

Defence Mechanism

Authored by
mohammad looti

November 19, 2022

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2022). *Defence Mechanism*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=38495>

In Freudian psychoanalytic theory, defense mechanisms are unconscious psychological strategies brought into play by various entities to cope with reality and to maintain self-image. Healthy persons normally use different defenses throughout life. An ego defense mechanism becomes pathological only when its persistent use leads to maladaptive behavior such that the physical and/or mental health of the individual is adversely affected. The purpose of ego defense mechanisms is to protect the mind/self/ego from anxiety, social sanctions or to provide a refuge from a situation with which one cannot currently cope.

They are more accurately referred to as ego defense mechanisms, and can thus be categorized as occurring when the id impulses are in conflict with each other, when the id impulses conflict with super-ego values and beliefs, and when an external threat is posed to the ego.

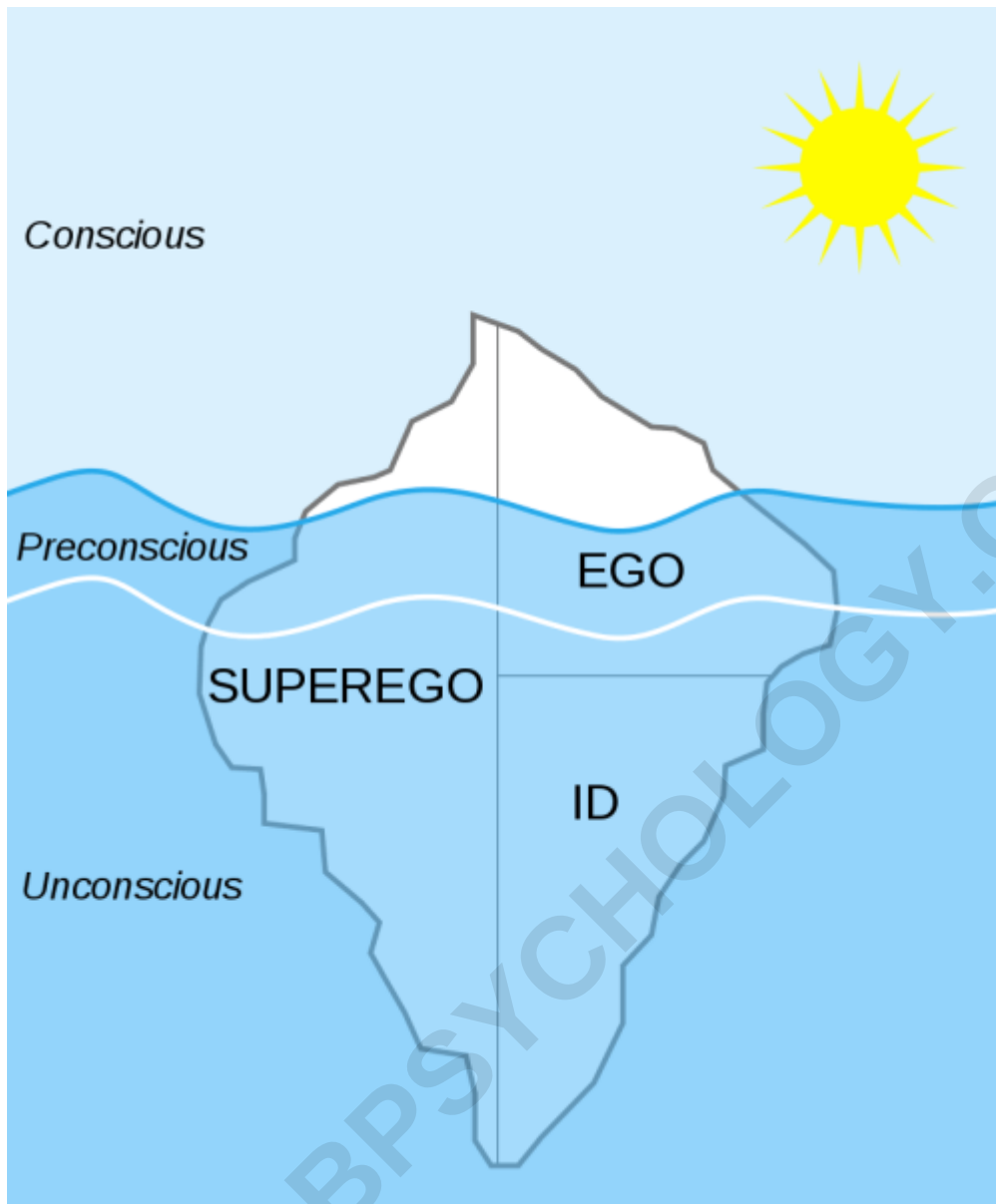
The term "defense mechanism" is often thought to refer to a definitive singular term for personality traits which arise due to loss or traumatic experiences, but more accurately refers to several types of reactions which were identified during and after daughter Anna Freud's time.

