Defense Mechanisms and Ego Anxiety

You've probably heard people talk about "defense mechanisms," or ways that we protect ourselves from things that we don't want to think about or deal with. The term got its start in psychoanalytic therapy, but it has slowly worked its way into everyday language. Think of the last time you referred to someone as being "in denial" or accused someone of "rationalizing." Both of these examples refer to a type of defense mechanism.

In Sigmund Freud's topographical model of personality, the **ego** is the aspect of personality that deals with reality. While doing this, the ego also has to cope with the conflicting demands of the **id** and the **superego**. The id seeks to fulfill all wants, needs, and impulses while the superego tries to get the ego to act in an idealistic and moral manner.

What happens when the ego cannot deal with the demands of our desires, the constraints of reality, and our own moral standards? 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 right. As a result, the ego then employs a defense mechanism to help reduce these feelings of anxiety.

Freud identified three types of anxiety:

1. **Neurotic anxiety** is the unconscious worry that we will lose control of the id's urges, resulting in punishment for inappropriate behavior.

2. **Reality anxiety** is fear of real-world events. The cause of this anxiety is usually easily identified. For example, a person might fear receiving a dog bite when they are near a menacing dog. The most common way of reducing this anxiety is to avoid the threatening object.

3. **Moral anxiety** involves a fear of violating our own moral principles.

In order to deal with this anxiety, Freud believed that defense mechanisms helped shield the ego from the conflicts created by the id, superego, and reality.

What is a Defense Mechanism?

**Defense Mechanisms**

Because of anxiety provoking demands created by the id, superego, and reality, the ego has developed a number of defense mechanisms to cope with anxiety. Although we may knowingly use these mechanisms, in many cases these defenses work unconsciously to distort reality.

While all defense mechanisms can be unhealthy, they can also be adaptive and allow us to function normally. The greatest problems arise when defense mechanisms are overused in order to avoid dealing with problems.

In psychoanalytic therapy, the goal may be to help the client uncover these unconscious defense mechanisms and find better, more healthy ways of coping with anxiety and distress.

Researchers have described a wide variety of different defense mechanisms. Sigmund Freud's daughter, Anna Freud described ten different defense mechanisms used by the ego.

Follow the links below to read more about each type of defense mechanism as well as other defense mechanisms described by psychologists.

Denial

**Denial** is probably one of the best known defense mechanisms, used often to describe situations in which people seem unable to face reality or admit an obvious truth (i.e. "He's in denial."). Denial is an outright refusal to admit or recognize that something has occurred or is currently occurring. Drug addicts or alcoholics often deny that they have a problem, while victims of traumatic events may deny that the event ever occurred.

Denial functions to protect the ego from things that the individual cannot cope with. While this may save us from anxiety or pain, denial also requires a substantial investment of energy. Because of this, other defenses are also used to keep these unacceptable feelings from consciousness.

In many cases, there might be overwhelming evidence that something is true, yet the person will continue to deny its existence or truth because it is too uncomfortable to face.

Denial can involve a flat out rejection of the existence of a fact or reality. In other cases, it might involve admitting that something is true, but minimizing its importance. Sometimes people will accept reality and the seriousness of the fact, but they will deny their own responsibility and instead blame other people or other outside forces.

Addiction is one of the best-known examples of denial. People who are suffering from a substance abuse problem will often flat-out deny that their behavior is problematic. In other cases, they might admit that they do use drugs or alcohol, but will claim that this substance abuse is not a problem.

**Video: What Is Denial?**

**Repression and Suppression**

**Repression** is another well-known defense mechanism. Repression acts to keep information out of conscious awareness. However, these memories don't just disappear; they continue to influence our behavior. For example, a person who has repressed memories of abuse suffered as a child may later have difficulty forming relationships. Sometimes we do this consciously by forcing the unwanted information out of our awareness, which is known as suppression. In most cases, however, this removal of anxiety-provoking memories from our awareness is believed to occur unconsciously.

