F/H.

4.5 Death is not modelled as a felt safe state

The framework does not claim that the organism knows death will be peaceful or represents post-mortem calm as an experienced outcome. In suicidal organisation, imagined noncontinuation, cessation, escape, control, or relief may acquire local preferability relative to a projected continuation of unbearable experience. Uncertainty, ambivalence, basal survival responses, attachment, available alternatives, and changing capacity may continue to exert competing influence.

4.6 Biological state can reorganise psychological defence

Hypoxia, sleep deprivation, circadian phase, pain, hunger, illness, inflammation, metabolic or endocrine change, intoxication, withdrawal, medication, microbiome-related modulation, and neurological variation can change registration, memory access, predicted pressure, inhibitory control, autonomic or endocrine response, available action, recovery, and estimated capacity. The same interpersonal event can therefore recruit little defence in one bodily condition and strong defence in another. These variables must be treated as conditions and possible rule-outs, not as ad hoc explanations applied after interpretive failure. Evidence strength differs sharply by mechanism: neural, autonomic, endocrine, inflammatory, sleep, and metabolic effects have substantial component support; microbiome-specific human causal claims remain comparatively immature.

4.7 Environmental and system-scale conditions can reorganise defence

Housing insecurity, coercive relationships, organisational hierarchy, discrimination, surveillance, legal status, economic precarity, cultural sanctions, digital exposure, and the availability or absence of credible support can alter objective danger, learned probability, perceived meaning, action cost, escape routes, recovery resources, and expected consequences. Their influence is not merely “outside context” added after an internal explanation; when causally coupled, it is part of the organisation being explained.

The model nevertheless requires scale discipline. A wider system must not be invoked as a vague total cause. Analysis should identify the local link by which it changes the trigger trajectory, estimated pressure, estimated capacity, available action, operation, or recurrent consequence. Different people can occupy the same nominal system while participating in different operative fields.

5. What psychological defence protects

5.1 Rejected formulations

The present statement rejects four overbroad formulations:

1. Defence always protects survival.
2. Defence always protects bodily tissue from direct injury.
3. Defence monitors anxiety as one universal signal.
4. Defence simply reduces peripheral bodily symptoms.

Each fails to distinguish basal protection, embodied phenomenal experience, prospective inference, capacity, and context.

5.2 Model-level target hypothesis

The component evidence does not directly demonstrate a universal defended variable. The present model makes an abductive, best-explanation inference from converging findings: threat processing is prospective and context-sensitive; bodily information participates in threat organisation; demand is evaluated relative to resources; regulatory operations alter multiple channels; and immediate pressure reduction can compete with bodily preservation. Taken together, these components motivate—but do not prove—the hypothesis that independently identified candidate psychological defensive reorganisations converge on a proximal regulatory objective or target family:

**keeping contact with an anticipated, emerging, or current embodied phenomenal state
within a presently estimated manageable envelope.**

An operation may attempt to prevent entry, attenuate intensity, terminate duration, delay onset, numb quality, substitute another state, increase control, or create distance. “Manageable contact” is a compact family label, not a demonstrated scalar variable: intensity, duration, accessibility, controllability, and recoverability must initially be modelled and measured separately. Commonality may exist at the level of a regulatory principle while the immediate targets remain plural or vector-valued. “Common” and “proximal” are empirical commitments, not definitional protections: independently identified candidates must be allowed to fail the predicted state- and capacity-sensitivity tests.

5.3 Why “embodied phenomenal” rather than “bodily symptoms”

Shame, grief, dread, helplessness, and humiliation are not adequately defined as heart rate, muscle tension, heat, nausea, or another isolated signal. Nor are they disembodied propositions. They are organised experiences of a living body in relation to self, another person, the world, and possible future. The term therefore preserves the bodily basis of suffering without reducing experience to peripheral physiology.

5.4 Why “estimated” matters

The state need not objectively exceed capacity. The estimate can be accurate, exaggerated, outdated, undergeneralised, overgeneralised, or distorted by current bodily condition and prior learning. A person may defend against a state they could in fact tolerate, or fail to defend against one that will overwhelm available regulation. The model predicts organisation, not correctness.

5.5 Why “presently available” matters

Capacity is time- and context-sensitive. An operation may be unnecessary when sleep, support, control, skill, or recovery time is available and dominant when those resources are absent. This permits testable within-person contrasts without treating defence as a fixed personality entity. In measurement, “presently estimated capacity” must be decomposed into actual capacity, estimated capacity, accessible resources, action-control options, and expected recoverability.

5.6 Rival regulated-target hypotheses

Several established literatures permit candidate operations to be organised around targets or traits other than the present embodied-capacity formulation. Self-affirmation and mnemonic-neglect research directly frame defensive bias and selective memory as protection of self-worth or self-integrity (Sherman & Cohen, 2002; Sedikides et al., 2016). Aversive-reactivity models link neuroticism to avoidant coping through sensitivity to aversive states, and identity/emptiness research provides a temporally proximal route to self-injurious ideation that is not reducible to generic negative affect (Semcho et al., 2023; Eggermont et al., 2026). These findings can be compatible with the present model, but compatibility is not discrimination.

Rival target	Rival prediction	Discriminating requirement for the present model
Self-worth or self-integrity	Defence tracks threat to valued identity even when expected affect and capacity are controlled	Embodied pressure × estimated-capacity effects must remain after independent self-integrity manipulation and measurement.
Epistemic certainty	Defence tracks uncertainty or prediction error itself	Capacity-relative experiential pressure must predict defence beyond uncertainty, information value, and surprise.
Status or attachment security	Defence tracks rank, rejection, or bond preservation	Status or attachment effects must be specifically explained by predicted embodied pressure and capacity rather than merely co-occurring with them.

Rival target	Rival prediction	Discriminating requirement for the present model
Agency or action control	Defence tracks blocked control or inability to act	Pressure–capacity variables must explain additional variance after credible action options and control expectancy are separated.
Instrumental loss	Defence tracks expected material, social, or bodily cost	Experiential control must distinguish defence from source-directed coping when objective expected loss is matched.
Goal conflict or moral commitment	Behaviour protects a valued goal even at experiential cost	The model must permit nondefensive value-consistent action and show why a candidate operation is pressure-control rather than goal pursuit.
Aversive-reactivity family	Anxiety sensitivity, distress intolerance, experiential avoidance, intolerance of uncertainty, thought–action fusion, or negative urgency explains avoidant or urgent coping without one defended target	The embodied objective must add within-person and incremental prediction beyond preregistered trait and process measures rather than relabelling them as capacity or pressure.
Identity integration or emptiness	Operations track identity disturbance, fragmentation, or emptiness even after negative affect is controlled	Identity and emptiness must be manipulated or temporally separated from the proposed embodied dimensions; residual prediction would narrow the common-objective claim.
Hierarchical perceptual or goal control	Behaviour controls multiple individual-specific perceptions or resolves conflict among reference conditions	The model must specify which dimensions are stabilised, tolerate person-specific targets, and outperform control-hierarchy accounts in disturbance tests (Marken & Mansell, 2013; Gucciardi et al., 2026).
Instrumentally valued affect	The person maintains or increases unpleasant affect because it serves performance, relationship, moral, or strategic goals	The model must predict when discomfort is voluntarily retained and must not classify every affective change as defence (Kalokerinos et al., 2017).