Defense mechanisms are sometimes confused with coping strategies.

Structural model: The id, ego, and superego

The concept of id impulses comes from Sigmund Freud's structural model. According to this theory, id impulses are based on the pleasure principle: instant gratification of one's own desires and needs. Sigmund Freud believed that the id represents biological instinctual impulses in ourselves, such as aggression (Thanatos or the Death instinct) and sexuality (Eros or the Life instinct). For example, when the id impulses (e.g. desire to have sexual relations with a stranger) conflict with the superego (e.g. belief in societal conventions of not having sex with unknown persons), unsatisfied feelings of anxiousness or feelings of anxiety come to the surface. To reduce these negative feelings, the ego might use defense mechanisms (conscious or unconscious blockage of the id impulses).

Freud also believed that conflicts between these two structures resulted in conflicts associated with psychosexual stages.



The iceberg metaphor is often used to explain the psyche's parts in relation to one another.

Definitions of individual psyche structures

Freud proposed three structures of the psyche or personality:

Id: a selfish, primitive, childish, pleasure-oriented part of the personality with no ability to delay gratification.

Superego: internalized societal and parental standards of "good" and "bad", "right" and "wrong" behavior.

Ego: the moderator between the id and superego which seeks compromises to pacify both. It can be viewed as our "sense of time and place",

Primary and secondary processes

In the ego, there are two ongoing processes. First there is the unconscious primary process, where the thoughts are not organized in a coherent way, the feelings can shift, contradictions are not in conflict or are just not perceived that way, and condensations arise. There is no logic and no time line. Lust is important for this process. By contrast, there is the conscious secondary process, where strong boundaries are set and thoughts must be organized in a coherent way. Most conscious thoughts originate here.

The reality principle

Id impulses are not appropriate in civilized society, so society presses us to modify the pleasure principle in favor of the reality principle; that is, the requirements of the external world.

Formation of the superego

The superego forms as the child grows and learns parental and social standards. The superego consists of two structures: the conscience, which stores information about what is "bad" and what has been punished and the ego ideal, which stores information about what is "good" and what one "should" do or be.

The ego's use of defense mechanisms

When anxiety becomes too overwhelming, it is then the place of the ego to employ defense mechanisms to protect the individual. Feelings of guilt, embarrassment and shame often accompany the feeling of anxiety. In the first definitive book on defense mechanisms, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* (1936), Anna Freud introduced the concept of signal anxiety; she stated that it was "not directly a conflicted instinctual tension but a signal occurring in the ego of an anticipated instinctual tension". The signaling function of anxiety is thus seen as a crucial one and biologically adapted to warn the organism of danger or a threat to its equilibrium. The anxiety is felt as an increase in bodily or mental tension and the signal that the organism receives in this way allows it the possibility of taking defensive action towards the perceived danger. Defense mechanisms work by distorting the id impulses into acceptable forms, or by unconscious or conscious blockage of these impulses.

