

Definition

Defense mechanisms are unconscious psychological responses that protect people from feelings of anxiety, threats to self-esteem, and things that they don't want to think about or deal with.

According to Freud

These mechanisms protect the conscious mind from contradictions between the animalistic id and the idealistic superego, ultimately contributing to "mental homeostasis."

Mental homeostasis is the tendency of a person to maintain stability or uniformity in their psychological states. It is a term used for psychological balance achieved when one's needs and desires have been met.

Primary Defense Mechanisms

Defense Mechanism	Brief Description	Example
Displacement	Taking feelings out on others	Being angry at your boss but taking it out on your spouse instead
Denial	Denying that something exists	Being the victim of a violent crime, yet denying that the incident occurred
Repression	Unconsciously keeping unpleasant information from your conscious mind	Being abused as a child but not remembering the abuse
Suppression	Consciously keeping unpleasant information from your conscious mind	Being abused as a child but choosing to push it out of your mind
Sublimation	Converting unacceptable impulses into more acceptable outlets	Being upset with your spouse but going for a walk instead of fighting
Projection	Assigning your own unacceptable feelings or qualities to others	Feeling attracted to someone other than your spouse, then fearing that your spouse is cheating on you
Intellectualization	Thinking about stressful things in a clinical way	Losing a close family member and staying busy with making the necessary arrangements instead of feeling sad
Rationalization	Justifying an unacceptable feeling or behavior with logic	Being denied a loan for your dream house, then saying it's a good thing because the house was too big anyway
Regression	Reverting to earlier behaviors	Hugging a teddy bear when you're stressed, like you did when you were a child
Reaction Formation	Replacing an unwanted impulse with its opposite	Being sad about a recent breakup, but acting happy about it

Mnemonic

DD - Denial, Displacement

RSS - Repression, Suppression, Sublimation

PIRRR - Projection, Intellectualization, Rationalization, Regression, Reaction Formation

How does it work?

Ego is the aspect of the mind that deals with inner conflicting demands of the Id (primal part, urges) and Superego (internal morals and values)

When conflicting, anxiety is created and ego shields with defense mechanisms.

According to Freud, anxiety is an unpleasant inner state that people seek to avoid. Anxiety acts as a signal to the ego that things are not going the way they should. As a result, the ego employs some sort of defense mechanism to help reduce these feelings of anxiety.

Other Defense Mechanisms according to Researchers

10 Other Common Defense Mechanisms

Since Freud first described the original defense mechanisms, other researchers have continued to describe other methods of reducing anxiety. Some of these defense mechanisms include:

- Acting out:** Coping with stress by engaging in actions rather than acknowledging and bearing certain feelings. For example, instead of telling someone that you are angry with them, you might yell at them or throw something against the wall.
- Aim inhibition:** Accepting a modified form of their original goal. An example of this would be becoming a high school basketball coach rather than a professional athlete.
- Altruism:** Satisfying internal needs through helping others. For example, someone recovering from substance use might volunteer to help others in recovery as a way to deal with drug cravings.
- Avoidance:** Refusing to deal with or encounter unpleasant objects or situations. For example, rather than discuss a problem with someone, you might simply start avoiding them altogether so you don't have to deal with the issue.
- Compensation:** Overachieving in one area to compensate for failures in another. For example, someone who feels insecure academically might compensate by excelling in athletics.
- Dissociation:** Becoming separated or removed from your experience. When dealing with something stressful, for example, you might mentally and emotionally disengage yourself from the situation.
- Fantasy:** Avoiding reality by retreating to a safe place within your mind. When something in your life is causing anxiety, you might retreat to your inner world where the cause of the stress cannot harm you.
- Humor:** Pointing out the funny or ironic aspects of a situation. An example of this might be cracking a joke in a stressful or traumatic situation.
- Passive-aggression:** Indirectly expressing anger. Instead of telling someone that you are upset, for example, you might give them the silent treatment.
- Undoing:** Trying to make up for what you feel are inappropriate thoughts, feelings, or behaviors. For example, if you hurt someone's feelings, you might offer to do something nice for them to assuage your anxiety or guilt.

Mnemonic

AHA - Altruism, Humor, Aim Inhibition

CUP - Compensation, Undoing, Passive-aggression

FADA - Fantasy, Acting-out, Dissociation, Avoidance

Types of Anxiety

Moral Anxiety	Neurotic anxiety	Reality anxiety
A fear of violating our own moral principles	The unconscious worry that we will lose control of the id's urges, resulting in punishment for inappropriate behavior	Fear of real-world events.

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Published 19th March, 2024.
Last updated 26th March, 2024.
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