If these rival targets, traits, or control architectures predict candidate operations as well as or better than the embodied-capacity objective across valid studies, the common-objective claim must be narrowed, pluralised, or rejected. Re-describing every rival after the fact as “embodied” is not an acceptable test.

6. What counts as a psychological defence

6.1 Independent identification of candidate defensive reorganisation

The target hypothesis must not define its own evidence. A candidate psychological defensive reorganisation should therefore first be identified without assuming that the regulated target is an embodied phenomenal state beyond capacity. Candidate identification requires converging evidence for:

1. target-neutral adverse-trajectory coupling: the operation changes systematically with an independently established event or trajectory that predicts disturbance to some presently relevant candidate protected variable, valued possibility, goal, relation, bodily condition, or expected outcome;
2. realised protective reorganisation: attention, inference, bodily regulation, action readiness, overt activity, bounded covert activity, or contact is actually altered in a way that attempts to prevent, limit, escape, or control that adverse trajectory;
3. current functional sensitivity: the operation varies with relevant context or anticipated consequence rather than being inferred solely from historical origin, diagnostic label, or behavioural form;
4. contextual discrimination: plausible alternatives such as direct coping, habit, reward, skill deficit, objective constraint, fatigue, medication, intoxication, neurological variation, coercion, and deliberate trade-off are addressed.

No single measure establishes all four. Threat, adversity, or protection indicators used here must not be defined by the proposed embodied pressure, capacity, or candidate operation itself. These criteria identify a candidate protective class while leaving the exact protected variable and target architecture open.

6.2 Test of the embodied-capacity target hypothesis

Once a candidate defence is identified independently, the present target hypothesis predicts additional relations:

1. the candidate operation should vary when the anticipated embodied phenomenal consequence changes while the external event and independently established adverse trajectory are held sufficiently constant;
2. it should vary when estimated capacity changes while actual capacity, accessible resources, action-control options, expected recoverability, and the predicted state are measured or experimentally separated as far as feasible;
3. changes in predicted pressure relative to capacity should explain part of the relation between trigger trajectory and operation;

4. the operation should alter at least one preregistered dimension—route into, onset, duration, intensity, accessibility, controllability, or recoverability—more reliably than rival accounts predict; improvement on one dimension must not be treated as evidence for an unmeasured scalar total.

Repeated failure across valid tests would weaken or reject the common-objective hypothesis even if the candidate operations remain defensively classifiable under another theory.

6.3 Non-circular rival-target design

The decisive study is not whether a self-threat, uncertainty manipulation, or social rejection produces bodily distress and defence; most rival theories predict that conjunction. The decisive design orthogonally manipulates the proposed embodied pressure and capacity relation against at least one rival target, uses manipulation checks for each pathway, and identifies the candidate defence independently. Evidence for the present hypothesis requires incremental prediction, mediation, or disturbance-sensitive regulation that the rival cannot explain equally well. If the constructs cannot be manipulated independently, longitudinal or intensive within-person designs should compare preregistered causal models rather than infer the target from retrospective relief.

6.4 Direct coping versus defence

Case	Source-directed change	Experience-directed change	Classification
Leaving a burning building	Removes exposure to tissue damage and lethal danger	Fear may also fall	Primarily direct protection; not psychological defence solely because fear decreases.
Correcting an actual error	Alters the source of evaluation risk	Shame may fall through successful repair	Primarily direct coping if contact with relevant information remains available.
Attacking the evaluator to stop shame	May not correct the error or source	Alters attention, agency, relation, and contact with shame	Potential defence if pressure-control function is independently supported.
Deliberate retreat from coercion	Reduces actual exposure while preserving agency	May also reduce fear	Cannot be classified from withdrawal form alone.
Repetitive distraction from grief	Does not change the loss	Interrupts contact with grief-related experience	Potential defence if the capacity and pressure-control criteria are met.

6.5 Mixed function is expected

The same operation can address a real danger, regulate experience, protect a relationship, and preserve agency simultaneously. Classification concerns relative causal influence, not exclusive purpose. Mixed function must not be forced into one category.

6.6 Defensive history does not establish current defence

An operation may originate through successful pressure reduction and later become cached, habitual, compulsive, reward-driven, or cue-bound. If it no longer varies with current inferred threat, anticipated experiential pressure, or available capacity under valid tests, it should be classified as a defensive derivative or historically defensive residue rather than assumed to be an active psychological defence. If current pressure and capacity continue to modulate it, automaticity alone does not remove defensive function.

6.7 Rapid, automatic, unconscious, or unpleasant is insufficient

A withdrawal reflex is rapid and protective but need not be psychological defence. A learned motor response can be automatic without altering experiential contact. A painful act can be defensive if it regulates a more intolerable state; a pleasant act can be nondefensive or defensive depending on causal organisation. Consciousness of motive is neither necessary nor sufficient.

6.8 Affect regulation is broader than defence

Not every regulation of emotion is defensive. Deliberate engagement, labelling, reappraisal, acceptance, co-regulation, problem solving, and recovery can alter affect while maintaining or increasing contact with relevant information. The present theory reserves “defence” for regulation organised around a state estimated beyond current capacity and implemented through protective reweighting. Later work must test whether this boundary is empirically useful.

7. Sixteen architectural propositions

Proposition 1 — Abductive embodied target hypothesis

Statement. Converging component evidence motivates the hypothesis that independently identified psychological defensive reorganisations converge on a proximal regulatory objective or target family: keeping contact with an anticipated, emerging, or current embodied phenomenal state within a presently estimated manageable envelope. The objective may be vector-valued across intensity, duration, accessibility, controllability, and recoverability.

Status. E1/E2 for affect-regulatory behaviour and survival–security conflicts; F/H for the universal target formulation.

Constraint. This is an abductive F/H integration, not a definition made true by classification. Evidence from self-injury or suicidality cannot establish the function of every defence. Failure to observe dimension-specific state- or capacity-sensitive change across independently identified candidates would weaken or reject the target claim; no scalar common currency is presumed.

Proposition 2 — Trigger as relational role

Statement. A trigger is an event that acquires target-neutral protective significance within current prior organisation by initiating or strengthening an adverse prospective trajectory involving some candidate protected variable or valued possibility. The embodied-capacity formulation is tested separately.

Status. E1/E2 for context-sensitive threat learning; F for integration with the present target claim.

Constraint. No object, word, person, memory, or bodily sensation is intrinsically a psychological trigger across organisms and contexts.

Proposition 3 — Prospective chained inference

Statement. Protective activation can depend on a multistep nonlinguistic trajectory in which X predicts Y and Y predicts an adverse Z. The embodied-capacity hypothesis adds that Z predicts one or more dimensions of an embodied state organised as unmanageable.

Status. E1/E2 for prospective threat processing and learned associations; F/H for the general chained architecture.

Constraint. Verbal reconstruction does not prove that the same propositions were represented online.

Proposition 4 — Psychological organisation is embodied

Statement. “Psychological” identifies an embodied level of relational and functional organisation, not a non-bodily origin, substrate, or controller; bodily processes can be conditions, constituents, and consequences of defence. This weak organismic claim does not entail that current peripheral feedback is necessary for every experience or operation.

