

31 Psychological Defense Mechanisms Explained

Posted in [Freudian Psychology](#)

A look at common defense mechanisms we employ to protect the ego.

In our last article, [Defense Mechanisms: Psychological Techniques We Use to Cope With Anxieties](#), we looked at the way in which the psyche deals with unconscious anxieties. We identified a number of common defense mechanisms which we often use without even realising, in order to avoid the anxiety caused by unreasonable impulses originating in the id and the resulting guilt which the super ego's moral conscience applies in reaction to these feelings.

Whilst defense mechanisms such as [repression](#), sublimation and identification with an aggressor can often be identified, there are also numerous other mechanisms that have been identified since [Sigmund Freud](#) first noted them more than a century ago.



[Sigmund Freud](#)

Let's take a look at some common and less well known defense mechanisms that a person might deploy, along with some examples of how the mind might use them:

Acceptance

Acceptance of a situation that has been causing anxiety is one technique that we might use to live with an undesirable circumstances or feelings. For instance,

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someone may acknowledge that they have behaved unreasonably towards their father owing to an [Oedipus Complex](#), or accept their new circumstances after separating from a partner.

Acting Out

When the id component of the human [psyche](#) signals the desire to act on an impulse, the [ego](#) and super ego will often counteract it if they feel that that behavior would be counterproductive or immoral. A person may want to curse after falling over in a busy street, but the ego, perceiving this as contradicting social etiquette, will often lead to them holding back on the expletives. On some occasions, however, we may not be able to balance the impulses of the id and will defend the ego by simply acting out the irrational desires.

For example a person might “act out” by theatrically storming out of a stressful meeting when they would otherwise stay calm and hide their unease.

Anticipation

The anticipation of a potentially stressful event is one way a person might mentally prepare for it. Anticipation might involve rehearsing possible outcomes in one’s mind or telling oneself that will not be as bad as they imagine. A person with a phobia of dentists might anticipate an appointment to have a tooth filling by telling themselves that the procedure will be over in just a few minutes, and reminding themselves that they have had one previously without any problems.

Altruism

An act of goodwill towards another person, known as altruistic behavior, can be used as a way of diffusing a potentially anxious situation. [Altruism](#) may be used as a defense mechanism, for example, by being particularly helpful to a person who we feel might dislike us or neutralizing an argument with kind words and positivity.

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Avoidance

When a perceived situation creates anxiety, one convenient option is sometimes to avoid it. Although avoidance can provide an escape from a particular event, it neglects to deal with the cause of the anxiety. For example, a person might know that they are due to give a stressful presentation to colleagues at work, and take a sick day in order to avoid giving it. Avoidance in this situation might be only a short term option, however, if the presentation is rescheduled to another day. Someone may also avoid thinking about something which causes anxiety, preferring to leave it unresolved instead of confronting it.

Conversion

Conversion is a defence mechanism whereby the anxiety caused by repressed impulses and feelings are 'converted' into a physical complaint such as a cough or feelings of paralysis. Freud observed this physical manifestation of anxieties in clients such as Dora, who complained of a cough, losing her voice and feelings resembling appendicitis. Upon investigation, Freud attributed her cough to fixation during the oral stage of psychosexual development, and linked her appendicitis to a "childbirth fantasy".

Denial

The self denial of one's feelings or previous actions is one defence mechanism to avoid damage to the ego caused by the anxiety or guilt of accepting them. A married woman might deny to herself that she holds affections for her husband's friend, rather than accepting her true feelings. A person might also deny to their physical behavior, such as theft, preferring to think that someone forced them into committing the crime, in order to avoid dealing with the guilt should they accept their actions. Denial is an undesirable defense mechanism as it contravenes the [reality principle](#) that the id adheres to, delving into an imaginary world that is separate from our actual environment.

