

Psychodynamic view of the internal self

Alongside the notion of different levels of consciousness, Freud developed a theory about how the psyche or mind is structured. He saw the mind as being divided into three competing parts: the id, the ego and the super-ego.

CRITICAL THINKING

A definition of the psyche is *the human soul, mind, or spirit*, which comes from Latin via the Greek *psukhe*, meaning “breath, life, soul”. One criticism of the psychodynamic approach is that it does not encompass the spiritual dimension of the psyche. Given that a spiritual life is important to many people, does this limit the usefulness of this approach? Would not having a spiritual dimension matter to you?



The *id* is the early instinctual part of the mind which is intent on self-gratification (the ‘pleasure principle’) and driven by unconscious drives both towards life, love and sex on one hand and death on the other. The id has no morals, no core values and no concept of danger or excess. The id just wants to party and to hell with the consequences!



Oh, I like the sound of the id; I can really relate to that when I go out on a Friday night and there are times when I have no real idea what I have done. But I then feel guilty the next day because I have been excessive and drunk too much and have vague memories of doing stupid things.

A That indeed sounds like the id in action. But I think you may have also introduced us to another part of the mind – the super-ego.

The *super-ego* is your conscience where all the messages that you have received from your parents and significant others are stored. It is that little voice inside you telling you not to do something because it is wrong, which echoes the morals, values and social conventions you learned as a child. Whereas the id is all about self-indulgence, the super-ego is all about doing what is right and sensible. The super-ego tries to check risky impulses and acts like a censor to the id.

Q Yes, I often get that voice in my head that tells me not to do something because it is dangerous or bad, but it seems that this voice does not want to have fun. It is like having to be on your best behaviour at a funeral when all you can see is the funny side. This seems like two extremes – either do what you like or don't do anything bad.

A Quite right, but this is where the ego comes in!
The *ego* acts like a mediator between the two voices of the id and the super-ego. The ego sees the whole picture and draws on logic and reason to work out how to balance the demands of the other parts and arrive at a reasonable response based on the reality of the situation.

Q So it is like when I want to go rock climbing. I could just climb the rock face but that would mean if I make a mistake or slip, I could fall and injure myself. My super-ego is telling me it is too dangerous, so don't do it, but I want to do it. Then my ego analyses what my id and super-ego are saying and comes up with a compromise. I can go rock climbing but I must use all the safety equipment.

A I think that is a pretty good explanation of how they work together.

EXAMPLE

Id, Ego and Super-ego go to the pub on a Friday night

Id: Thank God, it's Friday night. It's been a long hard week and I am in the mood for letting my hair down and having some fun. Let's get hammered! I'll get the first round in.

Super-ego: Well, is that really a good idea? You've got that essay to write before Monday and you promised to go round and help your mum in the garden tomorrow. Anyway, you can't drink because you've got to drive home and if you get wasted you won't be any good to anyone tomorrow.

Id: You are such a killjoy. I don't want to be thinking about that now. It's time to party – get lost!

Ego: Hang on, guys – it doesn't have to be one thing or the other. What about having a couple of drinks then getting a taxi home? You can always pick up the car in the morning and drop in on your mum on the way back.

- Can you think of a time you let your id take over and later regretted it?
- Can you think of a time when your super-ego stopped you doing something you wanted to do?
- Can you think of a time when your ego successfully found the middle ground?

Ego defences

The id and the super-ego are in constant conflict and there are times when the ego is unable to cope with the competing demands. Freud suggested that the ego develops a range of defences to stave off difficult feelings like depression and anxiety. Ego defences are like the walls around a castle keeping the ego safe from the constant attacks of the id and the super-ego. Here are some examples of common defence mechanisms:

Repression: this literally means 'subduing someone or something by force' (*Oxford English Dictionary*). It works at an unconscious level to stop uncomfortable thoughts or feelings from bubbling up. The thoughts and feelings do not disappear completely as they lurk in the unconscious and still affect what we do but repression helps us deal with the immediate discomfort. An example might be repressing guilty feelings of attraction towards your friend's partner but unconsciously flirting with them anyway.

Projection: this is when you project onto someone else your uncomfortable thoughts or feelings because you don't want to face the fact that these are actually your own thoughts or feelings. An example might be when you take a dislike to someone but rather than admitting to disliking that person you persuade yourself that they don't like you.

Denial: this is when you block the reality of a situation from your awareness: 'I do not want to hear this!' A classic example would be a smoker denying that smoking is bad for their health.

Displacement: this is when we take out frustration or anger on something else rather than the real object of our frustration. An example might be coming home after a bad day at work and taking it out on your partner or yelling at the TV.

Intellectualisation: this is when you try to explain your feelings away in a cold and detached way, rather than deal with the rawness of your emotions. For example,

you might focus on all the practicalities of splitting up with your partner, rather than engaging with how you are feeling about the end of your relationship.

Rationalisation: this involves the person explaining away a situation rather than acknowledging the reality. For example, a student might blame their poor mark for an assignment on the teacher's bias, rather than facing the fact that they have not done enough work.



REFLECTION

Do you recognise any defence mechanisms that you use?

What are these defence mechanisms helping you to avoid?