Status. E1/E2 for bounded reciprocal body–threat–regulation effects and peripheral-central dissociations; F for the weak level-of-analysis formulation; H for episode-specific strong peripheral embodiment.

Constraint. The proposition does not reduce psychological organisation to one bodily signal, neural region, or direction of causation and does not infer necessity from modulation.

Proposition 5 — Field-internal and multiscale protective organisation

Statement. Adverse trajectories, candidate protected variables, and protective weighting are organised within the same recurrent organism-relative field that maintains current condition, relational possibilities, wider-world constraints, and possible trajectories. The embodied-capacity hypothesis adds target-specific pressure and capacity organisation. Social, material, institutional, cultural, economic, legal, technological, and built-environment conditions may constrain this field through specifiable local pathways; no separate monitor is postulated.

Status. E1/E2 for context, social-rank, resource, and cumulative-environment effects; F/H for bounded multiscale integration.

Constraint. “Monitoring” may be used only as shorthand for distributed ongoing sensitivity. The environment is not psychological by itself, and a wider system must not be invoked without a plausible pathway into registration, trajectory, capacity, action, experience, or consequence.

Proposition 6 — Embodied prospective modulation

Statement. Current interoceptive and regulatory conditions alter threat processing, while inferred threat can prospectively alter bodily regulation and action readiness.

Status. E1 for bounded reciprocal interoceptive, autonomic, endocrine, and threat-processing effects; F/H for the general integrated proposition.

Constraint. One physiological index cannot be treated as the defended variable or a complete capacity measure.

Proposition 7 — Capacity-relative defensive influence

Statement. Under the embodied-capacity hypothesis and with other conditions held sufficiently constant, lower estimated capacity should increase candidate defensive influence for a given predicted state; actual capacity, estimated capacity, accessible resources, action-control options, and expected recoverability may contribute separately and must be measured or manipulated accordingly.

Status. E1/E2 for demand–resource effects; F/H for the exact formulation.

Constraint. No universal threshold, fixed capacity reservoir, or binary switch is assumed. A manipulation that changes several capacity components and the predicted state cannot identify a single capacity mechanism without pathway measurement.

Proposition 8 — Anticipatory activation

Statement. Protective reweighting can occur before the full aversive state is consciously experienced or verbally identified; classification as psychological defence still requires the independent target test.

Status. E1/E2 for pre-report threat processing and implicit regulation components; F/H for classifying the resulting change as psychological defence.

Constraint. Pre-report change is not proof of complete unconsciousness or absence of phenomenal experience.

Proposition 9 — Recurrent multilevel implementation

Statement. Once protective weighting gains influence, candidate reorganisation may alter contact and sampling, early registration, attention, memory access, inference, target, pressure-capacity and policy weighting, neural and peripheral bodily regulation, action readiness, overt or bounded covert activity, interpersonal or environmental coupling, experiential contact, and temporal horizon. Under the embodied target hypothesis this becomes psychological defensive reorganisation. Functional loci intersect with cross-cutting psychological, neural, systemic-biological, relational-material, and developmental layers rather than forming one cortex-to-body chain.

Status. E1/E2 for bounded attentional, mnemonic, inferential, neural, autonomic, endocrine, sensorimotor, interoceptive, social-regulatory, and learning components; F/H for their matrix integration as an account of psychological defence.

Constraint. This is neither a taxonomy nor a claim that a natural number of stages has been discovered. A biological brake, bodily response, social act, or environmental change is not defence by form; the same mechanism may implement basal protection, direct coping, psychological defence, recovery, or another process under different organisation.

Proposition 10 — Functional rather than formal classification

Statement. No behaviour, thought, feeling, bodily pattern, or interpersonal act is defensive by form alone. A candidate must first be identified through target-neutral adverse-trajectory coupling, realised protective reorganisation, current functional sensitivity, and exclusion of plausible alternatives; the embodied target hypothesis is then tested separately.

Status. F/H methodological proposition.

Constraint. An interpretation that cannot identify observations capable of disconfirming defensive function is post hoc.

Proposition 11 — Three nonexclusive protective distinctions

Statement. Basal viability protection distinguishes direct contribution to physiological integrity and continued life; direct protective coping distinguishes source-directed change that retains sufficient causal sensitivity; psychological defensive reorganisation distinguishes a proposed experiential-regulatory function. These cross-cutting distinctions can be jointly instantiated and are not cells of one exhaustive taxonomy.

Status. E1/E2 for basal and affect-regulatory components; F/H for the exact distinction.

Constraint. All three forms are embodied and none is a unitary module. The same outward act may contain mixed weighting and cannot be classified without causal evidence.

Proposition 12 — Possible conflict with survival

Statement. Psychological defence may support, ignore, or oppose bodily viability when reduction or anticipated termination of unbearable experience is locally preferred to continued exposure.

Status. E1/E2 for bounded self-injury, experiential-avoidance, and psychological-pain findings; F/H for assigning a defensive function to such acts and for the general survival-conflict proposition.

Constraint. No individual act of self-harm or suicidality should be assigned this function without direct assessment; multiple functions and causes are common.

Proposition 13 — Immediate relief and recurrent learning

Statement. Relief or increased control following a defensive operation provides new information and may increase the operation's later accessibility, even when longer-term viability, agency, relation, or future openness deteriorates.

Status. E1/E2 for negative reinforcement and relief processes, including evidence that relief can sustain persistent learned avoidance (Wong et al., 2026); F for integration with DSWFO and BSS.

Constraint. Relief is neither necessary nor sufficient for a durable defensive pattern.

Proposition 14 — Defensive history is not current defensive function

Statement. An operation with a defensive learning history may become cached, habitual, compulsive, reward-driven, or cue-bound and cease to express current capacity-relative defensive organisation.

Status. E1/E2 for goal-directed-habit distinctions and reinforcement; F/H for the defensive-derivative boundary.

Constraint. Automaticity alone does not remove defensive function. Classification depends on whether current inferred threat, predicted pressure, and capacity still modulate the operation under valid tests.

Proposition 15 — Survival, security, and enrichment are nested and co-present

Statement. Basal survival, psychological security, and enrichment are proposed as nested and co-present emphases whose relative influence changes across context and time; they are not fixed stages or a single linear score.

Status. A/F/H within the parent framework. Component evidence does not establish one nested survival–security–enrichment organisation.

Constraint. Security can facilitate enrichment but does not guarantee rationality, morality, or optimal action; enrichment can involve chosen discomfort.

Proposition 16 — Recurrent field consequences

Statement. Defensive activity and its consequences can update self-related agency, present-other relations, wider-world estimates, prospective trajectories, and background organisation, thereby changing later trigger sensitivity, capacity estimates, and defensive weighting.

Status. E1/E2 for activity information and bounded learning; F/H for full relational integration.

Constraint. Updates may be local, mixed, weak, transient, absent, or reversed; no global simultaneous update is assumed.

8. Worked example: evaluation and shame

8.1 Prior organisation

Previous evaluation has been followed by humiliation and punishment. Capability has become strongly linked to worth and relational safety. The current bodily condition includes sleep deprivation and elevated baseline arousal. Available support is low.

