

EGO DEFENSE MECHANISMS in Psychoanalytic Theory


- ✓ *EGO DEFENSE MECHANISMS* are *unconscious protective maneuvers* employed by the *ego* to cope with *anxiety*, either *neurotic* or *moral*. They are a normal part of human experience and are not considered maladaptive or pathological unless used to such an extreme that they disrupt a person's life or distort reality.

- ✓ *REPRESSION* is referred to as the *primary ego defense mechanism* since the other *ego defense mechanisms* require it to have taken place before they may be expressed. *Repression* occurs when troublesome, anxiety laden, thoughts, experiences, or events in one's world are *unconsciously* relegated to one's *unconscious mind*. For example, a young girl, abused by her father at age 4, has no recollection of such abuse in adulthood.
 - It should be noted that all persons have had experiences in childhood that were frightening. Just being lost on the beach for several hours would be absolutely terrifying to a five year old boy. All experiences such as this are commonly repressed since to keep them in consciousness would cause us to constantly be relive the terror. Repressed material in our unconscious mind, however, can accumulate. And, according to Freud, this repressed material in our unconscious mind can continue to influence our behavior as adults. For example, the young boy may avoid beaches and not know why and the young girl may have difficulty in establishing healthy relationships with men.

- ✓ *DEFENSE MECHANISM EXAMPLES*
 - *Projection*~ attributing to others one's own unacceptable thoughts, feelings, impulses, etc. The moralistic spouse, who is tempted to have an affair, accuses his partner of being unfaithful. A person, who does not want to recognize his lack of skill at tennis, blames his bad shots on a flawed racquet.
 - *Displacement*~ redirecting our impulses (often anger) from the real target (because that is too dangerous) to a safer but innocent person, animal, or object. The classic case is the frustrated worker, who can't yell at the boss but comes home and yells at his spouse or children or kicks the dog.
 - *Reaction formation*~ behaving in a way that is the polar opposite to our true feelings. A woman, burdened with a child she wished she had never conceived, smothers the child with affection, and "plays the role" of the perfect loving mom...the exact opposite of her true unconscious feelings.



Edvard Munch's "The Scream", 1893
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- *Rationalization*~ creating false but plausible excuses to justify our failures, shortcomings, or unacceptable behavior. For example, a person who steals from his employer *rationalizes* it by telling himself that everyone does it anyway, so why not him? In the *sour grapes* situation, a person who is unable to attain a desired goal *rationalizes* it after the fact by telling himself the goal was probably not worth it after all. In the *sweet lemons* version of rationalization, a person who has had to accept what he at first thought was a less desirable goal than another, *rationalizes* his situation by telling himself that it is really *sweeter* than he originally thought.
- *Denial* ~ refusing to admit or face a threatening realities or situations by *denying* their seriousness. For example, when a person with a heart condition denies that their overeating or smoking is of any consequence they may be described as *in denial*; or, when a person is unwilling to “read the writing on the wall” and accept the fact that a relationship is over.
- *Conversion* ~ according to psychoanalytic theory, this psychic event is caused by a *repression* of *intrapsychic conflicts* and their *conversion* into a physical symptom, generally a symbolic one. The symptoms enable the person to communicate that they need special consideration and special treatment. Often the symptoms are dramatic, sudden, and very visible, *e.g.*, becoming deaf suddenly or even mute, developing paralysis in a limb, exhibiting epileptic-like seizures. This condition is identified in clinical psychology as a *conversion disorder*. It must be distinguished from *psychosomatic disorders* where genuine physical health changes are seen (*e.g.*, ulcers) and from *malingering*, which involves the fully *conscious* voluntary production and presentation of false or grossly exaggerated physical or psychological symptoms. 

For further information on *ego defense mechanisms*, check out this web site:
<http://mentalhelp.net/psyhelp/chap5/chap5i.htm>