

# Freud's Defense Mechanisms

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As a part of the never-ending interplay between the id, ego, and superego, the mind (in particular the ego) must constantly repress anxiety-causing impulses or memories. This repression, though, is often tenuous and difficult to maintain. In order to sustain this repression and fend off anxiety, often in the face of constant reminders of the repressed item, the ego additionally employs several defense mechanisms. These mechanisms help to maintain the stability and sanity of the individual, though they sap a considerable amount of psychic energy in the process.

## Reaction Formation

To ward off an anxiety-causing and unacceptable impulse, one may replace it with its over-emphasized diametrical opposite. For example, the young boy who hates his older brother for his accomplishments and the rewards and praise which he receives may transform this hatred into aggressive love and praise. This replacement of his hatred with its opposite, love, represses the hatred, and satisfies his superego's guide for what is acceptable, but does not eliminate the original impulse. The best indication that an emotion or act is a formed reaction is any noticeable persistence or excess in the behavior. Indeed, an individual motivated by reaction formation may be stifling or absurdly, unnecessarily overzealous, evidence of the repressed impulse at its root.

## Projection

In projection, forbidden, unacceptable urges build up and break into consciousness, but are attributed to others. Freud's example: A jealous husband may call his wife unfaithful, while it is he who wants to have an affair but cannot face this. His projection means that he has first repressed his own urge, then projected it upon his wife; Next, he will distance himself from her in a further attempt to disassociate himself from this unacceptable impulse.

## Rationalization

If repressed thoughts break through into the conscious mind, they may be reinterpreted and misunderstood as something other than they actually are. This unconscious rationalization rids a person of anxiety or guilt by formulating perfectly reasonable reasons for the unacceptable behavior. The father who beats his child justifies it unconsciously by convincing himself that it is for the child's own good, thereby removing the anxiety this unacceptable act would otherwise cause.

## Displacement

When a natural urge is not ventable, and is then repressed, it is often displaced to another, disguised, outlet. A man's anger at his boss, unacceptable because of his position, may be displaced in a later beating of his child. Here the unacceptable urge is vented in a manner which is acceptable to the ego and superego.

