

# Defense Mechanisms

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Adapted from the [ChangingMinds.org](http://changingminds.org) web site

[http://changingminds.org/explanations/behaviors/coping/defense\\_mechanisms.htm](http://changingminds.org/explanations/behaviors/coping/defense_mechanisms.htm)

*EW Note: A useful non-technical discussion of defense mechanisms.*

Sigmund Freud describes how the Ego uses a range of mechanisms to handle the conflict between the Id, the Ego and the Super ego, which is why these mechanisms are often called 'Ego defense mechanisms'.

## Anxiety and tension

Freud noted that a major drive for most people is the reduction in tension, and that a major cause of tension was anxiety. He identified three different types of anxiety.

*Reality Anxiety.* This is the most basic form of anxiety and is typically based on fears of real and possible events, such as being bitten by a dog or falling from a ladder.

The most common way of reducing tension from Reality Anxiety is taking oneself away from the situation, running away from the dog or simply refusing to go up the ladder.

*Neurotic Anxiety.* This is a form of anxiety which comes from an unconscious fear that the basic impulses of the ID (the primitive part of our personality) will take control of the person, leading to eventual punishment (this is thus a form of Moral Anxiety).

*Moral Anxiety.* This form of anxiety comes from a fear of violating values and moral codes, and appears as feelings of guilt or shame.

## Defense Mechanisms

When anxiety occurs, the mind first responds by an increase in problem-solving thinking, seeking rational ways of escaping the situation. If this is not fruitful (and maybe anyway), a range of defense mechanisms may be triggered. In Freud's language,

these are tactics which the Ego develops to help deal with the Id and the Super Ego.

All Defense Mechanisms share two common properties :

- They often appear unconsciously.
- They tend to distort, transform, or otherwise falsify reality.

In distorting reality, there is a change in perception which allows for a lessening of anxiety, with a corresponding reduction in felt tension.

Freud's list of basic DefenseMechanisms includes:

- Denial: claiming/believing that what is true to be actually false.
- Displacement: redirecting emotions to a substitute target.
- Intellectualization: taking an objective viewpoint.
- Projection: attributing uncomfortable feelings to others.
- Rationalization: creating false but credible justifications.
- Reaction Formation: overacting in the opposite way to the fear.
- Regression: going back to acting as a child.
- Repression: pushing uncomfortable thoughts into the subconscious.
- Sublimation: redirecting 'wrong' urges into socially acceptable actions.

Each of these is briefly discussed below.

## Denial

### Description

Denial is simply refusing to acknowledge that an event has occurred. The person affected simply acts as if nothing has happened, behaving in ways that others may see as bizarre. In its full form, it is totally subconscious, and sufferers may be as mystified by the behavior of people around them as those people are by the behavior of the sufferers. It may also have a significant conscious element, where the sufferer is simply 'turning a blind eye' to an uncomfortable situation.

### Examples

A man hears that his wife has been killed, and yet refuses to believe it, still setting the table for her and keeping her clothes and other accoutrements in the bedroom.

A person having an affair does not think about pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases.

People take credit for their successes and find 'good reason' for their failures, blaming the situation, other people, etc. Alcoholics vigorously deny that they have a problem.

Optimists deny that things may go wrong.

Pessimists deny they may succeed.

### Discussion

Denial is one of Freud's original defense mechanisms. It is a form of *repression*, where stressful thoughts are banned from memory. If I do not think about it, then I do not suffer the associated stress have to deal with it. However, people engaging in Denial can pay a high cost in terms of the psychic energy needed to maintain the denial state.

Repression and Denial are two primary defense mechanisms which everybody uses. Children find denial easier, as with age, the ego matures and understands more about the "objective reality" it must operate within.

### How might this play out in real situations?

When you appear to deny a situation, then the other person may join you in the denial or may have to handle it in a way that is not as direct as they otherwise might.

