

Freud attributed most human behavior to the life or sexual instinct. However, he used this description in a very broad sense. Sexually motivated behaviors include not only those with obvious erotic content, but also nearly any action aimed at receiving pleasure. Late in his career, Freud added the death instinct—the desire to die and return to the earth. However, this unconscious motive is rarely expressed in the form of obvious self-destruction. Most often, the death instinct is turned outward and expressed as aggression against others. The wish to die remains unconscious.

Freud was greatly influenced by the scientific thought of his day. Among the ideas he adapted from other sciences was the notion of a limited amount of energy. Energy within a physical system does not disappear but exists in finite amounts. Similarly, Freud argued that we each have a finite amount of psychic energy that more or less powers the psychological functions. This means that energy spent on one part of psychological functioning is not available for other uses. Thus, if the ego expends large amounts of energy to control the id, it has little energy left to carry out the rest of its functions efficiently. One goal of Freudian psychotherapy is to help troubled clients release unconscious impulses being held in check, thereby freeing up energy for daily functioning.

Defense Mechanisms

“Freud recognized that most of what is real within ourselves is not conscious, and that most of what is conscious is not real.”

Erich Fromm

Freud’s description of the material in our unconscious minds can be a bit unsettling. Classic psychoanalytic cases involve such unconscious themes as hatred for one’s parents, aggression toward one’s spouse, incestuous thoughts, memories of traumatic childhood experiences, and similar notions too threatening to bring into awareness. The ego reduces or avoids anxiety by keeping this material out of consciousness. Occasionally, people experience what Freud called *neurotic anxiety*. These are vague feelings of anxiety sparked by the sensation that unacceptable unconscious thoughts are about to burst through the awareness barrier and express themselves in consciousness.

Fortunately, the ego has many techniques at its disposal to deal with unwanted thoughts and desires. These are known collectively as **defense mechanisms**. Some of the principal defense mechanisms are reviewed in the following sections. Freud touched on each of these concepts at various places in his works. However, descriptions of many of the defense mechanisms were developed more completely by some of his followers, in particular, by Anna Freud, Sigmund’s daughter who also became a psychoanalyst.

Repression

Freud called repression “the cornerstone on which the whole structure of psychoanalysis rests” (1914/1963, p. 116). It is clearly the most important of the defense mechanisms. *Repression* is an active effort by the ego to push threatening material out of consciousness or to keep that material from ever reaching consciousness. For example, one night a boy sees his father physically assault his mother. When later asked about the experience, the boy insists he has never seen anything of the sort. He may not be lying. Instead, he may have found the scene too horrifying to accept and therefore simply repressed it out of consciousness. Freud maintained that each of us

uses repression, for we all have material in our unconscious mind we would rather not bring into awareness. As useful as this seems, it is not without cost. Because repression is a constant, active process, it requires that the ego constantly expend energy. When required to repress a large number of unacceptable thoughts, our egos are left with little psychic energy. And without a strong ego, the battle for a stable personality can be lost.

Sublimation

Unlike repression, which drains our ability to function, the more we use *sublimation*, the more productive we become. Thus, psychoanalysts often refer to sublimation as the only truly successful defense mechanism. When using sublimation, the ego channels threatening unconscious impulses into socially acceptable actions. For example, we can express aggressive id impulses by playing an aggressive style of hockey or football. In this case, sublimation is a win-win option. The id is allowed to express its aggressive impulses, the ego doesn't have to tie up energy holding back those impulses, and society admires the athlete for his or her aggressive play.



Photo courtesy of Marlene Somsak

According to Freud, participation in aggressive sports allows the expression of unconscious aggressive impulses in a socially acceptable manner. Football players might be engaging in sublimation with each tackle.

Displacement

Like sublimation, *displacement* involves channeling our impulses to nonthreatening objects. Unlike sublimation, these displaced impulses don't lead to social rewards. For example, as the result of mistreatment by her spouse, a woman might carry around a great deal of unconscious anger. If expressing that anger toward her spouse might be problematic or dangerous, she might instead direct her emotions toward her coworkers or children. Freud maintained that many of our seemingly irrational fears are in fact symbolic displacements. He once speculated that a fear of horses expressed by a client's son was really a displaced fear of the father, who was symbolized in the child's mind as the powerful horse.

Denial

When we use *denial*, we refuse to accept that certain facts exist. This is more than saying we do not remember, as in repression. Rather, we insist that something is not true despite all evidence to the contrary. A widower who loved his wife deeply may act as if she were still alive long after her death. He may set a place for her at the table or tell friends that she is just away visiting relatives. To the widower, this charade is more acceptable than admitting consciously that his wife has died. Obviously, denial is an extreme form of defense. The more we use it, the less in touch with reality we are and the more difficulty we have functioning. Nonetheless, in some cases, the ego will resort to denial rather than allow certain thoughts to reach consciousness.

Reaction Formation

When using *reaction formation*, we hide from threatening unconscious ideas or urges by acting in a manner opposite to our unconscious desires. Thus, a young woman who constantly tells people how much she loves her mother could be masking strong unconscious hatred for her mother. People who militantly get involved with antipornography crusades may hold a strong unconscious interest in pornography. It is as if the thought is so unacceptable that the ego must prove how incorrect the notion is. How could a woman who professes so much love for her mother really hate her deep inside?

Intellectualization

Another way the ego handles threatening material is to remove the emotional content from the thought before allowing it into awareness. Using *intellectualization*—that is, by considering something in a strictly intellectual, unemotional manner—we can bring previously difficult thoughts into consciousness without anxiety. Under the guise of pondering the importance of wearing seat belts, a woman might imagine her husband in a gruesome automobile accident. A Freudian therapist might guess that the woman holds some unconscious hostility toward her spouse.

Projection

Sometimes we attribute an unconscious impulse to other people instead of to ourselves. This defense mechanism is called *projection*. By projecting the impulse onto another person, we free ourselves from the perception that we are the one who

actually holds this thought. The woman who thinks everyone in her neighborhood is committing adultery may be harboring sexual desires for the married man living next door. The man who declares that the world is full of distrustful and cheating people may unconsciously recognize that he is distrustful and a cheater.

Psychosexual Stages of Development

Among the most controversial aspects of Freud's theory is his description of personality development. Freud argued that our adult personalities are heavily influenced by what happens to us during the first 5 or 6 years of life. Each child is said to progress through a series of developmental stages during these years. Because the chief characteristic of each stage is the primary erogenous zone, and because each stage has a specific influence on the adult personality, they are referred to as the **psychosexual stages of development**.

Freud maintained that children face specific challenges as they pass through each of the psychosexual stages and that small amounts of psychic energy are used up resolving these challenges. If all goes as it should, most of us still have an adequate amount of psychic energy left to operate a healthy personality by the time we become adults. But sometimes things go awry. Some children have a difficult time moving through a particular stage (or, for a few, find the stage excessively satisfying and wish to stay there). The result is *fixation*, the tying up of psychic energy. Not only does this leave less energy available for normal adult functioning, but also the adult is said to express behaviors characteristic of the stage at which the energy is fixated.

The first stage in Freud's model is the *oral stage*. During this period, which spans approximately the first 18 months of life, the mouth, lips, and tongue are the primary erogenous zones, that is, the source of



Jerry Burger/Santa Clara University

According to Freud, adult oral personalities develop when traumatic childhood experiences cause the fixation of an excessive amount of psychic energy at the oral stage of development. Smoking, drinking, and excessive eating are characteristic of an oral personality.