8.2 System-scale constraints

The review occurs within a punitive organisation in which the supervisor controls future shifts, complaints are rarely investigated, employment is insecure, and mistakes have previously produced public criticism. These conditions are not “inside” the person, but neither are they incidental context. They alter the objective stakes, learned probabilities, available exits, credibility of support, cost of disagreement, and expected consequences through which the frown is organised. A different workplace

or legal and material position could change the operative field without changing the person's body or learning history.

8.3 Trigger trajectory

A supervisor frowns during a performance review. The frown does not intrinsically contain threat. Under the current organisation it increases the expected probability of negative evaluation; negative evaluation increases the expected probability of humiliation, rejection, and loss of standing; that trajectory projects intense shame, constriction, heat, agitation, helplessness, and continued post-event rumination.

8.4 Capacity relation

The projected state is organised as difficult to tolerate, regulate, repair, or recover from under current conditions. This relation—not the facial movement alone—raises security-related weighting.

8.5 Possible operations

Attention may narrow to signs of criticism. Ambiguous statements may receive hostile weighting. The supervisor may be attacked or devalued. The person may withdraw, overexplain, change the topic, become cognitively absorbed, or lose contact with the bodily state. None of these is classified as defence from form alone.

8.6 Direct coping contrast

If the person remains sufficiently in contact, asks what the concern is, obtains specific information, corrects an actual error, or sets a proportionate boundary, the action may be direct coping even if shame decreases. If the same question is used compulsively to force reassurance and prevent all contact with uncertainty, it may acquire defensive function. The difference is causal organisation, not wording.

8.7 Recurrent consequences

Attack may produce immediate agency and reduce shame while worsening the relation, increasing later evaluation threat, and updating the world as adversarial. Withdrawal may reduce immediate pressure while narrowing future possibility. Successful direct engagement may increase capacity estimates and future openness. Mixed updates are expected.

9. Evidence architecture

9.1 Evidence-reading rule

The table below records directness to a bounded component separately from design strength and generalisability. E1 does not mean high-certainty proof of the full model. A small human experiment can be direct but imprecise; a large meta-analysis can be strong but only indirectly relevant; a cellular mechanism can be causal yet non-diagnostic of psychological function. Citations are attached locally so that no evidential row inherits support from an undifferentiated bibliography.

9.2 Traceable component-evidence matrix

Component	Evidence profile	Key sources	Limit for this architecture
Threat imminence changes defensive responding and neural organisation	E1; human experimental and review evidence	Mobbs et al., 2007; Abend, 2023; Tseng et al., 2023; LeDoux & Daw, 2018	Primarily supports survival-related defensive responding, not the common psychological target.
Bodily information can modulate threat perception	E1; bounded human cardiac-cycle experiments and convergent interoception reviews	Garfinkel et al., 2014; Barrett & Simmons, 2015; Seth & Friston, 2016; Khalsa et al., 2018	Modulation does not establish one interoceptive monitor or necessity for every experience.
Peripheral output and subjective experience can dissociate	E1; small clinical neuropsychological and acute pharmacological human studies	Heims et al., 2004; Ali et al., 2017	Supports rejection of strong universal peripheral necessity; does not show that bodily input is irrelevant.
Social context and learned rank modulate threat learning	E1; human experimental paradigms	Karos et al., 2015; Haaker et al., 2016	Supports context sensitivity, not participation of every social system in every episode.
Material and socioeconomic conditions shape later physiological burden	E1/E2; prospective observational human evidence	Evans & Kim, 2012	Supports slower multiscale constraint; does not identify the local function of a defence.
Demand-resource evaluation relates to challenge/threat organisation and performance	E1/E2; experiments plus a 62-study meta-analysis with small effects in motivated performance settings	Tomaka et al., 1993, 1997; Hase et al., 2025	Bounded to studied performance settings; does not validate one scalar capacity ratio or universal defence rule.

Component	Evidence profile	Key sources	Limit for this architecture
Regulation can alter situation, attention, cognition, expression, physiology, and experience differently	E1/E2; process-model reviews and experimental suppression evidence	Gross, 1998, 2015; Gross & Levenson, 1993	Supports multiple control surfaces; emotion regulation is broader than defence.
Synaptic and systemic processes contain brakes and recovery mechanisms	E1; cellular/nonhuman causal work plus bounded human physiology	Ohno-Shosaku et al., 2001; Evanson et al., 2010; Hill et al., 2009; Ichinose et al., 2017; Costa & Biaggioni, 1994	Establishes biological regulation, not psychological defensive function.
Immune state can alter social-threat processing	E1; small randomised human endotoxin challenge	Inagaki et al., 2012	One paradigm and small sample; not a general immune controller of defence.
Familiar social contact can alter subjective and neural threat responding	E1; human partner-handholding experiment	Coan et al., 2017	Supports distributed co-regulation; effect and mechanism depend on relationship and context.
Development, adversity, sleep, and culture alter later threat or regulatory organisation	E1/E2; human and nonhuman evidence across different timescales	Chuah et al., 2010; Honeycutt et al., 2020; Harada et al., 2020	Historical calibration does not establish the function of a current operation; translation and cultural inference require restraint.
Conventional defence mechanisms form measurable, partly reliable constructs	E1/E2; observer-rating traditions, self-report psychometrics, construct reviews, recent observer-rating validation, and a five-year self-report systematic review	Cramer, 1998, 2008; Prout et al., 2022; Di Giuseppe et al., 2025; Martino et al., 2025	Establishes measurable neighbouring constructs, not membership in the proposed umbrella class or convergence on its objective.
Self-integrity threat can produce defensive information processing	E1/E2; experimental programmes and integrative reviews	Sherman & Cohen, 2002; Sedikides et al., 2016	Provides a serious rival target; bodily distress may mediate it but cannot be presumed to do so.

Component	Evidence profile	Key sources	Limit for this architecture
Safety behaviour and relief can alter threat learning and maintain avoidance	E1; experimental extinction and learned-fear paradigms with mixed broader literature	van Uijen et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2026	Safety behaviour is a candidate comparison family, not a synonym for psychological defence; relief is not the only maintaining process.
Aversive reactivity links neuroticism to avoidant coping	E2; transdiagnostic functional synthesis integrating several measured traits and processes	Semcho et al., 2023	Serious near-neighbour: it may explain avoidance without one common defended objective and therefore requires incremental head-to-head tests.
Self-injury can have affect-regulatory and defence-related correlates, with heterogeneous immediate and delayed effects	E1/E2; functional assessment, systematic reviews, laboratory relief, small EMA studies, and a 2026 defence-mechanism review	Nock & Prinstein, 2004; Brereton & McGlinchey, 2020; Franklin et al., 2013; Houben et al., 2017; Kranzler et al., 2018; Montebanocci & Sirri, 2026	Does not establish one function, reliable relief at every timescale, the function of every act, or the function of every defence.
Identity disturbance and emptiness can prospectively relate to NSSI ideation	E1/E2; intensive longitudinal clinical EMA	Eggermont et al., 2026	Supports a temporally proximal rival pathway after negative-affect adjustment; ideation is not behaviour and the result does not establish universality.
Psychological pain is associated with suicidality	E1/E2; large cross-sectional, small prospective, and seven-study meta-analytic evidence	Troister & Holden, 2010, 2012; Pachkowski et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2024	Association and covariation do not establish the function or target of an individual suicidal act.
Human microbiome composition has been associated with infant fear	Exploratory E2 modifier; pilot human association with stronger nonhuman mechanisms elsewhere	Carlson et al., 2021	n = 34 pilot evidence belongs to tentative modifiers, not foundational support.
Activity and consequences can update later organisation	E1/E2 in bounded learning domains; F/H for full relational integration	Gillan et al., 2015; Tseng et al., 2023	Does not establish uniform DSWFO/BSS updating after every operation.

