

## Defense Mechanisms

To live in social groups, we cannot act out our sexual and aggressive impulses willy-nilly. We must control them. When the ego fears losing control of the inner war between the demands of the id and the superego, the result is a dark cloud of unfocused anxiety. Anxiety, said Freud, is the price we pay for civilization. Anxiety is hard to cope with, as when we feel unsettled but are unsure why. Freud proposed that the ego protects itself against anxiety with defense mechanisms, which reduce or redirect anxiety in various ways, all of them distorting reality. Some examples:

Repression banishes anxiety-arousing thoughts and feelings from consciousness. According to Freud, repression underlies the other defense mechanisms, all of which disguise threatening impulses and keep them from reaching consciousness. Freud believed that repression explains why we do not remember our childhood lust for our parent of the other sex. However, he also believed that repression is often incomplete, with the repressed urges seeping out in dream symbols and slips of the tongue.

We also cope with anxiety through regression—retreating to an earlier, more infantile stage of development. Thus, when facing the anxious first days of school, a child may regress to the oral comfort of thumb-sucking. Juvenile monkeys, when anxious, retreat to infantile clinging to their mothers or to one another (Suomi, 1987). Even homesick new college students may long for the security and comfort of home.

In reaction formation the ego unconsciously makes unacceptable impulses look like their opposites. En route to consciousness, the unacceptable proposition “I hate him” becomes “I love him.” Timidity becomes daring. Feelings of inadequacy become bravado.

“The lady doth protest too much, methinks.”

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE  
HAMLET  
1600

Projection disguises threatening impulses by attributing them to others. Thus, “He doesn’t trust me” may be a projection of the actual feeling “I don’t trust him” or “I don’t trust myself.” An El Salvadoran saying captures the idea: “The thief thinks everyone else is a thief.”

The familiar mechanism of rationalization lets us unconsciously generate self-justifying explanations so we can hide from ourselves the real reasons for our actions. Thus, habitual drinkers may say they drink with their friends “just to be sociable.” Students who fail to study may rationalize, “All work and no play makes Jack [or Jill] a dull person.”

Displacement diverts one’s sexual or aggressive impulses toward an object more psychologically acceptable than the one that aroused them. Children who can’t express anger against their parents may displace their anger onto the family pet. Students upset over an exam may snap at a roommate.

Note again that all these defense mechanisms function indirectly and unconsciously, reducing anxiety by disguising our threatening impulses. We would never say, “I’m feeling anxious; I’d better project my sexual or hostile feelings onto someone else.” Defense mechanisms would not work if we recognized them. As the body unconsciously defends itself against disease, so also, believed Freud, does the ego unconsciously defend itself against anxiety.

### reaction formation

defense mechanism by which the ego unconsciously switches unacceptable impulses into their opposites. Thus, people may express feelings that are the opposite of their anxiety-arousing unconscious feelings.

### projection

the defense mechanism by which people disguise their own threatening impulses by attributing them to others.

### rationalization

defense mechanism that offers self-justifying explanations in place of the real, more threatening, unconscious reasons for one’s actions.

### displacement

defense mechanism that shifts sexual or aggressive impulses toward a more acceptable or less threatening object or person, as when redirecting anger toward a safer outlet.

### identification

the process by which, according to Freud, children incorporate their parents’ values into their developing superegos.

### gender identity

one’s sense of being male or female.

### fixation

according to Freud, a lingering focus of pleasure-seeking energies at an earlier psychosexual stage, where conflicts were unresolved.

### defense mechanisms

in psychoanalytic theory, the ego’s protective methods of reducing anxiety by unconsciously distorting reality.

### repression

in psychoanalytic theory, the basic defense mechanism that banishes anxiety-arousing thoughts, feelings, and memories from consciousness.

### regression

defense mechanism in which an individual retreats, when faced with anxiety, to a more infantile psychosexual stage where some psychic energy remains fixated.

## Defense Mechanisms

Type of Defense	Example	Possible Risk Behavior	Possible benefit
<b>Compensation</b> Making up for weakness in one area By working hard to achieve success In another area.			
<b>Conversion</b> Intolerable impulses or conflicts Are converted into Physical Symptoms.			
<b>Denial</b> Negation or non-acceptance of Important (stressful) aspects Of reality.			
<b>Displacement</b> Shifting unacceptable impulses Toward a more acceptable or Less threatening object or person.			
<b>Identification</b> Individual assumes qualities of Someone else so they can avoid The stress of thinking about their Own shortcomings			
<b>Projection</b> An individual disguises their Unacceptable impulses by believing Others have those same qualities.			
<b>Rationalization</b> An individual offers self-justifying Explanations for behavior in place of Real more threatening explanations.			
<b>Reaction Formation</b> The individual behaves in the Opposite manner of their unacceptable Impulses or thoughts.			
<b>Regression</b> The individual retreats, when faced With anxiety, to a more immature Psychological role.			
<b>Repression</b> The individual banishes anxiety Arousing thoughts, feelings and Memories from conscious thought.			
<b>Sublimation</b> The channeling of unacceptable Impulses into socially acceptable Actions (or goals).			

Defenses (synonymous words: Words we use when describing defense mechanism behavior)

rationalizing, justifying, projecting, blaming, accusing judging, moralizing, analyzing, explaining, generalizing, debating, arguing, questioning, switching, denying, superior, minimizing, evading, defiance, attacking, withdrawing, silence, talking, shouting, laughing, joking, staring, sighing, agreeing, grinning, complying,, sexuality, inferior, fragile, cute, crying, hostile

Why do we use Defense Mechanisms:

- reduce anxiety and enhance self esteem, protect the ego.

### Positive Coping Skills

People react differently to stressful situations. Following is a list of what would be considered positive responses.

Response	Never	Sometimes	Often
Meditate	_____	_____	_____
Stretch	_____	_____	_____
Engage in progressive muscle Relaxation	_____	_____	_____
Listen to music	_____	_____	_____
Exercise aerobically	_____	_____	_____
Watch television	_____	_____	_____
Go to the movies	_____	_____	_____
Read	_____	_____	_____
Work on puzzles or play games	_____	_____	_____
Go for a leisurely walk	_____	_____	_____
Go to a health club/Fitness Center	_____	_____	_____
Spend time alone	_____	_____	_____
Participate in recreational activity	_____	_____	_____
Socialize with friends	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____

### Negative Coping Skills

People react differently to stressful situations. Following is a list of what would be considered negative responses.

Response	Never	Sometimes	Often
Act Violently	_____	_____	_____
Yell at a friend	_____	_____	_____
Over Eat	_____	_____	_____
Do not eat for long periods	_____	_____	_____
Drink excessive amounts of alcohol	_____	_____	_____
Drink lots of coffee	_____	_____	_____
Smoke tobacco	_____	_____	_____
Kick something	_____	_____	_____
Throw something	_____	_____	_____
Drive fast in a car	_____	_____	_____
Pace up and down	_____	_____	_____
Bite your fingernails	_____	_____	_____
Yell at Parents	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____