**Video: What are Repression and Suppression?**

**Displacement**

**Displacement**

Have ever had a really bad day at work and then gone home and taken out your frustration on family and friends? Then you have experienced the ego defense mechanism of **displacement**. Displacement involves taking out our frustrations, feelings, and impulses on people or objects that are less threatening. Displaced aggression is a common example of this defense mechanism. Rather than express our anger in ways that could lead to negative consequences (like arguing with our boss), we instead express our anger towards a person or object that poses no threat (such as our spouse, children, or pets).
Sublimation

Sublimation is a defense mechanism that allows us to act out unacceptable impulses by converting these behaviors into a more acceptable form. For example, a person experiencing extreme anger might take up kickboxing as a means of venting frustration. Freud believed that sublimation was a sign of maturity that allows people to function normally in socially acceptable ways.

Projection

Projection is a defense mechanism that involves taking our own unacceptable qualities or feelings and ascribing them to other people. For example, if you have a strong dislike for someone, you might instead believe that he or she does not like you. Projection works by allowing the expression of the desire or impulse, but in a way that the ego cannot recognize, therefore reducing anxiety.

Intellectualization

Intellectualization works to reduce anxiety by thinking about events in a cold, clinical way. This defense mechanism allows us to avoid thinking about the stressful, emotional aspect of the situation and instead focus only on the intellectual component. For example, a person who has just been diagnosed with a terminal illness might focus on learning everything about the disease in order to avoid distress and remain distant from the reality of the situation.

Rationalization

Rationalization is a defense mechanism that involves explaining an unacceptable behavior or feeling in a rational or logical manner, avoiding the true reasons for the behavior. For example, a person who is turned down for a date might rationalize the situation by saying they were not attracted to the other person anyway, or a student might blame a poor exam score on the instructor rather than his or her lack of preparation.

Rationalization not only prevents anxiety, it may also protect self-esteem and self-concept. When confronted by success or failure, people tend to attribute achievement to their own qualities and skills while failures are blamed on other people or outside forces.

Regression

When confronted by stressful events, people sometimes abandon coping strategies and revert to patterns of behavior used earlier in development. Anna Freud called this defense mechanism regression, suggesting that people act out behaviors from the stage of psychosexual development in which they are fixated. For example, an individual fixated at an earlier developmental stage might cry or sulk upon hearing unpleasant news.

Behaviors associated with regression can vary greatly depending upon which stage the person is fixated at:

- An individual fixated at the oral stage might begin eating or smoking excessively, or might become very verbally aggressive.
- A fixation at the anal stage might result in excessive tidiness or messiness.

Reaction Formation

Reaction formation reduces anxiety by taking up the opposite feeling, impulse or behavior. An example of reaction formation would be treating someone you strongly dislike in an excessively friendly manner in order to hide your true feelings. Why do people behave this way? According to Freud, they are using reaction formation as a defense mechanism to hide their true feelings by behaving in the exact opposite manner.
Other 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**: In this type of defense, the individual copes with stress by engaging in actions rather than reflecting upon internal feelings.

- **Affiliation**: This involves turning to other people for support.

- **Aim Inhibition**: In this type of defense, the individual accepts a modified form of their original goal (i.e. becoming a high school basketball coach rather than a professional athlete.)

- **Altruism**: Satisfying internal needs through helping others.

- **Avoidance**: Refusing to deal with or encounter unpleasant objects or situations.

- **Compensation**: Overachieving in one area to compensate for failures in another.

- **Humor**: Pointing out the funny or ironic aspects of a situation.

- **Passive-aggression**: Indirectly expressing anger.

While defense mechanisms are often thought of as negative reactions, some of these defenses can be helpful. For example, utilizing humor to overcome a stressful, anxiety-provoking situation can actually be an adaptive defense mechanism. In other cases, they allow people to temporarily ease stress during critical times, allowing them to focus on what is necessary in the moment.

**Suggested Reading:**
- Defense Mechanisms Quiz
- The Id, Ego, and Superego
- Theory of Psychosexual Development