## Displacement

### Description

Displacement is the shifting of actions from a desired target to a substitute target when there is some reason why the first target is not permitted or not available. Displacement may involve retaining the action and simply shifting the target of that action. Where this is not feasible, the action itself may also change. Where possible the second target will resemble the original target in some way.

Phobias may also use displacement as a mechanism for releasing energy that is caused in other ways.

### Examples

The boss gets angry and shouts at me. I go home and shout at my wife. She then shouts at our son. With nobody left to displace anger onto, he goes and kicks the dog.

A man wins the lottery. He turns to the person next to him and gives the person a big kiss.

A boy is afraid of horses. It turns out to be a displaced fear of his father.

I want to speak at a meeting but cannot get a word in edgeways. Instead, I start scribbling furiously.

A religious person who is sexually frustrated focuses their attention on food, becoming a gourmet.

A woman, rejected by her boyfriend, goes out with another man 'on the rebound'.

### Discussion

Displacement is one of Freud's original defense mechanisms. It occurs when the Id wants to do something of which the Super ego does not permit. The Ego thus finds some other way of releasing the psychic energy of the Id. Thus there is a transfer of energy from a repressed object-cathexis to a more acceptable object.

Displaced actions tend to be into related areas or subjects. If I want to shout at a person but feel that I cannot, then shouting at somebody else is preferred to going to play the piano, although this may still be used if there is no other way I can release my anger.

Displacements are often quite satisfactory and workable mechanisms for releasing energy more

safely.

Dreams can be interpreted as the displacement of stored tensions into other forms (dreams are often highly metaphoric).

### How might this play out in real situations?

When people do strange things, work with them to find if there are other places from which they are displacing their energy - then deal with the real reason, not the displaced reason.

Attend to your own displacements. You probably have quite a few, as do most of us.

### Intellectualization (“flight into reason”)

#### Description

Intellectualization is a 'flight into reason', where the person avoids uncomfortable emotions by focusing on facts and logic. The situation is treated as an interesting problem that engages the person on a rational basis, whilst the emotional aspects are completely ignored as being irrelevant.

Heavy use of jargon when ordinary language would suffice is often used as a device of intellectualization. By using complex terminology, the focus becomes on the words and finer definitions rather than the human effects.

#### Examples

A person told they have cancer asks for details on the probability of survival and the success rates of various drugs. The doctor may join in, using 'carcinoma' instead of 'cancer' and 'terminal' instead of 'fatal'.

A woman who has been raped seeks out information on other cases and the psychology of rapists and victims. She takes self-defense classes in order to feel better (rather than more directly addressing the psychological and emotional issues).

A person who is in heavily debt builds a complex spreadsheet of how long it would take to repay using different payment options and interest rates.

#### Discussion

Intellectualization protects against anxiety by repressing the emotions connected with an event. It is also known as 'Isolation of affect' as the affective

elements are removed from the situation.

Freud believed that memories have both conscious and unconscious aspects, and that intellectualization allows for the conscious analysis of an event in a way that does not provoke anxiety.

Intellectualization is one of Freud's original defense mechanisms.

### How might this play out in real situations?

When people treat emotionally difficult situations in cold and logical ways, it often does not mean that they are emotionally stunted, only that they are unable to handle the emotion at this time. You can decide to give them space now so they can maintain their dignity, although you may also decide to challenge them in a more appropriate time and setting.

When you challenge a person who is intellectualizing, they may fight back (which is attack, another form of defense) or switch to other forms of defense.

### Projection

#### Description

When a person has uncomfortable thoughts or feelings, they may project these onto other people, assigning the thoughts or feelings that they need to repress to a convenient alternative target.

Projection may also happen to obliterate attributes of other people with which we are uncomfortable. We assume that they are like us, and in doing so we allow ourselves to ignore those attributes they have with which we are uncomfortable.

- *Neurotic projection* is perceiving others as operating in ways one unconsciously finds objectionable in yourself.
- *Complementary projection* is assuming that others do, think and feel in the same way as you.
- *Complimentary projection* is assuming that others can do things as well as you.

