

Defense Mechanisms

The major functions of anxiety are to help the person avoid conscious recognition of unacceptable instinctual impulses and to allow impulse gratification in appropriate ways at appropriate times. *Ego defense mechanisms* help to carry out these as well as to protect the person from overwhelming anxiety.

All defense mechanisms share two common characteristics: (1) they operate at an unconscious level and are therefore self-deceptive and (2) they distort, deny, or falsify perception of reality, so as to make anxiety less threatening to the individual. It should also be noted that people rarely rely upon a single defense mechanism to defend themselves against anxiety; typically, people employ several defense mechanisms to resolve conflict and thereby relieve anxiety.

Some principal defensive strategies are reviewed below.

1) Repression Freud regarded *repression* as the primary ego defense, not only because it serves as a basis for more elaborate mechanisms of defense but also because it involves the most direct approach in avoiding anxiety. Sometimes described as “motivated forgetting,” repression is the process of excluding distressing thoughts and feelings from consciousness. As a result of repression, individuals are neither aware of their own anxiety-provoking conflicts nor do they remember emotionally traumatic past events. For example, a person who has suffered a terrifying personal failure through repression may become unable to recount the experience.

The relief from anxiety provided by repression is not without cost. Freud theorized that repressed thoughts and impulses remain active in the unconscious and require continuous expenditure of psychic energy to prevent their emergence into conscious awareness. However, the constant striving of repressed material for overt expression may find momentary gratification through dreams, jokes, slips of the tongue. It is the most basic and widely used defense mechanism.

2) Projection as a defense mechanism, projection ranks next to repression in terms of theoretical importance. It involves the process by which the person attributes unacceptable internal thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to other people or to the environment. Projection thus enables a person to blame someone or something else for his or her own shortcomings. For example, a young woman who is unaware of her lustful strivings but sees everyone she dates as attempting to seduce her is also projecting. Finally, there is the classic example of the student who inadequately prepares for an exam and then attributes his or her failing grades to an unfair test, the cheating of others, or a professor who neglected to explain the points at issue. Projection has also been used as an explanation of social prejudice and scapegoating, since ethnic and racial stereotypes provide a convenient target for the attribution of one’s own negative personal characteristics.

3) Displacement In the defense mechanism called displacement, the expression of an instinctual impulse is redirected from a more threatening person or object to a less threatening one. A common example is the child who is scolded by her parents and proceeds to hit her little sister, kick her dog, or smash her toys. *Displacement* is also observed in an adult's hypersensitivity to minor annoyance. Consider, for instance, the wife who is criticized by an overdemanding employer and reacts with violent rage to the slightest provocation by her husband or children. She fails to recognize that, as objects of her hostility, they are simply substitute targets for the boss. In each of these instances, the original object of the impulse has been replaced by one that is far less threatening to the individual. A less common form of displacement is turning against the self, whereby the hostile impulses toward others are redirected to oneself, producing feelings of depression and self-depression.

4) Rationalization Another important way in which the ego attempts to cope with frustration and anxiety is to distort reality and thus protect self-esteem. *Rationalization* refers to "Fallacious reasoning" in that it misrepresents irrational behavior in order to make it appear rational and thus justifiable to oneself and others. Silly mistakes, poor judgments, and failures can be explained away by the people through the magic of rationalization. One frequently employed type, known as "sour grapes," is based on one of Aesop's fables about a fox who could not reach the grapes he desired and thus concluded that they were sour anyway. People rationalize in the same way, as in the example of a man who is snubbed when asking for a date and consoles himself by concluding that the woman really was not all that attractive anyway. Similarly, a student who is denied admission to dental school may convince herself that she really did not want to be a dentist anyway.