Component	Evidence profile	Key sources	Limit for this architecture
Perceptual-control formulations model individual-specific stress regulation	F/E2; formal control theory plus current integrative review	Marken & Mansell, 2013; Gucciardi et al., 2026	Provides a control-theoretic rival and design logic, not evidence that the present objective is one controlled variable.
Negative affect can be regulated instrumentally rather than simply reduced	E1/E2; daily-life motivational evidence	Kalokerinos et al., 2017	Prevents equating unpleasant affect, its maintenance, or any affective change with defence.

9.3 Mixed, null, and mismatch-sensitive evidence

Four corrections constrain interpretation. First, Franklin et al. (2013) demonstrated pain-offset relief, but its association with NSSI frequency was weak or nonsignificant; it is therefore an analogue of relief, not direct evidence that relief maintains NSSI. Second, EMA findings differ by timescale and sample: Kranzler et al. (2018) found immediate reduction of high-arousal negative affect after NSSI, whereas Houben et al. (2017) found increased negative emotion over subsequent hours. The defensible claim is heterogeneous, timescale-dependent regulation—not uniform relief. Third, recent reviews and EMA extend the evidence base but do not close the target gap: the systematic review by Montebanocci and Sirri synthesises defence-mechanism associations with self-injury (Montebanocci & Sirri, 2026), while Eggermont et al. (2026) concern NSSI ideation and identify identity/emptiness pathways. Fourth, psychache studies support association and prospective covariation, but the 2024 meta-analysis in major depression included seven studies and yielded a modest pooled association after publication-bias adjustment; this does not establish a universal escape function (Wang et al., 2024).

Evidence that subjective stress persists despite marked peripheral suppression, and that social-motivational functioning can remain broadly intact in pure autonomic failure, directly constrains strong peripheral embodiment (Heims et al., 2004; Ali et al., 2017). These findings do not oppose organismic embodiment or reciprocal body-brain modulation; they prohibit treating current autonomic output as necessary, sufficient, or identical to the target.

9.4 The central inferential gap

No existing study establishes that every psychological defensive reorganisation converges on one common regulatory objective—or one vector of targets—defined around manageable contact with embodied phenomenal states relative to capacity. Nor does existing evidence establish the present multilevel matrix as one discovered biological object. The model integrates evidence that threat is

prospective; bodily information and immune-metabolic state can change threat processing; social contact, rank, material resources, culture, and cumulative environments shape threat and regulation; demand-resource relations matter; neural and bodily responses contain multiple brakes and feedback loops; regulation operates through internal and externally coupled channels; and pressure reduction can override bodily preservation. This is an abductive model-level synthesis rather than a direct empirical result. The integration is scientifically permissible only if candidates are identified through target-neutral adverse-trajectory coupling, evidence is traced locally, and rival targets, traits, or control architectures remain capable of outperforming or falsifying the proposed objective.

9.5 Compatibility with the framework axiom

Where sentience is independently warranted, the parent architecture adopts movement toward better phenomenal experience as A. The present model supplies a candidate preservation-side mechanism: when a trajectory predicts experience as uninhabitable under current capacity, security weighting attempts to prevent or control it. This does not reduce “better” to immediate comfort. Defensive local preferability can worsen broader and longer-term experience, while enrichment can require chosen discomfort.

10. Adversarial audit and boundary cases

Boundary case	Required interpretation	Constraint imposed
Bodily implementation of a psychological operation	Neural, autonomic, endocrine, immune, metabolic, respiratory, analgesic, sensorimotor, and behavioural changes may constitute or constrain the operation	“Psychological” must not imply a disembodied origin or a one-way psyche → body sequence.
Biological braking without psychological defence	Synaptic inhibition, HPA feedback, baroreflex buffering, transmitter clearance, or recovery may limit a response	Basal counter-regulation is not psychological defence unless target-neutral adverse-trajectory coupling is first established and the embodied-objective test then succeeds.
Disinhibition	Threat responding may rise because an existing brake is reduced rather than because a new excitatory command is added	Do not model activation as a single positive signal moving downstream.
Muscle contraction	It may alter expression, proprioception, breathing, freezing, or action readiness and can increase sympathetic activity	Do not claim that contraction generally blocks neurotransmitter or hormone release.
Unrelated environmental event	The wider world is not automatically part of the operative field	A specifiable coupling to registration, trajectory, capacity, action, experience, or consequence is required.

Boundary case	Required interpretation	Constraint imposed
Structural or institutional constraint	A wider system may alter real stakes, resources, sanctions, support, and available action	Do not individualise objective constraint or explain it away as defence; trace the local pathway.
Socially distributed regulation	Another person may alter effort, information, bodily threat response, action, or recovery	Co-regulation is not automatically defence and cannot be reduced to an internal cognitive strategy.
Withdrawal from a hot surface	Basal nociceptive/sensorimotor protection may be sufficient	Rapid bodily protection is not automatically psychological defence.
Leaving actual fire	Direct action changes lethal exposure	Reduction in fear does not by itself make the action defensive.
Shame without defence	The state may be painful yet currently tolerable and integrable	Aversive experience is not sufficient for defence.
Defence before named emotion	A learned trajectory may reweight attention or action readiness early	Verbal access is not required.
Deliberate exposure	Chosen contact may increase immediate pressure while supporting capacity and enrichment	Pressure reduction is not the only form of local preferability.
Self-injury	Physical damage can regulate or terminate a more aversive state	Psychological security can oppose bodily integrity; function must be assessed.
Suicidal action	Imagined cessation may become preferable to projected unbearable continuation	Survival is not an unconditional target; no single-motive inference is permitted.
Heroic rescue	Risking death may prevent a projected future state associated with inaction, or may reflect attachment, training, rapid helping, values, or mixed organisation	Sacrifice cannot be reduced automatically to avoidance of guilt or shame.
Substance intoxication	It may attenuate experience, reflect reward/habit, or both	Defence, local reward, dependence, and neurological effects require separation.
Repeated cue-bound operation	It may be an active defence or a cached derivative with defensive history	Test current sensitivity to inferred threat, predicted pressure, and capacity; history alone is insufficient.
Sleepiness or dissociation-like presentation	Defensive disengagement is possible, but fatigue, medication, neurological conditions, and other causes must be tested	Surface shutdown does not identify defence.
Reassurance seeking	It may obtain needed information or compulsively regulate uncertainty	Same form, different causal organisation.

