

Defense Mechanisms

Freud believed that feelings of anxiety result from the ego's inability to mediate the conflict between the id and superego. When this happens, Freud believed that the ego seeks to restore balance through various protective measures known as defense mechanisms ([Figure 11.7](#)). When certain events, feelings, or yearnings cause an individual anxiety, the individual wishes to reduce that anxiety. To do that, the individual's unconscious mind uses ego **defense mechanisms**, unconscious protective behaviors that aim to reduce anxiety. The ego, usually conscious, resorts to unconscious strivings to protect the ego from being overwhelmed by anxiety. When we use defense mechanisms, we are unaware that we are using them. Further, they operate in various ways that distort reality. According to Freud, we all use ego defense mechanisms.

Denial

Refusing to accept real events because they are unpleasant

Kaila refuses to admit she has a problem although she is unable to go a day without drinking excessively

Displacement

Transferring inappropriate urges or behaviors onto a more acceptable or less threatening target

During lunch at a restaurant, Mark yells at his older brother, but does not yell at his mother and instead is verbally abusive to the server.

Projection

Attributing unacceptable desires to others

Chris often cheats on her boyfriend, but she suspects he is already cheating on her

Rationalization

Justifying behaviors by substituting acceptable reasons for less-acceptable real reasons

Kim failed his history course because he did not study or attend class, but he tells his roommates that he failed because the professor didn't like him

Reaction Formation

Reducing anxiety by adopting beliefs contrary to your own beliefs

Nadia is angry with her coworkers for always arriving late to work after partying, but she is nice and agrees with Beth and affirms the partying is necessary

Regression

Returning to coping strategies for less mature stages of development

After failing to pass his doctorate examinations, Giorgio spends days crying and cuddling his favorite childhood teddy bear

Repression

Suppressing painful memories and thoughts

LaShea cannot remember her grandfather's fatal heart attack, although she was present at the time

Figure 11.7 Defense mechanisms are unconscious protective behaviors that work to reduce anxiety.

While everyone uses defense mechanisms, Freud believed that overuse of them may be problematic. For example, let's say Joe Smith is a high school football player. Deep down, Joe feels sexually attracted to males. His conscious belief is that being gay is immoral and that if he were gay, his family would disown him and he would be ostracized by his peers. Therefore, there is a conflict between his conscious beliefs (being gay is wrong and will result in being ostracized) and his unconscious urges (attraction to males). The idea that he might be gay causes Joe to have feelings of anxiety. How can he decrease his anxiety? Joe may find himself acting very "macho," making gay jokes, and picking on a school peer who is gay. This way, Joe's unconscious impulses are further submerged.

There are several different types of defense mechanisms. For instance, in repression, anxiety-causing memories from consciousness are blocked. As an analogy, let's say your car is making a strange noise, but because you do not have the money to get it fixed, you just turn up the radio so that you no longer hear the strange noise. Eventually you forget about it. Similarly, in the human psyche, if a memory is too overwhelming to deal with, it might be **repressed** and thus removed from conscious awareness (Freud, 1920). This repressed memory might cause symptoms in other areas.

Another defense mechanism is **reaction formation**, in which someone expresses feelings, thoughts, and behaviors opposite to their inclinations. In the above example, Joe made fun of a homosexual peer while himself being attracted to males. In **regression**, an individual acts much younger than their age. For example, a four-year-old child who resents the arrival of a newborn sibling may act like a baby and revert to drinking out of a bottle. In **projection**, a person refuses to acknowledge her own unconscious feelings and instead sees those feelings in someone else. Other defense mechanisms include **rationalization**, **displacement**, and **sublimation**.