# **Defense Mechanisms**

Sigmund Freud (1894, 1896) noted a number of ego defenses which he refers to throughout his written works. His daughter Anna (1936) developed these ideas and elaborated on them. Many psychoanalysts have also added further types of defenses.

Defense mechanisms are psychological strategies that are unconsciously used to protect a person from anxiety arising from unacceptable thoughts or feelings.

We use defense mechanisms to protect ourselves from feelings of anxiety or guilt, which arise because we feel threatened, or because our id or superego becomes too demanding. They are not under our conscious control, and are non-voluntaristic.

There are a large number of defense mechanisms; the main ones are summarized below.

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#### **Projection**

This involves individuals attributing their own thoughts, feeling, and motives to another person (A. Freud, 1936). Thoughts most commonly projected onto another are the ones that would cause guilt such as aggressive and sexual fantasies or thoughts.

For example, if you feel guilty you think that everyone around you feels guilty without admitting you have those feelings.

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#### **Displacement**

Displacement is the redirection of an impulse (usually aggression, but sometimes sexual) onto a powerless substitute target (A. Freud, 1936). The target can be a person or an object that can serve as a symbolic substitute.

Someone who is frustrated by his or her superiors may go home and kick the dog or beat up a family member.

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#### **Sublimation**

This mechanism refers to the basis that we take emotions we have that are socially inappropriate and focus them into ways that are socially appropriate.

For example, if someone is very aggressive, they would channel this into becoming a surgeon where they cut things open for a living.

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#### **Denial**

Anna Freud (1936) proposed denial involves blocking external events from awareness. If some situation is just too much to handle, the person just refuses to experience it.

As you might imagine, this is a primitive and dangerous defense - no one disregards reality and gets away with it for long! It can operate by itself or, more commonly, in combination with other, more subtle mechanisms that support it.

For example, smokers may refuse to admit to themselves that smoking is bad for their health.

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#### **Regression**

This is a movement back in psychological time when one is faced with stress (A. Freud, 1936). When we are troubled or frightened, our behaviors often become more childish or primitive.

A child may begin to suck their thumb again or wet the bed when they need to spend some time in the hospital. Teenagers may giggle uncontrollably when introduced into a social situation involving the opposite sex.

#### **Rationalization**

Rationalization is the cognitive distortion of "the facts" to make an event or an impulse less threatening (A. Freud, 1936). We do it often enough on a fairly conscious level when we provide ourselves with excuses.

For example, someone who is a heavy drinker may say that they only drink when friends are present. They wouldn’t acknowledge the extent that they go to make sure they are always around friends.

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#### **Reaction Formation**

This is where a person goes beyond denial and behaves in the opposite way to which he or she thinks or feels (A. Freud, 1936).

Conscious feelings are the opposite of the unconscious. Love - hate. Shame - disgust and moralizing are reaction formation against sexuality.Usually, a reaction formation is marked by showiness and compulsiveness.

For example, Freud claimed that men who are prejudice against homosexuals are making a defense against their own homosexual feelings by adopting a harsh anti-homosexual attitude which helps convince them of their heterosexuality.