Projection also appears where we see our own traits in other people, as in the false consensus effect. Thus we see our friends as being more like us than they really are.

### Examples

I do not like another person. But I have a value that says I should like everyone. So I project onto them that they do not like me. This allows me to avoid them and also to handle my own feelings of dislike.

An unfaithful husband suspects his wife of infidelity.

A woman who is attracted to a fellow worker accuses the person of sexual advances.

### Discussion

Projection is one of Freud's original defense mechanisms. It turns neurotic or moral anxiety into reality anxiety, which is easier to deal with.

Projecting thoughts or emotions onto others allows the person to consider them and how dysfunctional they are, but without feeling the attendant discomfort of knowing that these thoughts and emotions are their own. We can thus criticize the other person, distancing ourselves from our own dysfunction.

One explanation is that the ego perceives dysfunction from 'somewhere' and then seeks to locate that somewhere. The super ego warns of punishment if that somewhere is internal, so the ego places it in a more acceptable external place - often in convenient other people.

Projection is a common attribute of paranoia, where people project dislike of themselves onto others such that they believe that most other people dislike them.

Projection helps justify unacceptable behavior, for example where a person claims that they are sticking up for themselves amongst a group of aggressive other people.

Empathy, where a person experiences the perceived emotions of others, may be considered as a 'reverse' form of projection, where a person projects other people onto themselves. Identification may also be a form of reverse projection.

### Rationalization

#### Description

When something happens that we find difficult to accept, then we will make up a logical reason why it has happened.

The target of rationalization is usually something that we have done, such as being unkind to another

person. It may also be used when something happens independent of us which causes us discomfort, such as when a friend is unkind to us.

We rationalize to ourselves. We also find it very important to rationalize to other people, even those we do not know.

### Examples

A person evades paying taxes and then rationalizes it by talking about how the government wastes money (and how it is better for people to keep what they can).

A man buys a expensive car and then tells people his old car was very unreliable, very unsafe, etc.

A person fails to get good enough results to get into a chosen university and then says that they didn't want to go there anyway.

A parent punishes a child and says that it is for the child's 'own good'.

I trip and fall over in the street. I tell a passer-by that I have recently been ill.

### Discussion

Rationalization is one of Freud's original defense mechanisms. When a person does something of which the moral super ego disapproves, then the ego seeks to defend itself by adding reasons that make the action acceptable to the super ego. Thus we are able to do something that is outside our values and get away with it without feeling too guilty.

This is related to our need to explain what happens. Our need for esteem also leads us to rationalize to others.

Rationalization happens with bullies and victims. The bully rationalizes what they have done by saying that their victim 'deserved it'.

Self-Serving Bias uses rationalization when it leads to taking more credit for success than we deserve and blame others for our failures.

### How might this play out in real situations?

Watch for your own rationalizations. If you can be honest with yourself and with other people, you can gain esteem for your courage and integrity.

In persuasion, offer people logical reasons that people can use to rationalize their compliance with your arguments. Sometimes people disagree simply be-

cause they do not want to agree with you, such as with teenagers and parents, or perhaps do not like to feel persuaded, so give them reasons to focus on the substance rather than the persuader.

### Reaction Formation

#### Description

Reaction Formation occurs when a person feels an urge to do or say something and then actually does or says something that is effectively the opposite of what they really want. It also appears as a defense against a feared social punishment. If I fear that I will be criticized for something, I very visibly act in a way that shows I am personally a long way from the feared position.

A common pattern in Reaction Formation is for the person to show 'excessive behavior', for example using exaggerated friendliness when the person is actually feeling unfriendly.

#### Examples

A person who is angry with a colleague actually ends up being particularly courteous and friendly towards them.

A man who is gay has a number of conspicuous heterosexual affairs and openly criticizes gays.

A mother who has a child she does not want becomes very protective of the child.

An alcoholic extols the virtues of abstinence.

