

Defense may have a  
certain basis in  
reality.



Defense mechanism, in psychoanalysis, any of a variety of unconscious personality reactions which the ego uses to protect the conscious mind from threatening feelings and perceptions. Sigmund Freud first used defense as a psychoanalytic term (1894), but he did not break the notion into categories, viewing it as a singular phenomenon of repression. His daughter, Anna Freud, expanded on his theories in the 1930s, distinguishing some of the major defense mechanisms recognized today. Primary defense mechanisms include repression and denial, which serve to prevent unacceptable ideas or impulses from entering the conscience. Secondary defense mechanisms—generally appearing as an outgrowth of the primary defense mechanisms—include projection, reaction formation, displacement, sublimation, and isolation. The defense mechanisms Freud's daughter, Anna, who still does psychoanalysis, summarized several ego defenses in *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* (1936). As noted above, the ego protects itself from three threats: (1) the id, because the urges from the id can become so strong that they overwhelm the ego, bringing with them irrational chaos. Thus, we might panic if our sexual or brutally hostile urges popped into our conscience.

(2) The outside world or real danger. For example, the ego would realize that a child's parents staunchly forbid any aggression; thus, showing the slightest hint of murderous urges to them would produce severe anxiety. Likewise, a fear of driving recklessly or of being rejected by a lover may have a certain basis in reality.

(3) The superego is a threat to the ego too. The basic duty of the ego is to find some satisfaction for the id. If the superego detects any immoral aspects

in our behavior, there is hell to pay in the form of self censure and guilt. The ego tries to avoid this discomfort. But, keep in mind that, according to Freud's original theory, the ego defenses are successful only so long as the conscious part of the ego is unaware that another part of the ego is defending itself! Uncovering some of your ego defenses may be interesting fun, but your defenses against really threatening urges or ideas are not likely to disclose what they are doing to your conscious awareness.

Anna Freud used the defenses as hints of the repressed, scary impulses (instincts) that were underlying the patient's troubles. For example, the goodie-goodie 5-year-old dethroned king, who never shows anger towards his younger sister, his competitor, is assumed to be hiding his sibling rivalry. The defenses can also give us insight into our own mental processes—sometimes mental gymnastics or contortions. All defenses involve distortions of reality; they are ways of feeling better by fooling ourselves.

If we realized these defenses in our lives, we might handle reality better. Almost all adjustment books mention these defense mechanisms, even the writers who are arrogantly critical of Freud. An excellent text about Sigmund and Anna Freud and the ego defenses is by Christopher Monte (1980). Repression: shoving thoughts and urges that are unacceptable or distressing into our unconscious. This is what happens to the unacceptable urges of childhood—the ego represses them. Taboo ideas, like incest, would probably never get into consciousness or, if they got there, they'd be quickly repressed.

Sometimes dreams or slips of the tongue or attempts at humor reveal our unconscious motives. For example, if a teacher ridiculed you in class, you might dream he/she had a horrible auto accident. Or, trying hard to say something nice to the teacher a few days later, you comment after class, “each of your lectures seems better than the next.

” Or, if you were unfortunate enough to be asked to introduce your former teacher at a symposium and said, “ I’d like to prevent-huh-I mean present Dr. \_\_,” some might guess the truth. All these speculations about repressed feelings are just guesses. Repression must be distinguished from suppression and withdrawal. Suppression is more conscious and deals with unpleasant but not usually utterly despicable acts or thoughts.

Examples: You may want to forget a bad experience or an unpleasant chore to be done (a term paper to write or expressing sympathy to a friend whose mother has just died). You just forget to do things or you may deliberately try to think of other things so you can “ settle