

will have an easier time gaining access to and receiving the services and help they need.

## CONCLUSION

It is hoped that we, as a culture, will increase our tolerance and understanding of mental illness. As we do, our ability to diagnose psychological disorders will continue to improve, although, in many cases, it continues to be as much art as science. Chances are we will never do away with psychiatric labels; they are an important part of effective treatment of psychological disorders, just as names of diseases are part of diagnosing and treating physical illnesses. However, if we are stuck with labels (no pun intended), we must continue to work to take the stigma, embarrassment, and shame out of them.

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## Reading 30: YOU'RE GETTING DEFENSIVE AGAIN!

Freud, A. (1946). *The ego and the mechanisms of defense*. New York: International Universities Press.

In a book about the history of research that changed psychology, one imposing figure would be extremely difficult to omit: Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). Psychology as we know it would probably not exist today without Freud's contributions. He was largely responsible for elevating our interpretations of human behavior (especially maladaptive behavior) from irrational superstitions of demonic possession and evil spirits to the rational approaches of reason and science. Without an examination of his work, this book would be incomplete. Now, you may be asking yourself, if Sigmund Freud is so important, why does this discussion focus on a book written by his daughter, Anna Freud (1895–1982)? The answer to that question requires a bit of explanation.

Although Sigmund Freud was integral to psychology's history and, therefore, is a necessary part of this book, the task of including his research here along with all the other researchers is a difficult one because Freud did not reach his discoveries through a clearly defined scientific methodology. It

is not possible to choose a single study or series of experiments to represent his work, as has been done for other researchers in this book. Freud's theories grew out of his detailed observations of his patients over decades of clinical analysis. Consequently, his writings are abundant, to say the least. The English translation of his collected writings (Freud, 1953 to 1974) totals 24 volumes! Obviously, only a very small piece of his work can be discussed here. In choosing what to include, consideration was given to the portions of Freud's theories that have stood the test of time relatively unscathed. Over the past century, a great deal of criticism has been focused on Freud's ideas, and in the last 50 years especially, his work has been drawn into serious question from a scientific perspective. Critics have argued that many of his theories either cannot be tested scientifically; or if they are tested, they prove to be invalid. Therefore, although few would doubt the historical importance of Freud's work, many of his theories about the structure of personality, the development of personality through five psychosexual stages, and the sources of people's psychological problems have been rejected by most psychologists today. However, some aspects of his work have received more positive reviews through the years and now enjoy relatively wide acceptance. One of these is his concept of the *ego defense mechanisms*: psychological "weapons" that your ego uses to protect you from your self-created anxiety. This element from Freud's work has been selected to represent Freud in this book.

Sigmund Freud's discovery of ego defense mechanisms occurred gradually over 30 or more years as his experiences in dealing with psychological problems grew. A cohesive, self-contained discussion of this topic does not appear anywhere in Sigmund Freud's many volumes. In fact, he passed that job on to his daughter, who was an important psychoanalyst in her own right, specializing in helping children. Freud acknowledged this fact in 1936 just before Anna's book *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* was originally published in German: "There are an extremely large number of methods (or mechanisms, as we say) used by the ego in the discharge of its defensive functions. My daughter, the child analyst, is writing a book about them" (S. Freud, 1936). Because it was Anna Freud who synthesized her father's theories regarding the defense mechanisms into a single work, her book has been chosen for our discussion of the work of Sigmund Freud.

## THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS

To examine Freud's notion of defense mechanisms, we should discuss briefly his theory of the structure of personality. Freud proposed that personality consists of three components: *id*, *ego*, and *superego*.

In Freud's view, the *id* (which is simply Latin for "it") is present at birth and contains your basic human biological urges and instincts such as hunger, thirst, and sexual impulses. Whenever these needs are not met, the *id* generates strong signals that demand the person find a way to satisfy them—and to do so immediately! The *id* operates on what Freud called the *pleasure principle*,



meaning it insists upon instantaneous gratification of all desires, regardless of reason, logic, safety, or morality. Freud believed that dark, antisocial, and dangerous instinctual urges (especially sexual ones) are present in everyone's id and that these constantly seek expression. You are not usually aware of them because, Freud contended, the id operates on the unconscious level. However, if you were lacking the other parts of your personality and only had an id, Freud would expect your behavior to be amoral, shockingly deviant, and even fatal to you and others.