#### Discussion

Reaction formation is one of Freud's original defense mechanisms. It occurs when the unconscious seeks to cover up something unacceptable by adopting an opposite stance. Freud called the exaggerated compensation that can appear in Reaction Formation 'overboarding' as the person is going overboard in one direction to distract from and cover up something unwanted in the other direction, such as a person who fears war becoming a pacifist, convincing themselves that war is wrong (rather than the 'cowardly' position that war is scary).

Reaction Formation goes further than projection such that unwanted impulses and thoughts are not acknowledged.

Psychoanalysts believe that extreme patterns of

Reaction Formation are found in paranoia and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), where the person becomes trapped in a cycle of repeating a behavior that they know (at least at a deep level) is somehow wrong.

#### How might this play out in real situations?

When a person takes a position or stance on something, and particularly if that position is extreme, consider the possibility that their real views are opposite to this. This offers you two options in persuasion. You can either support their current position or carefully expose how their underlying tendencies are opposite (and how it is ok to admit this).

To cause a Reaction Formation pattern, show the other person that a particular behavior is socially unacceptable. Then give them the space and ideas to react against this undesirable pattern and create their own way of showing how they are actually very far away from the undesirable behavior.

In a therapeutic situation, help a person who is dysfunctionally forming contrary reactions by first create a supportive environment where they can admit and accept what is happening to themselves. Then support their changing of position to somewhere that is more acceptable and appropriate for them.

### Regression

#### Description

Regression involves taking the position of a child in some problematic situation, rather than acting in a more adult way. This is usually in response to stressful situations, with greater levels of stress potentially leading to more overt regressive acts. Regressive behavior can be simple and harmless, such as a person who is sucking a pen (as a Freudian regression to oral fixation), or may be more dysfunctional, such as crying or using petulant arguments..

#### Examples

A wife refuses to drive a car even though it causes the family much disorganization. A result of her refusal is that her husband has to take her everywhere.

A person who suffers a mental breakdown assumes a fetal position, rocking and crying.

A child suddenly starts to wet the bed after years of not doing so (this is a typical response to the arrival

of a new sibling).

A college student carefully takes their teddy-bear with them (and goes to sleep cuddling it).

### Discussion

Regression is one of Freud's original defense mechanisms. Regression is a form of retreat, going back to a time when the person felt safer and where the stresses in question were not known, or where an all-powerful parent would take them away.

In a Freudian view, the stress of fixations caused by frustrations of the person's past psychosexual development may be used to explain a range of regressive behaviors, including:

- Oral fixation can lead to increase smoking or eating, or vocal actions including verbal abuse.
- Anal fixation can lead to anal retentive behaviors such as tidying and fastidiousness. Obsessive-compulsive disorders can occur including those that lead to cruelty, extreme orderliness, or miserliness
- Phallic fixation can lead to conversion hysteria (the transformation of psychic energy into physical symptoms) which is disguised sexual impulses.

### How might this play out in real situations?

If the person with whom you are working is showing regressive symptoms, you can respond to their child state in several ways, including taking a parent position of authority (nurturing or controlling) or join them in their child place (thus building alignment).

## Repression

### Description

Repression involves placing uncomfortable thoughts in relatively inaccessible areas of the subconscious mind. Thus when things occur that we are unable to cope with now, we push them away, either planning to deal with them at another time or hoping that they will fade away on their own accord.

The level of 'forgetting' in repression can vary from a temporary abolition of uncomfortable thoughts to a high level of amnesia, where events that caused the anxiety are buried very deep.

Repressed memories do not disappear. They can have an accumulative effect and reappear as unattributable anxiety or dysfunctional behavior. A high level of repression can cause a high level of anxiety or dysfunction, although this may also be caused by the repression of one particularly traumatic incident.

Repressed memories may appear through subconscious means and in altered forms, such as dreams or slips of the tongue ('Freudian slips').

### Examples

A child who is abused by a parent later has no recollection of the events, but has trouble forming relationships.