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Displacement

Displacement occurs when a person represses affection, fear or impulses that they feel towards another person. Accepting that it is irrational or socially unacceptable to demonstrate such feelings, the psyche prevents them from being converted into actions. However, the feelings are instead displaced towards a person or animal whom it is acceptable to express such sentiments for.

A person who dislikes their teacher after being given low grades may feel that they would be punished if they express their hostility towards them. Therefore, they may unconsciously displace their antipathy onto their best friend, making excuses for treating them badly without justification.

In the case of Little Hans, Freud believed that the boy had displaced a fear of his father onto horses, whose blinkers and facial features reminded him of his parent. Instead of misbehaving towards his father, he felt anxious at being in the presence of horses and would avoid leaving the house when possible.

Dissociation

People who use dissociation as a defense mechanism tend to momentarily lose their connection to the world around them. They may feel separated from the outside world, as though they exist in another realm. Dissociation often helps people to cope with uncomfortable situations by 'removing' themselves from them. They may enter a state of daydreaming, staring into space and letting their mind wander until someone nudges them, prompting them to acknowledge reality once more.

A case which Freud analyzed after reading an autobiographical account of an illness was that of Daniel Schreber, a German judge who described the dissociative feeling that he and the rest of the world were separated by a veil. Schreber felt as though he was not entirely a part of his environment and that he was in some way separate from it.

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Fantasy

When life seems mundane or distressing, people often use fantasy as a way of escaping reality. They may fantasize about winning the lottery or idealized outcomes of their lives changing for the better in some way. Fantasies help us to explore alternatives to situations that we are unhappy with but unrealistic expectations of them being fulfilled can lead to us losing touch with reality and taking more viable actions to improve our lives.

Humor

George Vaillant described the use of humor as a “mature” defense mechanism - a primarily adaptive technique to help us to cope with tense or stressful situations. Looking for a funny aspect in an environment in which we lack control can help us to endure it, and can even be an altruistic act in helping others to better cope as well.

Humility

Showing humility involves lowering our expectations and view of our self importance, sacrificing our pride and often focusing on others. Humility can enable us to pacify those around us in tense conflicts and encourage cooperation with other people to take place. For example, someone who is known to boast about their abilities may show humility whilst trying to complete a difficult task. This might encourage others to empathize with, and help, them.

Idealization

Idealization involves creating an ideal impression of a person, place or object by emphasizing their positive qualities and neglecting the those that are negative. Idealization adjusts the way in which we perceive the world around us and can lead us to make judgement that support our idealized concepts. People often idealize their recollections of being on holiday or memories from childhood, seeing them as ‘happier times’, but fail to recollect arguments or stresses during those periods. We often idealize the image we hold of people we admire - relatives, partners or

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celebrities, making excuses for their failures and emphasizing their more admirable qualities.

Identification

According to Freud's concept of the Oedipus Complex, a child may experience feelings of resentment towards their father as they compete for the affection of their mother and the resulting castration anxiety - an irrational fear directed towards the father - may lead them to feel the need to appease the father. In order to pacify a person whom we perceive to be a threat, we may emulate aspects of their behavior. By adopting their mannerisms, repeating phrases or language patterns that they tend to use and mirroring their character traits, a person may attempt to appease a person. This defense mechanism was described by Anna Freud as identification with an aggressor.

A person moving schools or countries, starting a new job or entering a new social circle might adopt the social norms or attitudes of classmates, neighbors, colleagues or other people whom they seek acceptance from, for example, in order to avoid being rejected by their new peers.

Intellectualisation

When a person is attached emotionally to an issue, they may be tempted to consider it in intellectual terms. This often involves standing back from the situation and attempting to take a cold, neutral view of it. For instance, a person who has been made redundant after twenty years of service to a company may intellectualize it, acknowledging the management's view that redundancies needed to be made for the company to survive. However, this defense mechanism of intellectualization would not necessarily prevent the person's passionate feeling that they have been betrayed after committing to work for the company for so long.

