

# Defense Mechanisms

by [Saul McLeod](#) published 2009

[Sigmund Freud](#) (1854, 1896) noted a number of ego defenses which he refers to throughout his written works. His daughter Anna (1917) developed these ideas and elaborated on them, adding five of her own. Many [psychoanalysts](#) have also added further types of ego defenses.

Freud once said, "Life is not easy!" The ego -- the "I" -- sits at the center of some pretty powerful forces: reality; society, as represented by the superego; biology, as represented by the Id.

When these make conflicting demands upon the poor ego, it is understandable if you feel threatened, feel overwhelmed, feel as if it were about to collapse under the weight of it all. This feeling is called anxiety, and it serves as a signal to the ego that its survival, and with it the survival of the whole organism, is in jeopardy.

In order to deal with conflict and problems in life, Freud stated that the ego employs a range of defense mechanisms. Defense mechanisms operate at an unconscious level and help ward off unpleasant feelings (i.e. anxiety) or make good things feel better for the individual.

[The ego, driven by the id, confined by the superego](#), repulsed by reality, struggles to master its economic task of bringing about harmony among the forces and influences working in and upon it; and we can understand how it is that so often we cannot suppress a cry 'life is not easy'!

If the ego is obliged to admit its weakness, it breaks out in anxiety regarding the outside world, moral anxiety regarding the superego, and neurotic anxiety regarding the strength of the passions in the id. (Freud 1933, p. 78).

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## **Why do we need Ego defenses?**

Memories banished to the [unconscious](#), or unacceptable drives or urges do not disappear. They continue to exert a powerful influence on behavior. The forces, which try to keep painful or socially undesirable thoughts and memories out of the conscious mind, are termed defense mechanisms.

There is a perpetual battle between the wish (repressed into the id) and the defense mechanisms.

We use defense mechanisms to protect ourselves from feelings of anxiety or guilt, which arise because we feel threatened, or because our id or superego becomes too demanding. They are not under our conscious control, and are non-voluntaristic. With the ego, our unconscious will use one or more to protect us when we come up against a stressful situation in life. Ego-defense mechanisms are natural and normal. When they get out of proportion, neuroses develop, such as anxiety states, phobias, obsessions, or hysteria.

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## Examples of Defenses Mechanisms

There are a large number of defense mechanisms; the main ones are summarized below.

Mechanism	Description	Example
<b>Repression</b>	Repression is an unconscious mechanism employed by the ego to keep disturbing or threatening thoughts from becoming conscious.	During the Oedipus complex aggressive thoughts about the same sex parents are repressed
<b>Denial</b>	Denial involves blocking external events from awareness. If some situation is just too much to handle, the person just refuses to experience it.	For example, smokers may refuse to admit to themselves that smoking is bad for their health.
<b>Projection</b>	This involves individuals attributing their own unacceptable thoughts, feeling and motives to another person.	You might hate someone, but your superego tells you that such hatred is unacceptable. You can 'solve' the problem by believing that they hate you.
<b>Displacement</b>	Satisfying an impulse (e.g. aggression) with a substitute object.	Someone who is frustrated by his or her boss at work may go home and kick the dog,
<b>Regression</b>	This is a movement back in psychological time when one is faced with stress.	A child may begin to suck their thumb again or wet the bed when they need to spend some time in the hospital.
<b>Sublimation</b>	Satisfying an impulse (e.g. aggression) with a substitute object. In a socially acceptable way.	Sport is an example of putting our emotions (e.g. aggression) into something constructive.

### Repression

This was the first defense mechanism that Freud discovered, and arguably the most important. Repression is an unconscious mechanism employed by the ego to keep disturbing or threatening thoughts from becoming conscious. Thoughts that are often repressed are those that would result in feelings of guilt from the superego. For example, in the Oedipus complex, aggressive thoughts about the same sex parents are repressed.

This is not a very successful defense in the long term since it involves forcing disturbing wishes, ideas or memories into the unconscious, where, although hidden, they will create anxiety.

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## **Projection**

This involves individuals attributing their own thoughts, feeling and motives to another person. Thoughts most commonly projected onto another are the ones that would cause guilt such as aggressive and sexual fantasies or thoughts. For instance, you might hate someone, but your superego tells you that such hatred is unacceptable. You can 'solve' the problem by believing that they hate you.

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## **Displacement**

Displacement is the redirection of an impulse (usually aggression) onto a powerless substitute target. The target can be a person or an object that can serve as a symbolic substitute. Someone who feels uncomfortable with their sexual desire for a real person may substitute a fetish. Someone who is frustrated by his or her superiors may go home and kick the dog, beat up a family member, or engage in cross-burnings.

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## **Sublimation**

This is similar to displacement, but takes place when we manage to displace our emotions into a constructive rather than destructive activity. This might for example be artistic. Many great artists and musicians have had unhappy lives and have used the medium of art or music to express themselves. Sport is another example of putting our emotions (e.g. aggression) into something constructive.

For example, fixation at the oral stage of development may later lead to seeking oral pleasure as an adult through sucking one's thumb, pen or cigarette. Also, fixation during the anal stage may cause a person to sublimate their desire to handle faeces with an enjoyment of pottery.

Sublimation for Freud was the cornerstone of civilized life, arts and science are all sublimated sexuality. (NB. this is a value laden concept, based on the aspirations of a European society at the end of the 1800 century).

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## **Denial**

Denial involves blocking external events from awareness. If some situation is just too much to handle, the person just refuses to experience it. As you might imagine, this is a primitive and dangerous defense - no one disregards reality and gets away with it for long! It can operate by itself or, more commonly, in combination with other, more subtle mechanisms that support it. For example, smokers may refuse to admit to themselves that smoking is bad for their health.

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## **Regression**

This is a movement back in psychological time when one is faced with stress. When we are troubled or frightened, our behaviors often become more childish or primitive. A child may begin to suck their thumb again or wet the bed when they need to spend some time in the hospital. Teenagers may giggle uncontrollably when introduced into a social situation involving the opposite sex.

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## **Rationalization**

Rationalization is the cognitive distortion of "the facts" to make an event or an impulse less threatening. We do it often enough on a fairly conscious level when we provide ourselves with excuses. But for many people, with sensitive egos, making excuses comes so easy that they never are truly aware of it. In other words, many of us are quite prepared to believe our lies.

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## **Identification with the Aggressor**

A focus on negative or feared traits. I.e. if you are afraid of someone, you can practically conquer that fear by becoming more like them.

An extreme example of this is the Stockholm Syndrome, where hostages identify with the terrorists. E.g. Patty Hearst and the Symbionese Liberation Army. Patty was abused and raped by her captors, yet she joined their movement and even took part in one of their bank robberies. At her trial she was acquitted because she was a victim suffering from Stockholm Syndrome.

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## **Reaction Formation**

This is where a person goes beyond denial and behaves in the opposite way to which he or she thinks or feels. By using the reaction formation the id is satisfied while keeping the ego in ignorance of the true motives. Conscious feelings are the opposite of the unconscious. Love - hate. Shame - disgust and moralizing are reaction formation against sexuality.

Usually a reaction formation is marked by showiness and compulsiveness. For example, Freud claimed that men who are prejudice against homosexuals are making a defense against their own homosexual feelings by adopting a harsh anti-homosexual attitude which helps convince them of their heterosexuality. Other examples include:

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- \* The dutiful daughter who loves her mother is reacting to her Oedipus hatred of her mother.
- \* Anal fixation usually leads to meanness, but occasionally a person will react against this (unconsciously) leading to over-generosity.

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## References

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