A woman who found childbirth particularly painful continues to have children (and each time the level of pain is surprising).

An optimist remembers the past with a rosy glow and constantly repeats mistakes.

A man has a phobia of spiders but cannot remember the first time he was afraid of them.

A person greets another with 'pleased to beat you' (the repressed idea of violence toward the other person creeping through).

### Discussion

Repression (sometimes called *motivated forgetting*) is a primary ego defense mechanism since the other ego mechanisms use it in tandem with other methods. Thus defense is often 'repression + ....'.

Repression is unconscious. When we deliberately and consciously try to push away thoughts, this is suppression.

In Freudian terminology, repression is the restraining of a cathexis by an anti-cathexis.

Repression is not all bad. If all uncomfortable memories were easily brought to mind we would be faced with a non-stop pain of reliving them.

### How might this play out in real situations?

When a person is being defensive in some way, think about the repressions that may be at the root of their problem. Also listen for speech errors and other signals from the subconscious. You can even start a conversation about recent weird dreams and then listen for further symbols, though be careful with this, as dreams can be very symbolic.

Help a person recover from the discomfort and dysfunction that repression brings by digging out the original memory. Be very careful with this, of course - done wrong, it may only cause more pain.

If you have caused a person stress and they feel unable to respond, you may find that they act as if nothing had happened. This is a surprisingly common attribute of persuasive situations. It can gain compliance in the shorter term, but can build up problems for later.

### Sublimation

#### **Description**

Sublimation is the transformation of unwanted impulses into something less harmful. This can simply be a distracting release or may be a constructive and valuable piece of work.

When we are faced with the dissonance of uncomfortable thoughts, we create psychic energy. This has to go somewhere. Sublimation channels this energy away from destructive acts and into something that is socially acceptable and/or creatively effective.

Many sports and games are sublimations of aggressive urges, as we sublimate the desire to fight into the ritualistic activities of formal competition.

#### **Examples**

I am angry. I go out and chop wood. I end up with a useful pile of firewood. I am also fitter and nobody is harmed.

A person who has an obsessive need for control and order becomes a successful business entrepreneur.

A person with strong sexual urges becomes an artist.

A man who has extra-marital desires takes up household repairs when his wife is out of town.

The brilliant student with strong aggressive energies and deep desires to control people finds himself attracted to careers such as medicine in which he can have great power and control over patients and staff in the context of doing good for people. The underlying aggressive urge might sometimes be seen in mistreatment of nurses or remarks to others about patients' shortcomings.

#### **Discussion**

Sublimation is probably the most useful and constructive of the defense mechanisms as it takes the energy of something that is potentially harmful and turns it to doing something good and useful.

Freud believed that the greatest achievements in civilization were due to the effective sublimation of our sexual and aggressive urges that are sourced in the Id and then channeled by the Ego as directed by the Super ego. In his more basic musings, he considered such as painting as a potentially sublimated desire to smear one's own faeces.

Sublimation is one of Freud's original defense mechanisms.

#### **How might this play out in real situations?**

Help others who are causing themselves and others problems, for example by their sexual advances or aggressive outbursts, to re-channel their energies into more constructive activities.

Beware of 'on the boundary' activities (including your own) where sublimated energy may switch back into unwanted or anti-social activities or other, less constructive, coping mechanisms.

#### **Conclusion**

Psychoanalysis often involves a long series of sessions with the client in which original causes are sought out (often searching through childhood relationships) and cathartic experiences of realization are used to teach the client how these mechanisms are no longer appropriate.

For Freud, the purpose of psychoanalysis was to bring repressed memories, fears and thoughts back to the conscious level of awareness. Two techniques he used are free association and dream analysis. He considered dreams as the "royal road" to the unconscious. He also analyzed and interpreted the various defense mechanisms.

In persuasion, you can watch for these dysfunctional mechanisms in people and either work around them or with them as appropriate.

You should also watch for these mechanisms in yourself, and either learn to handle them or get professional help in doing so.