Theories and classifications

The list of defense mechanisms is huge and there is no theoretical consensus on the number of defense mechanisms. Classifying defense mechanisms according to some of their properties (i.e.

underlying mechanisms, similarities or connections with personality) has been attempted. Different theorists have different categorizations and conceptualizations of defense mechanisms. Large reviews of theories of defense mechanisms are available from Paulhus, Fridhandler and Hayes (1997) and Cramer (1991). The Journal of Personality published a special issue on defense mechanisms (1998).

Otto F. Kernberg (1967) developed a theory of borderline personality organization of which one consequence may be borderline personality disorder. His theory is based on ego psychological object relations theory. Borderline personality organization develops when the child cannot integrate positive and negative mental objects together. Kernberg views the use of primitive defense mechanisms as central to this personality organization. Primitive psychological defenses are projection, denial, dissociation or splitting and they are called borderline defense mechanisms. Also, devaluation and projective identification are seen as borderline defenses.

In George Eman Vaillant's (1977) categorization, defenses form a continuum related to their psychoanalytical developmental level. Vaillant's levels are:

Level I - pathological defenses (i.e. psychotic denial, delusional projection)

Level II - immature defenses (i.e. fantasy, projection, passive aggression, acting out)

Level III - neurotic defenses (i.e. intellectualization, reaction formation, dissociation, displacement, repression)

Level IV - mature defenses (i.e. humor, sublimation, suppression, altruism, anticipation)

Robert Plutchik's (1979) theory views defenses as derivatives of basic emotions. Defense mechanisms in his theory are (in order of placement in circumplex model): reaction formation, denial, repression, regression, compensation, projection, displacement, intellectualization.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) published by the American Psychiatric Association (1994) includes a tentative diagnostic axis for defense mechanisms. This classification is largely based on Vaillant's hierarchical view of defenses, but has some modifications. Examples include: denial, fantasy, rationalization, regression, isolation, projection, and displacement.

Vaillant's categorization of defense mechanisms

Level 1 - Pathological

The mechanisms on this level, when predominating, almost always are severely pathological. These four defenses, in conjunction, permit one to effectively rearrange external experiences to eliminate the need to cope with reality. The pathological users of these mechanisms frequently appear irrational or insane to others. These are the "psychotic" defenses, common in overt

psychosis. However, they are found in dreams and throughout childhood as well.

They include:

Delusional Projection: Grossly frank delusions about external reality, usually of a persecutory nature.

Denial: Refusal to accept external reality because it is too threatening; arguing against an anxiety-provoking stimulus by stating it doesn't exist; resolution of emotional conflict and reduction of anxiety by refusing to perceive or consciously acknowledge the more unpleasant aspects of external reality.

Distortion: A gross reshaping of external reality to meet internal needs.

Splitting: A primitive defense. Negative and positive impulses are split off and unintegrated. Fundamental example: An individual views other people as either innately good or innately evil, rather than a whole continuous being.

Extreme projection: The blatant denial of a moral or psychological deficiency, which is perceived as a deficiency in another individual or group.

Level 2 - Immature

These mechanisms are often present in adults and more commonly present in adolescents. These mechanisms lessen distress and anxiety provoked by threatening people or by uncomfortable reality. People who excessively use such defenses are seen as socially undesirable in that they are immature, difficult to deal with and seriously out of touch with reality. These are the so-called "immature" defenses and overuse almost always leads to serious problems in a person's ability to cope effectively. These defenses are often seen in severe depression and personality disorders. In adolescence, the occurrence of all of these defenses is normal.

They include:

Acting out: Direct expression of an unconscious wish or impulse in action, without conscious awareness of the emotion that drives that expressive behavior.

Fantasy: Tendency to retreat into fantasy in order to resolve inner and outer conflicts.

Idealization: Unconsciously choosing to perceive another individual as having more positive qualities than he or she may actually have.

Passive aggression: Aggression towards others expressed indirectly or passively such as using procrastination.

Projection: Projection is a primitive form of paranoia. Projection also reduces anxiety by allowing the expression of the undesirable impulses or desires without becoming consciously aware of them; attributing one's own unacknowledged unacceptable/unwanted thoughts and emotions to another; includes severe prejudice, severe jealousy, hypervigilance to external danger, and "injustice collecting". It is shifting one's unacceptable thoughts, feelings and impulses within

oneself onto someone else, such that those same thoughts, feelings, beliefs and motivations are perceived as being possessed by the other.

