

Psychological Defenses

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson is going to cover psychological defense mechanisms by examining:

1. Unconscious Defense Mechanisms
2. Conscious Defense Mechanisms

1. Unconscious Defense Mechanisms

When faced with stress, anxiety, or other harmful things, the human brain is not necessarily defenseless. There are different ways that the brain protects itself from harm. One of the first ways that psychologists identified the brain protecting itself was identified by Sigmund Freud (who you may recall from psychoanalytical theory) in the late 1800s. Freud said that over time, the brain develops these unconscious, learned patterns of protecting itself from anxiety and stress. He called these patterns **defense mechanisms**. In other words, these defense mechanisms allow a person to avoid thinking about or dealing with things that are mentally or emotionally harmful, particularly to one's sense of self.

This type of defense is intended to protect a person from things that negatively affect mental health until the brain is better able to deal with them. Or, if it is an issue that is unnecessary to deal with altogether, then this type of defense can simply dismiss it altogether and allow the person to move on to more important things. This type of defense, however, does have the potential to be unhealthy.



TERM TO KNOW

Defense Mechanisms

Unconscious learned patterns of protecting oneself from anxiety

There are several types of defense mechanisms, including:

- Denial, which is refusing to accept something that's unpleasant. Instead of facing a problem, a person would essentially ignore anything that is bothering them or causing stress and anxiety.
- Compensation, which is countering some weakness or perceived threat by emphasizing a strength that you have, instead reinforcing your sense of self and self-worth



EXAMPLE If somebody says that a person is not talented in a certain area, that person may reply with something like, "I'm a really great basketball player," emphasizing something that he actually does excel at.

- Intellectualization, where a person takes a situation and separates it from its emotional component.

➡ **EXAMPLE** If a history teacher says that Hitler was a great leader, you might look at statement in a very intellectual sense, detaching Hitler from the emotional component of all the terrible things that he did.

- Rationalization, which is justifying a bad choice with logic or rationale. It refers to backing something up by giving some reason; in reality, this reason doesn't necessarily justify a course of action, but in the individual's mind, it does.
- Projection, where a person sees their own negative aspects, feelings, or abilities in other people.
- Sublimation, where a person channels unacceptable energies or desires into acceptable activities.

➡ **EXAMPLE** For example, instead of talking about unacceptable subject matter, it might be more acceptable if you sing about it. Or, you might take a cold shower instead of having untoward feelings towards other people.

These are the defense mechanisms identified by Freud. There are other psychological defense mechanisms that others have identified, such as passive aggression, humor, and even altruism.

2. Conscious Defense Mechanisms

A person can consciously learn about ways to protect themselves over time by seeking out situations, people, and work that are healthy and acceptable to their sense of self, and reinforcing positive psychological ideas. However, some people can find themselves in negative situations so often that they feel those situations are unavoidable.

In other words, they learn, in a negative way, how to defend themselves. They come to accept those situations as being true and unavoidable. This is known as **learned helplessness**. Learned helplessness is when a person learns, over time, that they are unable to overcome or escape certain obstacles.

IN CONTEXT

A good example of learned helplessness is what is called "battered person syndrome." A person in an abusive relationship learns to stay in that relationship even though common sense, from an outside standpoint, would direct the person to get out.

Another example is when a child thinks that they aren't good in a particular subject at school because they have consistent reinforcement from someone like a parent or teacher telling them they can't succeed. Eventually, the child might come to accept it, and will not try to improve in that subject.

Learned helplessness is closely related to **depression**, where a person experiences feelings of helplessness and a lack of **hope**. They have decreased energy and activity levels, less pleasure, less desire to eat, etc. Recurring thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, similar to those experienced in depression, can help to perpetuate this cycle in a person. Learned helplessness is one of the root causes of depression.

Treatment for learned helplessness, and the resulting depression, involves helping people to understand their

own abilities, and that they aren't necessarily helpless. Basically, they are taught to create feelings of hope, which allow them to overcome feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Treatment for a person with learned helplessness may involve finding something they are good at and reinforcing that thing.



TERM TO KNOW

Learned Helplessness

When a person learns over time that they are unable to overcome or escape certain obstacles and learns to accept them

Depression

A mood disorder marked by low affect or emotion and reduced activity, lack of enjoyment in activities, and feelings of loneliness and hopelessness

Hope

The feeling that things will get better and that a person isn't helpless



SUMMARY

Sigmund Freud described **unconscious defense mechanisms**, which are learned patterns of protecting oneself from negative stressors. There are several types of defense mechanisms identified by Freud, including: denial, compensation, intellectualization, rationalization, projection, and sublimation. Other defense mechanisms have been described by different people and include passive aggression, humor, and altruism. There are also **conscious defense mechanisms** used for protecting the self, such as seeking out situations that are healthy and acceptable to one's sense of self. People can also develop negative conscious defense mechanisms such as learned helplessness.

Good luck!

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia Author Erick Taggart.



TERMS TO KNOW

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Hope

The feeling that things will get better and that a person isn't helpless.

Learned Helplessness

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