Introjection

Introjection occurs when a person takes stimuli in their environment and adopts them as their own ideas. This may involve internalizing criticism from another

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person and believing the other person's points to be valid. A person may introject religious ideas that they have heard at church, or political opinions that friends espouse. Behavior can also be introjected - the mannerisms of a father may be observed by his son and then replicated.

Isolation

The defense mechanism of isolation can lead a person to separate ideas or feelings from the rest of their thoughts. In distinguishing an emotion or impulse from others in this way, a person attempts to protect the ego from anxieties caused by a specific situation. For example, a person with a particularly stressful job may use isolation to separate their work life from their family life, avoiding the stress affecting their relationships.

Passive Aggression

Displays of aggression are considered unsociable and undesirable in many societies, so when aggressive or violent impulses are experienced, people tend to avoid them as much as possible. However, the remaining energy driving such aggression may prove to be more difficult contain, and may manifest in other forms, known as passive aggression. A passive aggressive person may be uncooperative in carrying out their duties or other tasks, may deliberately ignore someone when spoken to and might adopt a negative view of their situation, such as their job, and of those around them (e.g. colleagues).

Projection

When we experience feelings or desires that cause anxiety, or that we are unable to act on owing to the negative impact that they would have on us or those around us, we may defend the ego from resulting anxieties by projecting those ideas onto another person. A person who is afraid of crossing a bridge with a friend might accuse them of having a fear of heights, for example, and in doing so, avoids accepting their own weaknesses. In the case of Daniel Schreber, who accused his therapist of attempting to harm him, projection may have occurred when he attributed his own feelings and desires onto his therapist, Professor Flechsig.

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Rationalization

Rationalization occurs when a person attempts to explain or create excuses for an event or action in rational terms. In doing so, they are able to avoid accepting the true cause or reason resulting in the present situation.

Examples of rationalization include a shoplifter blaming the high price of sweets to justify their theft of a chocolate bar, when in reality they simply enjoyed the act of shoplifting. If a person fails an exam, they may excuse themselves from blame by rationalizing that they were too busy to revise during the revision period.

Reaction Formation

When the insatiable desires of the id conflict with the ego and super ego, a person may formulate a reaction to those impulses. Often, this action is the direct opposite to the demands of the original desire, and helps to counteract impulses which may be unacceptable to act out or fulfill.

For example, a man may experience feelings of love towards a married woman. The super ego recognizes that the fulfillment of his desires would contradict social norms regarding acceptable behavior, and so a reaction formation would occur - the man may experience feelings of dislike towards her - the opposite of the original feelings.

Repression

Repression is perhaps the most significant of defense mechanisms in that repressed feelings and impulses can lead to the use of many other mechanisms. According to Sigmund Freud's psychodynamic theory, the impulsive desires of the psyche's id are prevented by being fulfilled by the ego, which observes the Reality Principle - that our actions are restricted by our environment, including social etiquette. Moreover, the superego acts as our moral compass, inducing feelings of guilt at having experienced the irrational desires that the id creates.

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Tensions inevitably arise between the id, ego and superego and the guilt induced by the latter can lead to feelings of anxiety and shame. In order to live with such feelings, Freud believed that our minds repress the thoughts at the source of our anxieties: instead of contemplating them consciously, they are 'bottled up' in the unconscious mind, emerging in symbolic dreams and unexplained patterns of behavior.

Freud and his colleague, Josef Breuer, used techniques such as hypnosis, regression and free association to encourage clients to recall and accept repressed memories and impulses.

Regression

Regression occurs when a person reverts to the types of behavior that they exhibited at an earlier age. Stress of adult life and the associated anxiety may lead to a person seeking comfort in things which they associate with more secure, happier times. They might regress by eating meals that they were given as a child, watching old films or cartoons, acting without thought for the consequences of their actions.