Boundary case	Required interpretation	Constraint imposed
Acceptance or co-regulation	Experience changes while contact may increase	Affect regulation is broader than defence.
Conventionally coded defence mechanism	It may be measurable within DMRS or another established system	Conventional membership does not automatically establish membership in the proposed umbrella class or convergence on the proposed objective.
High aversive reactivity or distress intolerance	It may predict avoidance, urgency, or other coping across contexts	A trait or transdiagnostic process is not itself the defended target; incremental within-person tests are required.
Identity disturbance or emptiness	It may prospectively organise defensive behaviour or NSSI ideation	Do not absorb identity or emptiness into embodied pressure unless temporal mediation and rival-model tests support that path.
Instrumentally maintained unpleasant affect	Distress may be retained because it serves a valued goal	Non-reduction of distress can be deliberate and nondefensive; the model must preserve goal-directed exceptions.
Self-integrity or certainty threat	Defensive bias may protect identity, self-worth, or certainty	Do not translate the rival target into embodied pressure without independent mediation or incremental-prediction evidence.
No sentence warrant	Functional protection and avoidance may occur	Do not attribute psychological defence as phenomenally defined.

11. Discriminating research programme

11.1 Core predictions

- 1. Target-neutral identification before target manipulation.** First establish candidate reorganisation from an independently measured adverse trajectory without using bodily-pressure, capacity, or operation measures to define threat. Then, with the external event and adverse trajectory held sufficiently constant, experimentally change one preregistered bodily-affective dimension. Failure would weaken the proposed objective.
- 2. Decomposed capacity contrast.** With the predicted state held sufficiently constant, estimated capacity should be manipulated separately where feasible from actual capacity, accessible resources, action-control options, and expected recoverability. No change across valid manipulations would weaken the capacity-relative claim; failure to separate pathways would leave the mechanism unidentified.

3. **Direct coping versus experiential control.** Matched outward actions should produce different processing and later learning when one changes the source and the other primarily changes experiential contact.
4. **Pre-report effects.** Defensive attentional, physiological, or action changes should sometimes appear before verbal identification of the elicited state, while later report should correlate imperfectly with them.
5. **Survival-security conflict.** Under carefully controlled and ethically permissible designs, pressure-reducing options should sometimes be selected despite known bodily cost; the effect should increase with perceived unbearability and low capacity.
6. **Relief learning.** Operations followed by pressure reduction should become more accessible in similar contexts than matched operations without relief, unless countervailing consequences dominate.
7. **Mixed update.** An operation can reduce immediate pressure while worsening present-other safety, wider-world trust, agency, or future openness; a one-valence model should fit worse than a multidimensional account.
8. **State dependence.** Sleep loss, pain, illness, hunger, or other bodily constraints should alter defensive thresholds partly through capacity and pressure estimates rather than behavioural form alone.
9. **Security-to-enrichment widening.** Credible reductions in pressure or increases in capacity should widen exploration, connection, flexible attention, or value-consistent action, without guaranteeing optimal choice.
10. **Boundary failure.** If direct problem solving, accepted discomfort, reflexive protection, habitual reward, and psychological defence cannot be discriminated using prespecified contrasts, the proposed defence construct must be narrowed or rejected.
11. **Bounded multiscale influence.** With the immediate cue held sufficiently constant, experimentally or naturally occurring changes in social power, material resources, institutional protection, cultural sanction, or available exit should alter trajectory, capacity, and defence only through specified local pathways. Failure of the pathway variables to change should weaken the proposed scale-level explanation.
12. **Defensive derivative contrast.** Operations classified independently as historically defensive but no longer sensitive to current inferred threat, predicted pressure, or capacity should be better explained as cached derivatives than as active defence. Persistent sensitivity would count against complete decoupling.
13. **Layer dissociation.** Matched psychological organisation may be implemented through different biological or interpersonal pathways, and similar biological changes may serve different functions. Failure to obtain such many-to-many relations would favour a more rigid one-to-one architecture.
14. **Biological-brake contrast.** Manipulating a local inhibitory, endocrine-feedback, or autonomic-buffering mechanism should change the magnitude or timing of bodily response without necessarily changing the inferred target or defensive function. If every bodily brake covaries uniquely with psychological defence, the basal-versus-psychological distinction would require revision.

15. **Co-regulation pathway.** Familiar support, credible institutional protection, or material control should alter defence through measured changes in expected trajectory, effort, capacity, action availability, bodily response, or recovery. An unexplained context main effect is insufficient evidence for the proposed pathway.
16. **Timescale separation.** Developmental history, culture, chronic bodily condition, and repeated relief should predict present parameters and learning rates without being mistaken for the current operation. Designs that cannot distinguish calibration from online selection cannot adjudicate the model.
17. **Rival-target competition.** In preregistered factorial or intensive longitudinal designs, the embodied-dimension $\times$ estimated-capacity relation should predict candidate defence beyond self-integrity, certainty, status or attachment, agency, instrumental loss, goal conflict, aversive-reactivity traits, identity/emptiness, person-specific controlled perceptions, and instrumental emotion motives. Equal or superior rival prediction would narrow or reject the common-objective claim.
18. **Dimension-specific disturbance tests.** Before any controlled-variable claim, perturb intensity, duration, accessibility, controllability, and recoverability separately where feasible. Compensatory reorganisation should stabilise a prespecified reference condition for the disturbed dimension, with measurable error-sensitive outputs. Failure of disturbance resistance would retain “candidate regulatory objective” but reject the stronger control-theoretic label.
19. **Bridge validation.** Candidate operations coded independently by established defence-mechanism measures, safety-behaviour paradigms, and experiential-avoidance measures should be tested for convergence on the proposed objective. Failure to converge would imply plural comparison families or partial overlap rather than one class.

11.2 Measurement requirements

- Measure current bodily state, anticipated bodily-affective state, and reflective emotion labels separately.
- Measure intensity, duration, accessibility, controllability, uncertainty, and expected recoverability separately rather than using one distress score or summing them without a validated measurement model.
- Measure actual capacity, estimated capacity, practical resources, support, skill, action-control options, and expected recoverability separately before testing an integrated capacity construct.
- Distinguish the objective source of danger, the independently established adverse trajectory, the candidate protected variable, and the operation’s immediate function. Do not define threat using the same bodily-pressure, capacity, or operation measure later used to confirm the target.
- Measure relevant environmental and system-scale variables—material resources, power, sanctions, support, legal or organisational constraints, cultural regularities, and available exits—only where a hypothesised local pathway is specified.
- Record sampling, early registration, attention, memory access, inference, action readiness, overt action, bounded covert activity, neural and synaptic proxies where justified, autonomic, endocrine,

immune-metabolic and sensorimotor change, subjective change, interpersonal or environmental change, and consequences across time.

- Separate implementation from function: a biological or social mechanism should be measured alongside independent evidence for target-neutral adverse-trajectory coupling; the embodied-objective test follows rather than defines candidate status.
- Sample at more than one timescale where feasible so online change, recovery, learning, developmental calibration, and stable constraint are not collapsed.
- Use within-person and longitudinal designs to distinguish state-sensitive defence from stable descriptive tendency.
- Identify candidate defences independently of the embodied-target measures before testing whether predicted pressure and capacity explain their selection.
- Pre-specify alternative target, trait, goal, identity, and control-hierarchy models, causal diagrams, mediation paths, and rule-outs; report whether each proposed embodied dimension adds prediction beyond each rival.
- Include established measures or independent coding of conventional defence mechanisms where the sample and task permit, so membership in the proposed umbrella is bridged rather than assumed.
- Do not treat one biomarker, one behaviour, one self-report item, or one clinician interpretation as “defence itself.”