In Freud's view, the reason you do not behave in these dangerous and deviant ways is that your ego and superego develop to place limits and controls on the impulses of your id. According to Freud, the ego (*ego* means "the self") operates on the *reality principle*, which means it is alert to the real world and the consequences of behavior. The ego is conscious, and its job is to satisfy your id's urges, but to do so using means that are rational and reasonably safe. However, the ego also has limits placed upon it by the superego (meaning "above the ego"). Your superego, in essence, requires that the ego finds solutions to the id's demands that are moral and ethical, according to your own internalized set of rules about what is good or bad, right or wrong. These moral rules, Freud contended, were instilled in you by your parents, and if you behave in ways that violate them your superego will punish you with its own very effective weapon: guilt. Do you recognize the superego? It is commonly referred to as your *conscience*. Freud believed that your superego operates on both conscious and unconscious levels.

Freud's conceptualization of your personality was a dynamic one in which the ego is constantly trying to balance the needs and urges of the id with the moral requirements of the superego in determining your behavior. Following is an example of how this might work. Imagine a young man strolling down the street in a small town. It is 10:00 P.M., and he is on his way home. Suddenly he realizes he is hungry. He passes a grocery store and sees food on the other side of the large windows, but the store is closed. His id might say, "Look! Food! Jump through the glass and get some!" (Remember, the id wants immediate satisfaction, regardless of the consequences.) He would probably not be aware of the id's suggestion because it would be at a level below his consciousness. The ego would "hear" it, though, and because its job is to protect the boy from danger, it might respond, "No, that would be dangerous. Let's go around back, break into the store, and steal some food!" At this, the superego would remark indignantly, "You can't do that! It's immoral, and if you do it I will punish you!" Therefore, the young man's ego reconsiders and makes a new suggestion that is acceptable to both the id and the superego: "You know, there's an all-night fast-food place four blocks over. Let's go there and buy some food." This solution, assuming that the boy is psychologically healthy, is finally the one that is reflected in his behavior.

According to Freud, the reason most people do not behave in antisocial or deviant ways is because of this system of checks and balances among the three parts of the personality. But what would happen if the system malfunctioned—if

this balance were lost? One way this could happen would be if the demands of the id became too strong to be controlled adequately by the ego. What if the unacceptable urges of the id edged their way into your consciousness (into what Freud called the *preconscious*) and began to overpower the ego? Freud contended that if this happens, you will experience a very unpleasant condition called *anxiety*. Specifically, he called it *free-floating anxiety*, because although you feel anxious and afraid, the causes are not fully conscious, so you are not sure why you feel this way.

When this state of anxiety exists, it is uncomfortable and we are motivated to change it. To do this, the ego will bring on its “big guns,” the *ego defense mechanisms*. The purpose of the defense mechanisms is to prevent the id’s forbidden impulse from entering consciousness. If this is successful, the discomfort of the anxiety associated with the impulse is relieved. The defense mechanisms ward off anxiety through self-deception and the distortion of reality so that the id’s urges will not have to be acknowledged.

## METHOD

Freud claimed to have discovered the defense mechanisms gradually over many years of clinical interactions with his patients. In the years since Sigmund Freud’s death and since the publication of Anna Freud’s book, many refinements have been made in the interpretation of the defense mechanisms. The next section summarizes a selection of only those mechanisms identified by Sigmund Freud and elaborated on by his daughter.

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## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Anna Freud (p. 44) identified 10 defense mechanisms that had been described by her father. Five of the original mechanisms that are commonly used and widely recognized today are discussed here: *repression*, *regression*, *projection*, *reaction formation*, and *sublimation*. Keep in mind that the primary function of the defense mechanisms is to alter reality in order to protect against anxiety.

### Repression

Repression is said to be the most basic and most common mechanism we use in defending the ego. In his early writings, Freud used the terms *repression* and *defense* interchangeably and interpreted repression to be virtually the only defense mechanism. Later, however, he acknowledged that repression was only one of many psychological processes available to protect a person from anxiety. Freud believed that a person’s use of repression forces disturbing thoughts completely out of consciousness. Consequently, the anxiety associated with the “forbidden” thoughts is avoided because the person is unaware of their existence. In Freud’s view, repression is often employed to defend against the anxiety caused by unacceptable sexual desires. For example, a woman who has sexual feelings about her father would probably experience intense anxiety if these impulses were to become conscious. To avoid that anxiety, she might



repress her unacceptable desires, forcing them fully into her unconscious. This would not mean that her urges are gone, but because they are repressed, they cannot produce anxiety.

You might be wondering how such thoughts are ever discovered if they remain in the unconscious. According to Freud, these hidden conflicts may be revealed through slips of the tongue, through dreams, or by the various techniques used in psychoanalysis, such as free association or hypnosis. Furthermore, repressed desires, in the Freudian view, can create psychological problems that are expressed in the form of *neuroses*. For instance, consider again the woman who has repressed sexual desires for her father. She might express these impulses by becoming involved in successive failed relationships with men in an unconscious attempt to resolve her conflicts about her father.