5) Reaction Formation Sometimes the ego can guard against a forbidden impulse by expressing its opposite in both thought and behavior. This is known as *reaction formation*. As a defensive process it operates in two steps: first, the unacceptable impulse is repressed; next, the exact opposite is expressed on a conscious level. Reaction formation is especially evident in socially acceptable behavior that is compulsive, exaggerated, and rigid. For instance, a woman threatened by her own conscious sexual desires may become a staunch crusader to ban pornographic movies in her community. She may also actively picket particular movie houses or write to production companies about the degrading state of films today. Freud theorized that many males who ridicule homosexuals are defending against their own latent homosexual feelings.

6) Regression Still another prominent defense mechanism that people use to defend themselves against anxiety is *regression*. This involves reverting to immature and child like patterns of behavior. It is a way of alleviating anxiety by retreating to an earlier period of life that was more secure and pleasant. Readily observed forms of regression displayed by adults include losing their temper, pouting, giving people "the silent treatment," using baby talk, destroying property, rebelling against authority, and driving fast and recklessly.

7) Sublimation According to Freud, *sublimation* is an ego defense mechanism that enables the person adaptively to divert impulses so that they may be expressed via socially approved thoughts or actions. Sublimation is considered the only healthy, constructive strategy against objectionable impulses because it allows the ego to change the aim or object (or both) of impulse without inhibiting their expression. The instinctual energy is diverted into other channels of expression ones that society considers acceptable. For example, a woman with strong, unconscious, aggressive and sadistic drives may become a surgeon or first-rate novelist. By doing so, she may demonstrate her superiority over others, but in a way that contributes to society.

8) Denial When someone refuses to acknowledge that an unpleasant event has occurred, he or she is engaging in denial. Consider the father who refuses to believe that his daughter has been brutally raped and murdered and acts as though she is still alive. As another illustration, consider the child who denies the death of a pet and persists in believing that it is still alive. Denial of reality is also evident when people say, or insist, “*it can’t happen to me,*” in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary (such as when a physician informs a patient of a terminal disease diagnosis). According to Freud, denial is most typical of young children or immature older individuals (though persons usually function in a mature manner may occasionally use denial when faced with extremely traumatic situations).

9) Intellectualization works to reduce anxiety by thinking about events in a cold, clinical way. This defense mechanism allows us to avoid thinking about the stressful, emotional aspect of the situation and instead focus only on the intellectual component. For example, a person who has just been diagnosed with a terminal illness might focus on learning everything about the disease in order to avoid distress and remain distant from the reality of the situation.

10) Fantasy everyone fantasizes now and then. It helps to fend off the dreariness and drabness of everyday life and to plan for an uncertain future. But when fantasy becomes a central feature of grappling with conflict, it is pathological. Seeking gratification – the satisfaction of drives or desires – mainly by fantasizing is an unhealthy defense. Some people often indulge in grandiose fantasies which are incommensurate with their accomplishment and abilities. Such fantasy life retards personal growth and development because it substitutes for true coping.

11) Fixation refers to a persistent focus of the id’s pleasure-seeking energies on an earlier stage of psychosexual development. A *fixation* occurs when an issue or conflict in a psychosexual stage remains unresolved, leaving the individual focused on this stage and unable to move onto the next. Individuals with an oral fixation may have problems with drinking, smoking, eating or nail biting.

12) Undoing is the attempt to take back an unconscious behavior or thought that is unacceptable or hurtful. For instance, after realizing you just insulted your significant other unintentionally, you might spend the next hour praising their beauty, charm and intellect. By “*undoing*” the previous action, the person is attempting to counteract the damage done by the original comment, hoping the two will balance one another out. For example a husband who showers his wife with roses and chocolates on her birthday may be unconsciously seeking to undo a year of neglect.

13) Identification involves identifying with someone else, taking on their personality characteristics, in order to solve some emotional difficulty and avoid anxiety. This is a fairly common method of attempting to forget about ones troubles, happens often in insecure people. A person joining a sports team, fraternity, social clique or even subcultures are all examples of this. It was originally Freud’s solution to Oedipus and Electra complex: identify with the same sex parent and try to become like him or her.