12. Integration and conflict audit against the parent documents

12.1 Foundational Architecture v2.2

Parent commitment	Present implementation	Audit result
Recurrent embodied organism-environment process	Defensive sequence is recurrent, bodily, relational, multiscale where coupled, and explicitly bounded	Aligned; environment is neither excluded nor treated as unlimited.
Nonlinguistic operation without blanket innateness	Chained inference can be prelinguistic; specific trajectories can be learned	Aligned.
DSWFO as one relational orientation	Threat and capacity are organised within the same field	Aligned; no extra monitor or domain added.
Bodily regulation and action readiness	Both are inputs to and channels of defence	Aligned; no detailed emotion theory imported.
Limited processing and action capacity	Defensive weighting narrows and reallocates processing	Aligned; no single energy reservoir claimed.
Local preferability may diverge from viability	Pressure reduction can damage survival or future openness	Direct elaboration.

Parent commitment	Present implementation	Audit result
Better phenomenal experience is A	Security defence is proposed as a preservation-side mechanism	Aligned; target claim remains F/H, not promoted to A.
Preservation and enrichment are nested and co-present	Survival, security, enrichment are treated as emphases, not stages	Aligned with terminology correction.
Threat relative to capacity increases protective weighting	Target-neutral trigger → adverse trajectory → protective weighting is separated from the target-specific embodied objective × capacity → operation hypothesis	Direct elaboration without circular identification or a serial neuroanatomical chain.

12.2 Continuous Inferential Flow

The present model preserves the parent flow: prior organisation constrains contact and registration; constructive perception, memory activation, and broader inference organise significance and possibility; bodily regulation and action readiness change; activity is selected; immediate activity information and later consequences update relational and background organisation. Psychological defence is inserted as a possible form of protective reweighting and realised activity within that flow, not as a parallel controller. Version 1.5 retains the implementation matrix without turning the parent functional flow into a claim about ordered brain regions.

Attempt, realised operation, immediate relief, objective outcome, later consequence, agency attribution, and reflective endorsement remain distinct. A defensive attempt may fail to reduce pressure; an accidental reduction is not automatically defence; a favourable outcome does not establish defensive function.

12.3 Deep Orientation v2.2

The model retains the present other as a local differentiation within the world field and future as prospective continuation. A trigger trajectory can therefore involve what a present other may do, what the wider world affords or threatens, what the organism can enact, and what next trajectories become possible. Defensive activity may update these relations in different directions.

The background regulatory condition/BSS remains both result and constraint. A more constricted background organisation may increase trigger sensitivity and reduce estimated capacity; repeated successful contact and recovery may widen security. Neural and peripheral biological condition, social-material coupling, and developmental history are treated as contributors to this recurrent field rather than new DSWFO domains. The exact accumulation pathway remains F/H.

12.4 Necessary terminological refinement

The parent documents use “preservation” broadly for viability, integrity, regulation, and continued engagement. The present statement does not replace that term. It introduces three nonexclusive analytic distinctions:

- basal viability protection, most directly concerned with survival and physiological integrity;
- direct protective coping, distinguished by altering the source, probability, or practical impact of threat while retaining sufficient sensitivity to relevant causal information;
- psychological defence, distinguished by a proposed experiential-regulatory function and hypothesised to keep contact with embodied phenomenal experience within a manageable envelope.

These distinctions are cross-cutting rather than fixed stages, exclusive modules, or a one-to-one mapping onto survival, security, and enrichment. “Survival → security → enrichment” is acceptable as pedagogical shorthand only when its nested, co-present, and non-linear character is stated.

12.5 Neighbouring-model and novelty map

Neighbouring model or literature	What the present architecture inherits or accommodates	What remains distinctive and testable here
Conventional defence mechanisms and DMRS	Automatic protective processes, named defences, levels of adaptive functioning, empirical coding	Treats conventional mechanisms as a candidate family and tests both membership in the proposed umbrella and convergence on the proposed objective (Di Giuseppe et al., 2025; Martino et al., 2025).
Gross process and extended-process models of emotion regulation	Situation selection or modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change, response modulation, and regulation monitoring	Restricts candidate status to target-neutral adverse-trajectory-sensitive protective reorganisation and adds a separately tested embodied-objective hypothesis, nonexclusive protective distinctions, and a recurrent matrix (Gross, 1998, 2015).
Experiential avoidance and safety behaviours	Attempts to avoid, suppress, or control aversive private events; effects on learning and relief	Treats them as candidate comparison families and requires independent functional identification rather than equating all avoidance with defence (van Uijen et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2026).
Aversive reactivity and distress-intolerance family	Neuroticism-related sensitivity and reactions to aversive states can bridge to avoidant coping	Requires incremental within-person prediction beyond anxiety sensitivity, distress intolerance, experiential avoidance, uncertainty intolerance, thought-action fusion, and negative urgency (Semcho et al., 2023).

Neighbouring model or literature	What the present architecture inherits or accommodates	What remains distinctive and testable here
Defensive-behaviour and threat-imminence taxonomies	Reflexes, fixed reactions, habits, goal-directed actions, active avoidance, and brain-body integration	Uses these distinctions to separate basal viability, direct coping, and psychological defensive reorganisation rather than reducing them to one survival system (LeDoux & Daw, 2018; Tseng et al., 2023).
Perceptual Control Theory	Organisms can be studied by identifying individual-specific perceptions kept near reference conditions through action and conflict among goals	Uses PCT disturbance tests while withholding a controlled-variable claim; person-specific or plural controlled perceptions may outperform the proposed objective (Marken & Mansell, 2013; Gucciardi et al., 2026).
Self-affirmation and mnemonic neglect	Defensive bias can protect self-integrity and alter information processing	Treats self-integrity as a rival target that the embodied-capacity hypothesis must outperform, not as evidence automatically absorbed by it.
Identity, emptiness, and self-injury research	Identity disturbance and emptiness can organise NSSI ideation in real time	Treats identity integration and emptiness as rival pathways rather than automatic synonyms for embodied pressure (Eggermont et al., 2026).
Instrumental emotion regulation	People may seek, maintain, or alter even unpleasant affect for valued goals	Requires separation of protective defence from instrumentally motivated affect regulation and chosen discomfort (Kalokerinos et al., 2017).
Predictive interoception and allostasis	Bodily prediction, interoception, and anticipatory regulation shape experience and action	Supplies implementation-compatible mechanisms but not a defence taxonomy or proof of the proposed objective (Barrett & Simmons, 2015; Seth & Friston, 2016).

The incremental contribution is therefore not the mere claim that regulation can alter situations, attention, cognition, or physiology. It is the conjunction of: target-neutral candidate identification; a separately testable, potentially vector-valued embodied-capacity objective; three nonexclusive protective distinctions; a recurrent functional-surface $\times$ implementation-layer matrix; bounded social-material coupling; and explicit tests that permit rival targets, traits, control architectures, or plural defensive families to win.

