

## Psychoanalytic theory – Freud

According to Freud, there are **three levels of awareness** in an individual's mind: conscious, preconscious, and unconscious.

The **conscious mind** consists of the information and thoughts that a person thinks right now – what they are directly and immediately aware of.

The **preconscious mind** is what we often refer to when we talk about “memory”. It consists of information that we are not aware of right this moment, but that is retrievable.

The **unconscious mind** contains all the information we have but are unaware of and cannot retrieve by will. It also contains information like painful or frightening experiences or drives and urges that are not accepted in society. It is these suppressed experiences and drives that are of particular importance in Freud's psychoanalytic theory. According to Freud, all mental health symptoms come from unresolved conflicts stored away in the unconscious mind.

These conflicts emerge between the **three components of the Psyche**: The Id, the Ego, and the Superego. One can imagine these components as three people, each with a certain interest or task, discussing how to lead this human.

The **Id** contains our basic needs and wants to assure their satisfaction. The Id goes after two instincts: The “life instinct”, or Eros, and the “death instinct”, Thanatos. Former is about survival and contains for example breathing and eating. Thanatos on the other hand is about self-destruction, aggression, and violence.

The **Superego** contains morality and social norms, and its main interest is for the individual to stay in line with these.

The **Ego** can be imagined as a mediator between Id and Superego; it is responsible for balancing our social needs with morality and social norms. Whenever conflicts arise the Ego cannot solve, a person engages in defense mechanisms.

At the root of these conflicts is Freud's concept of the **Psychosexual Stages**. According to Freud, every human goes through five developmental stages, with each stage arising new conflicts. The main goal is to successfully overcome the conflicts specific to that stage and move on to the next one.

If a person fails to resolve a conflict, they either get stuck in the respective stage, or carry on problems even when moving to the next one. It is these unresolved conflicts that Freud sees as the root of all mental health symptoms, as when such conflicts remain unresolved, the ego engages in **defense mechanisms**.

When the ego gets confronted with information that it does not find a way to deal with, it engages in mechanisms to keep the material in the unconscious mind (and thereby invisible to the ego) or to store new undesirable material there. These mechanisms are meant to lower anxiety but can lead to disfunction if overused and the ego starts to depend on them.

Some of the most important of these mechanisms:

- **Denial:** The person will not acknowledge something that is true. In this case, the person really does not understand that what they deny is true, because the respective material is stored away in the unconscious and thereby not retrievable or visible to them.
- **Displacement:** A feeling (for example aggression) towards one person gets directed onto another person who has nothing to do with it.
- **Regression:** The individual moves back to an earlier developmental stage with its behaviors and conflicts.
- **Fixation:** The individual gets stuck at a particular stage and stays in the respective conflict.
- **Projection:** The individual projects its own (undesirable) behavior or self-issues onto another person.
- **Repression:** Material from the conscious or preconscious mind is moved over to the unconscious mind so the individual becomes unaware of it.

In a way, all defense mechanisms try to accomplish some degree of repression.

Freud's psychoanalytic theory is often criticized and not commonly used in therapy; however, it presents a concept that is fundamental to understanding the human mind and one own's psyche.