Projective identification: The object of projection invokes in that person precisely the thoughts, feelings or behaviors projected.

Somatization: The transformation of negative feelings towards others into negative feelings toward self, pain, illness, and anxiety.

Level 3 - Neurotic

These mechanisms are considered neurotic, but fairly common in adults. Such defenses have short-term advantages in coping, but can often cause long-term problems in relationships, work and in enjoying life when used as one's primary style of coping with the world.

They include:

Displacement: Defense mechanism that shifts sexual or aggressive impulses to a more acceptable or less threatening target; redirecting emotion to a safer outlet; separation of emotion from its real object and redirection of the intense emotion toward someone or something that is less offensive or threatening in order to avoid dealing directly with what is frightening or threatening. For example, a mother may yell at her child because she is angry with her husband.

Dissociation: Temporary drastic modification of one's personal identity or character to avoid emotional distress; separation or postponement of a feeling that normally would accompany a situation or thought.

Hypochondriasis: An excessive preoccupation or worry about having a serious illness.

Intellectualization: A form of isolation; concentrating on the intellectual components of a situation so as to distance oneself from the associated anxiety-provoking emotions; separation of emotion from ideas; thinking about wishes in formal, affectively bland terms and not acting on them; avoiding unacceptable emotions by focusing on the intellectual aspects (e.g. isolation, rationalization, ritual, undoing, compensation, magical thinking).

Isolation: Separation of feelings from ideas and events, for example, describing a murder with graphic details with no emotional response.

Rationalization (making excuses): Where a person convinces him or herself that no wrong was done and that all is or was all right through faulty and false reasoning. An indicator of this defense mechanism can be seen socially as the formulation of convenient excuses - making excuses.

Reaction formation: Converting unconscious wishes or impulses that are perceived to be dangerous into their opposites; behavior that is completely the opposite of what one really wants or feels; taking the opposite belief because the true belief causes anxiety. This defense can work effectively for coping in the short term, but will eventually break down.

Regression: Temporary reversion of the ego to an earlier stage of development rather than handling unacceptable impulses in a more adult way.

Repression: The process of attempting to repel desires towards pleasurable instincts, caused by a threat of suffering if the desire is satisfied; the desire is moved to the unconscious in the attempt to prevent it from entering consciousness; seemingly unexplainable naivety, memory lapse or lack of awareness of one's own situation and condition; the emotion is conscious, but the idea behind it is absent.

Undoing: A person tries to 'undo' an unhealthy, destructive or otherwise threatening thought by engaging in contrary behavior.

Withdrawal: Withdrawal is a more severe form of defense. It entails removing oneself from events, stimuli, interactions, etc... that could remind one of painful thoughts and feelings.

Level 4 - Mature

These are commonly found among emotionally healthy adults and are considered mature, even though many have their origins in an immature stage of development. They have been adapted through the years in order to optimize success in life and relationships. The use of these defenses enhances pleasure and feelings of control. These defenses help us integrate conflicting emotions and thoughts, while still remaining effective. Those who use these mechanisms are usually considered virtuous.

They include:

Altruism: Constructive service to others that brings pleasure and personal satisfaction.

Anticipation: Realistic planning for future discomfort.

Humor: Overt expression of ideas and feelings (especially those that are unpleasant to focus on or too terrible to talk about) that gives pleasure to others. The thoughts retain a portion of their innate distress, but they are "skirted round" by witticism.

Identification: The unconscious modeling of one's self upon another person's character and behavior.

Introjection: Identifying with some idea or object so deeply that it becomes a part of that person.

Sublimation: Transformation of negative emotions or instincts into positive actions, behavior, or emotion.

Thought suppression: The conscious process of pushing thoughts into the preconscious; the conscious decision to delay paying attention to an emotion or need in order to cope with the present reality; making it possible to later access uncomfortable or distressing emotions while accepting them.