12.6 No imported taxonomy

No ISTDP, psychodynamic, cognitive, behavioural, attachment, predictive-processing, or diagnostic taxonomy is adopted as the architecture. Existing defence-mechanism, emotion-regulation, safety-

behaviour, experiential-avoidance, aversive-reactivity, control-theoretic, and threat-defence literatures are treated as empirical neighbours and candidate comparison families. Later classification may compare traditions, but named defences cannot be used to define the mechanism circularly.

12.7 No-loss and no-overreach conclusion

The present model develops the detailed domain that the three parent documents leave outside their own scope. Version 2.2 of the foundational and deep-orientation statements incorporates only the boundary distinctions needed for consistency; it does not absorb the present target hypothesis, functional control surfaces, implementation matrix, or research programme. The defence model does not contradict their sentence restriction, recurrence, bounded relational-field formulation, minimal capacity definition, mixed updating, local preferability, or PED. Its principal novel claims—the common or vector-valued proximal embodied objective, the three nonexclusive protective distinctions, bounded multiscale field participation, recurrent functional-pathway × implementation-layer matrix, and possible survival–security conflict—remain F/H where evidence does not establish universality.

13. Current consolidated scientific statement

Psychological defence is provisionally modelled as recurrent, context-sensitive protective reorganisation within an embodied organism–environment process. “Psychological” identifies a level of relational and functional organisation, not a non-bodily origin, substrate, or controller. Bodily information and neural, synaptic, autonomic, endocrine, immune, metabolic, respiratory, nociceptive, analgesic, sensorimotor, attentional, mnemonic, inferential, behavioural, environmental, and interpersonal change may be conditions, constituents, and consequences of the same operation.

The psychological unit is neither an isolated interior nor the environment by itself. It is the organised organism-relative relation through which bodily condition, other people, objects, places, material resources, social positions, institutional arrangements, cultural regularities, and possible futures acquire causal relevance. Wider family, organisational, economic, legal, cultural, technological, and built-environment systems may constrain the field by changing probabilities, meanings, sanctions, support, available actions, and consequences. Their inclusion requires a specifiable local pathway; the framework does not make everything psychological.

A trigger is not an intrinsically threatening stimulus but an event that, relative to current organisation, initiates or intensifies a target-neutral adverse trajectory involving some candidate protected variable or valued possibility. The trajectory may be direct or chained, may operate without online language, and may project bodily, relational, environmental, social, and system-conditioned consequences. Adverse

trajectories and protective weighting are organised within this same recurrent field rather than assessed by a separate monitor; embodied pressure and capacity enter as a distinct target-specific hypothesis.

Candidate psychological defensive reorganisations must first be identified independently through target-neutral adverse-trajectory coupling, realised protective reorganisation, current functional sensitivity, and discrimination from plausible alternatives. The model then makes a separate abductive target hypothesis: such candidates may converge on a proximal regulatory objective or target family of keeping contact with an anticipated, emerging, or current embodied phenomenal state within a presently estimated manageable envelope. This objective may be vector-valued across intensity, duration, accessibility, controllability, and recoverability. The hypothesis is not made true by definition. “Controlled variable” is reserved for a later stage at which dimension-specific disturbance resistance, reference conditions, error-sensitive output, and formal control tests have been demonstrated.

Candidate protective operations may alter field contact and sampling, early registration, attention, memory access, inference, target, pressure-capacity and policy weighting, neural and peripheral bodily regulation, action readiness, overt activity, bounded covert activity, environmental and interpersonal coupling, experiential contact, and temporal horizon. They are classified as psychological defence only after the target-specific test. These functional loci intersect with cross-cutting psychological, neural, systemic-biological, relational-material, and developmental layers; they do not form one cortex → amygdala → body chain. Biological braking and recovery can operate throughout the trajectory, and regulation can be partly implemented by other people or the material field. No operation is defensive by behavioural form, biological form, speed, automaticity, unpleasantness, unconsciousness, clinical label, or conscious report alone. An operation with a defensive history may become a cached, habitual, compulsive, or reward-driven derivative; current defensive function requires present sensitivity to an independently established adverse trajectory and target-specific variation.

Basal viability protection, direct protective coping, and psychological defensive reorganisation are nonexclusive analytic distinctions that cut across different axes and can be dynamically coupled. Basal protection is distinguished by direct contribution to physiological regulation, bodily integrity, and continued life. Direct coping is distinguished by changing the source, probability, or practical consequences of threat while maintaining sufficient sensitivity to relevant causal information; it need not preserve sensory exposure. Psychological defence is distinguished by a proposed experiential-regulatory function and is hypothesised to regulate security of embodied phenomenal experience. It can support survival but does not protect survival unconditionally; immediate or anticipated pressure reduction may sometimes oppose bodily integrity, relation, agency, or future viability. Mixed weighting within one act is expected.

Survival, security, and enrichment remain nested and co-present emphases rather than fixed stages. Survival ordinarily preserves the possibility of continued experience, security preserves the possibility of inhabitable engagement, and enrichment expands its viable quality and meaningful range. Local defensive preferability can diverge from all three over longer timescales.

Direct and convergent evidence supports prospective defensive responding; bounded reciprocal modulation of threat and bodily information; synaptic and systemic biological braking; immune-to-threat and sleep-related modulation; social co-regulation; cultural, rank, resource, and cumulative-environment effects; developmental calibration; demand-resource relations in studied settings; multiple regulation channels; heterogeneous affect-regulatory self-injury; and associations between psychological pain and suicidality. It also supports measurable conventional defence constructs, aversive-reactivity processes, identity/emptiness pathways, instrumental emotion motives, and rival self-integrity and control-theoretic accounts. It does not establish one universal objective or target vector, validate the multilevel matrix as a discovered unitary mechanism, prove strong online peripheral embodiment, or show that every biological or wider system participates in every episode. The common-objective, implementation-matrix, and bounded-multiscale claims therefore remain F/H and must be tested against basal protection, direct coping, habit, reward, objective constraint, chosen discomfort, neurological variation, independently valued goals, traits, identity pathways, and rival control architectures.

CURRENT CONSOLIDATED CONCLUSION — The model treats psychological defensive reorganisation as an embodied, relational, and potentially multiscale proposed functional class, not as a disembodied mental cause, a synonym for every named defence mechanism, unconditional survival protection, or a serial cortex-to-amygdala-to-body cascade. Candidate operations are first identified target-neutrally through adverse-trajectory-sensitive protective reorganisation. Its central separate hypothesis is that valid candidates converge on capacity-relative regulation of one or more dimensions of the route into, duration of, accessibility of, controllability of, or recovery from embodied phenomenal states organised as unmanageable. Its implementation hypothesis is a recurrent matrix in which functional control surfaces intersect with biological, relational-material, and developmental layers. The framework remains provisional: the proposed objective must outperform self-integrity, certainty, status or attachment, agency, instrumental-loss, goal-conflict, aversive-reactivity, identity/emptiness, instrumental-emotion, and person-specific control alternatives; capacity and objective dimensions must be separated; conventional defence measures must be bridged; and the architecture must be narrowed, pluralised, or rejected if those tests fail.

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