### Regression

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Regression is a defense used by the ego to guard against anxiety by causing the person to retreat to the behaviors of an earlier stage of development that was less demanding and safer. Often when a second child is born into a family, the older sibling will regress, using younger speech patterns, wanting a bottle, and even bed-wetting. Adults can use regression as well. Consider a man experiencing a “midlife crisis” who is afraid of growing old and dying. To avoid the anxiety associated with these unconscious fears, he might regress to an adolescent stage by becoming irresponsible, cruising around in a sports car, trying to date younger women, and even eating the foods associated with his teenage years. Another example of regression is the married adult who goes home to mother whenever a problem in the marriage arises.

### Projection

Imagine for a moment that your ego is being challenged by your id. You're not sure why, but you are experiencing a lot of anxiety. If your ego uses the defense mechanism of projection to eliminate the anxiety, you will begin to see *your* unconscious urges in *other* people's behavior. That is, you will *project* your impulses onto them. In theory, this externalizes the anxiety-provoking feelings and reduces the anxiety. You will not be aware that you're doing this, and the people onto whom you project may not be guilty of your accusations. An example of this offered by Anna Freud involves a husband who is experiencing impulses to be unfaithful to his wife (p. 120). He may not even be conscious of these urges, but they are creeping up from his id and creating anxiety. To ward off the anxiety, he projects his desires onto his wife, becomes intensely jealous, and accuses her of having affairs, even though no evidence supports his claims. Another example is the woman who is afraid of aging and begins to point out how old her friends and acquaintances are looking. The individuals in these examples are not acting or lying; they truly believe their projections. If they did not, the defense against anxiety would fail.

### Reaction Formation

The defense identified by Freud as a reaction formation is exemplified by a line from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, when Hamlet's mother, after watching a scene in a play, remarks to Hamlet, "The lady doth protest too much, me thinks." When a person is experiencing unacceptable, unconscious "evil" impulses, anxiety caused by them might be avoided by engaging in behaviors that are the exact *opposite* of the id's real urges. Anna Freud pointed out that these behaviors are usually exaggerated or even obsessive. By adopting attitudes and behaviors that demonstrate outwardly a complete rejection of the id's true desires, anxiety is blocked. Reaction formations tend to become a permanent part of an individual's personality unless the id-ego conflict is somehow resolved. As an example of this, reconsider the husband who unconsciously desires other women. If he employs a reaction formation rather than projection to prevent his anxiety, he may become obsessively devoted to his wife and shower her with gifts and pronouncements of his unwavering love. Another example comes from many disturbing news reports of the violent crime referred to as *gay bashing*. In a Freudian interpretation, a man who is experiencing unconscious homosexual desires (which he fears, due to society's disapproval of nonheterosexual orientations) might engage in the extreme opposite behavior of attacking and beating gay men to hide his true desires and the anxiety associated with them (this concept is discussed further in this reading).

### Sublimation

Both Sigmund Freud and Anna Freud considered most of the defense mechanisms, including the four previously described, as indicating problems in psychological adjustment (*neuroses*). Conversely, they saw the defense of sublimation as not only normal but also desirable. When people invoke sublimation, they are finding socially acceptable ways of discharging anxious energy that is the result of unconscious forbidden desires. Sigmund Freud maintained that because everyone's id contains these desires, sublimation is a necessary part of a productive and healthy life. Furthermore, he believed that most strong desires can be sublimated in various ways. Someone who has intense aggressive impulses might sublimate them by engaging in contact sports or becoming a surgeon. A teenage girl's passion for horseback riding might be interpreted as sublimated unacceptable sexual desires. A man who has an erotic fixation on the human body might sublimate his feelings by becoming a painter or sculptor of nudes.

Freud proposed that all of what we call "civilization" has been made possible through the mechanism of sublimation. In his view, humans have been able to sublimate their primitive biological urges and impulses, channeling them instead into building civilized societies. However, Freud suggested, sometimes humans' unconscious forces overpower our *collective egos* and these primitive, animalistic urges may burst out in barbaric, uncivilized expressions, such as war. Overall, however, it is only through sublimation that civilization can exist at all (S. Freud, 1936).



## IMPLICATIONS AND RECENT APPLICATIONS

Although Anna Freud stated clearly in her book that the use of defense mechanisms is often associated with neurotic behavior, this is not always the case. Nearly everyone uses various defense mechanisms occasionally in their lives, sometimes to help them cope with periods of increased stress. They help us reduce our anxiety and maintain a positive self-image. Use of certain defense mechanisms has even been shown to reduce unhealthy physiological activity. For example, use of projection has been found to be associated with lower blood pressure (Cramer, 2003). Nevertheless, defense mechanisms involve self-deception and distortions of reality that can produce negative consequences if they are overused. For example, a person who uses regression every time life's problems become overwhelming might never develop the strategies necessary to deal with their problems and solve them. Consequently, the person's development as a whole person may be inhibited. Moreover, Freud and many other psychologists have contended that when anxiety caused by specific conflicts is repressed, it is sometimes manifested in other ways, such as phobias, anxiety attacks, or obsessive-compulsive disorders.

