

Sigmund Freud introduced the foundational concept of psychological defense mechanisms, but it was his daughter, Anna Freud, who more fully systematized and defined the specific list in her seminal 1936 book, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*.

Here are several of the primary defense mechanisms originally identified or heavily emphasized by the Freuds:

- **Repression:** Pushing painful or unacceptable thoughts, memories, and desires out of conscious awareness.
A person who survived a catastrophic car crash as a child has no conscious memory of the accident itself, yet they experience unexplained panic attacks whenever they smell burning rubber.
- **Denial:** Refusing to accept or acknowledge an obvious, distressing reality or fact.
A person continues to buy expensive luxury items, ignoring collection notices piling up in the mail.
- **Projection:** Attributing one's own unacceptable thoughts, feelings, or motives to another person.
A coworker who secretly dislikes you and wants you off the project walks up to you and states, "I know you don't want to work on this project."
- **Displacement:** Redirecting dangerous or unacceptable impulses away from their true target onto a safer, less threatening one.
A person is humiliated by their boss at work; unable to argue back, they go home and unload their anger by screaming at their kids over a minor mess.
- **Regression:** Reverting to behaviors associated with an earlier stage of development when faced with severe stress or anxiety.
An adult who feels completely overwhelmed by stress, conflict, or a heavy workload curls up under their desk in the fetal position and begins crying uncontrollably.
- **Sublimation:** Channeling socially unacceptable impulses into productive, admirable, and socially beneficial activities.
A person with aggressive urges and intense, chronic anger channels that energy into disciplined physical training and becomes deeply committed to exercise.
- **Rationalization:** Creating logical, socially acceptable justifications for behavior that is actually driven by unconscious motives.
A student fails an important exam because they spent the weekend partying, but they tell themselves and their parents, "The test was poorly written, and the professor hates me anyway."
- **Reaction Formation:** Converting an unacceptable feeling or impulse into its opposite to hide the true sentiment.
A person who deeply dislikes their new stepmother goes completely out of their way to shower her with lavish gifts and attention.
- **Identification with the Aggressor:** Adopting the traits, behaviors, or mindset of a threatening or abusive person to gain a sense of control.
A child who is severely bullied at school starts mimicking the bully's cruel behavior, style of dress, and language, using those exact tactics to bully younger children.
- **Intellectualization:** Distancing oneself from uncomfortable emotions by focusing on abstract, factual, or analytical aspects of a situation.
After being diagnosed with a serious medical illness, a patient completely blocks out their fear and sadness by clinically analyzing survival rate statistics and treatment trial methodologies for hours on end.