

Chapters

- [Authorship](#)
- [Table of Contents](#)
- 1. [Introduction to Psychology and Research Methods](#)
- 2. [Biopsychology](#)
- 3. [Personality Development](#)
- 4. [Learning and Behavioral Psychology](#)
- 5. [Sensation and Perception](#)
- 6. [Memory, Intelligence and States of Mind](#)
- 7. [Motivation and Emotion](#)
- 8. [Social Psychology](#)
- 9. [Psychopathology](#)
- 10. [Psychotherapy](#)

- [References](#)

FAQs

- [About AllPsych](#)
- [Dr. Heffner](#)
- [Recognition](#)
- [Contact Us](#)
- [Disclaimer](#)

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Psychology 101

Chapter 3: Personality Development

[Section 1: Introduction to Development, Personality, and Stage Theories](#)

[Section 2: Motor and Cognitive Development](#)

[Section 3: Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development](#)

[Section 4: Freud's Stages of Psychosexual Development](#)

[Section 5: Freud's Structural and Topographical Model](#)

Section 6: Freud's Ego Defense Mechanisms

[Section 7: Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development](#)

Ego Defense Mechanisms

We stated earlier that the ego's job was to satisfy the id's impulses, not offend the moralistic character of the superego, while still taking into consideration the reality of the situation. We also stated that this was not an easy job. Think of the id as the 'devil on your shoulder' and the superego as the 'angel of your shoulder.' We don't want either one to get too strong so we talk to both of them, hear their perspective and then make a decision. This decision is the ego talking, the one looking for that healthy balance.

Before we can talk more about this, we need to understand what drives the id, ego, and superego. According to Freud, we only have two drives; sex and aggression. In other words, everything we do is motivated by one of these two drives.

Sex, also called Eros or the Life force, represents our drive to live, prosper, and produce offspring. Aggression, also called Thanatos or our Death force, represents our need to stay alive and stave off threats to our existence, our power, and our prosperity.

Now the ego has a difficult time satisfying both the id and the superego, but it doesn't have to do so without help. The ego has some tools it can use in its job as the mediator, tools that help defend the ego. These are called **Ego Defense Mechanisms** or Defenses. When the ego has a difficult time making both the id and the superego happy, it will employ one or more of

these defenses:

DEFENSE	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE
denial	arguing against an anxiety provoking stimuli by stating it doesn't exist	denying that your physician's diagnosis of cancer is correct and seeking a second opinion
<u>displacement</u>	taking out impulses on a less threatening target	slamming a door instead of hitting a person, yelling at your spouse after an argument with your boss
intellectualization	avoiding unacceptable emotions by focusing on the intellectual aspects	focusing on the details of a funeral as opposed to the sadness and grief
<u>projection</u>	placing unacceptable impulses in yourself onto someone else	when losing an argument, you state "You're just Stupid;" homophobia

rationalization

supplying a logical or rational reason as opposed to the real reason

stating that you were fired because you didn't kiss up the the boss, when the real reason was your poor performance

reaction formation

taking the opposite belief because the true belief causes anxiety

having a bias against a particular race or culture and then embracing that race or culture to the extreme

regression

returning to a previous stage of development

sitting in a corner and crying after hearing bad news; throwing a temper tantrum when you don't get your way

repression

pulling into the unconscious

forgetting sexual abuse from your childhood due to the trauma and anxiety

sublimation

acting out unacceptable impulses in a socially acceptable way

sublimating your aggressive impulses toward a career as a boxer; becoming a surgeon because of your desire to cut; lifting weights to release 'pent up' energy

suppression

pushing into the unconscious

trying to forget something that causes you anxiety

Ego defenses are not necessarily unhealthy as you can see by the examples above. In fact, the lack of these defenses, or the inability to use them effectively can often lead to problems in life. However, we sometimes employ the defenses at the wrong time or overuse them, which can be equally destructive.



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