Most researchers today have questioned most of Freud's theories, including his notion of ego defense mechanisms. Do the defense mechanisms really exist? Do they actually function "unconsciously" to block anxiety created by forbidden impulses of the id? Probably, the most often cited criticism of all of Freud's work is that to test it scientifically is difficult at best—and usually impossible. Many studies have tried to demonstrate the existence of various Freudian concepts. The results have been mixed. A few of his ideas have found some scientific support (see Cramer, 2007); others have been clearly disproved; and still others simply cannot be studied (see Fisher & Greenberg, 1977; 1995). One fascinating study may have found supporting scientific evidence that *homophobia*, an irrational fear, avoidance, and prejudice toward gay and lesbian individuals, may be a reaction formation used to ward off the extreme anxiety caused by a person's own repressed homosexual tendencies (Adams, Wright, & Lohr, 1996). In this study, a group of men were given a written test to determine their level of homophobia and then divided into two groups: homophobic and nonhomophobic. Then participants were exposed to videos depicting explicit heterosexual, gay, or lesbian sexual scenes, and while they viewed these videos they were monitored for physiological signs of sexual arousal. The only difference found between the groups was when they viewed the videos of gay males. In this condition, "The results indicate that the homophobic men showed a significant increase in [arousal], but that the [nonhomophobic] men did not" (p. 443). In fact, 66% of the nonhomophobic group showed no significant signs of arousal while viewing the homosexual video, but only 20% of the homophobic group showed little or no evidence of arousal. Furthermore, when asked to rate their level of arousal, the homophobic men *underestimated* their degree of arousal in response to the homosexual video. This study's results are clearly consistent with Anna Freud's description of the defense mechanism of reaction formation and lend support for a possible explanation of violence targeted against gay individuals.

## CONCLUSION

As evidenced by studies discussed in this reading, scientific interest in the defense mechanisms appears to be on the upswing among psychologists in various subfields, including cognition, human development, personality, and social psychology (see Cramer, 2007). Through an awareness and understanding of the defense mechanisms, your ability to obtain important insights into the causes of people's actions is clearly enhanced. If you keep a list of the defense mechanisms handy in your "brain's back pocket," you may begin to notice them in others or even in yourself. By the way, if you think someone is using a defense mechanism, remember this: he or she is doing so to avoid unpleasant anxiety. Therefore, it is probably not a great idea to bring it to his or her attention. Knowledge of the defense mechanisms can be a powerful tool in your interactions with others, but that knowledge must be used carefully and responsibly.

You can easily experience for yourself the continuing influence of Anna Freud's synthesis and analysis of her father's concept of defense mechanisms by picking up virtually any recent academic or scholarly work that discusses psychoanalytic theory in detail. Most of the Freud citations you will encounter will be referring to Sigmund, and rightly so. But when the discussion turns to the defense mechanisms, it is Anna Freud's 1946 book and its various revisions that serve as the authoritative work on the topic.

Adams, H., Wright, L., & Lohr, B. (1996). Is homophobia associated with homosexual arousal? *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 105*(3), 440–445.

Cramer, P. (2003). Defense mechanisms and physiological reactivity to stress. *Journal of Personality, 71*, 221–244.

Cramer, P. (2007). *Protecting the self: Defense mechanisms in action*. New York: Guilford Press.

Fisher, S., & Greenberg, R. (1977). *The scientific credibility of Freud's theories and therapy*. New York: Basic Books.

Fisher, S., & Greenberg, R. (1995). *Freud scientifically reappraised: Testing the theories and therapy*. New York: Wiley.

Freud, S. (1936). *A disturbance of memory on the Acropolis*. London: Hogarth Press.

Freud, S. (1953 to 1974). *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Hogarth Press.

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## Reading 31: LEARNING TO BE DEPRESSED

Seligman, M. E. P., & Maier, S. F. (1967). Failure to escape traumatic shock. *Journal of Experimental Psychology, 74*, 1–9.

If you are like most people, you expect that your actions will produce certain consequences. Your expectations cause you to behave in ways that will produce desirable consequences *and* to avoid behaviors that will lead to undesirable consequences. In other words, your actions are determined, at least in part, by your belief that they will bring about a certain result; they are contingent upon a certain consequence.

Let's assume for a moment that you are unhappy in your present job, so you begin the process of making a change. You make contacts with others in