Self Serving Bias

The self serving bias arises from our need to protect the ego from self criticism and to defend ourselves from the complaints of others. We show a self serving bias when we exaggerate the importance of our own achievements - after passing a test, we might over-estimate the significance of that particular exam, and take credit for completing it without acknowledging the role that tutors played in our success. Similarly, when faced with potential criticism we might deflect blame, apportioning responsibility for failure to anybody but ourselves. Whilst many of us show signs of this self serving bias, it can be an ineffective method of defense as it distorts our view of reality and our ability to rationalize and interpret events effectively.

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Social Comparison

When people feel that they have been victims of unjust actions, they may defend the ego by comparing themselves to those worse off. Similarly, we may see similarities between ourselves and others in a better position to improve our self image. These defense mechanisms are known as downward or upward social comparisons. For example, a man who has broken a leg and confined to a wheelchair may make a downwards social comparison with a person who has been diagnosed with a more serious condition to make their own situation seem less troublesome. Alternatively, a person might seek to identify with a person of a perceived higher social position, such as when they learn that a celebrity is eating at the same restaurant as they are.

Splitting

Splitting occurs when the ego attempts to reconcile multiple aspects or rationales, but resorts to understanding the world in “black and white” terms. A person who experiences splitting may take an “either-or” approach when making evaluations of the world around them, including objects, situations, and people. They tend to view ideas as either right or wrong, with no middle ground or compromise. Similarly, they may take a “good versus bad” approach in relationships, admiring one group of people whilst completely rejecting those who do not live up to their expectations.

Sublimation

Sublimation is considered to be a more adaptive defense mechanism in that it can transform negative anxiety into a more positive energy. Psychiatrist George Vaillant identified it as a mature defense mechanism, which we can use to adapt to arising anxieties.

When the energy of the libido surfaces in the form of impulses in the psyche's id, these desires are disabled by the ego, and the super ego may produce guilt at having experienced unacceptable feelings. Whilst these impulses may be repressed, the energy behind them remains. Instead of converting this energy into socially unacceptable behavior, a person may use sublimation to redirect this motivation into more acceptable, even productive, endeavors.

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Freud believed that artists' creative energies were often a refocusing of carnal impulses or other anxieties, through sublimation, onto their work. Athletes may also use sublimation to concentrate their energy on productive activities such as training.

Somatization

The somatization defense mechanism occurs when the internal conflicts between the drives of the id, ego and super ego take on physical characteristics.

Josef Breuer, a colleague of Sigmund Freud, observed this in the case of [Anna O](#), who sought help from Breuer for hysteria. Breuer discovered that Anna's anxieties had resulted from traumatic events that had been repressed, but later manifested themselves physically. For example, she experienced paralysis on one side, which Breuer linked to a dream in which she felt paralyzed whilst trying to fend off a snake from her bed-bound father.



[Anna O: Sigmund Freud's Case History](#)

Suppression

Unlike many other defense mechanisms, the suppression of thoughts and emotions is something which occurs consciously and we may be entirely aware that we are attempting to suppress anxieties. Suppression involves attempting not to think

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about a memory or feelings - a person may try to think of another subject when an uneasy thought enters their mind or they might preoccupy their minds by undertaking an unrelated task to distract themselves. A person may also suppress feelings of love or dislike towards a person, behaving normally towards them as though they felt dispassionate towards them.

Undoing

When we act on an idea or impulse that we later regret, we may adopt a defense mechanism of attempting to “undo” that action in order to protect the ego from feelings of guilt or shame. A person may intentionally push past someone in a shop, but realizing that the person was frail, feel guilty with regards to their behavior. They may try to undo their action by apologizing or offering to help the person.

Wishful Thinking

We all engage in wishful thinking to some extent in an attempt to avoid facing undesirable realities. A football fan might deceive themselves that the ailing team that they support will miraculously turn themselves around and win all of the future matches of the season. Such wishful thinking enables the person to avoid disappointment and sadness for as long as possible.

[Defense Mechanisms Quiz](#)