

Coping Mechanisms

Do you know what causes anxiety, stress, panic and many other difficult human experiences? Let me tell you something that Freud wrote about several years ago; something that explains how we cope with difficulties and stressors.

Freud and many of his students believed (and still do to this day), that we have three basic parts to our personality; the Id, Ego & Superego. The Id's primary role is to increase pleasure and decrease pain/distress at all costs. This of course is not always possible, at least in a healthy way. Think about a student who neglected to study for their college finals. As the professor passes out the exam, the student clearly breaks into anxiety. How is our student going to cope with this anxiety? Let me introduce the other two characters before we revisit our student's dilemma.

The Ego serves many purposes, one of which is to help the ID reduce distress, hence increasing pleasure. It, however, has some rules to follow. First it cannot violate reality, and second it shouldn't violate all those things mom and dad taught us not to do (our morals).

The Superego is a collection of our moral learnings; things we should and shouldn't do (like neglect to study for our finals), that we learned throughout our life.

Now let's return to our student. The anxiety is clearly uncomfortable for our student, something that he wants to reduce. The student's Ego must find a way to "cope" or make the anxiety manageable, without violating reality and our morals (superego). Our student can do so in several ways, some of which violate the rules. Let's take a look at some options:

Healthy

Sublimation: "I learned my lesson, I will need to schedule more time for study in the future."

Regression: "I'll just cheat from my neighbor."

Compartmentalization: "I will deal with the anxiety later, right now I have to do the best I can on this test."

Less Healthy (slight violation of reality/morals)

Rationalization: "Who cares about passing this class, it's not like English 101 is foundational to getting a good paying job."

Repression: "That anxiety, I don't feel that anymore."

Withdrawal: "I'll just take a Xanax," or "for some reason I can't stop daydreaming about school being over."

Unhealthy (Clear violation of reality/morals)

Omnipotent Control: "I'll just talk to the professor. I'm sure that I can win him over with wit and charm so that he will let me skip the test all together."

Denial: "What test?"

Continue reading and learn the definitions of common coping methods. While you're at it, try to determine which ones you use and how you use them. You may want to ask those close to you. They are often much more aware of your quirks than you.



Coping Mechanisms

Less Healthy

(Violates reality to some degree)

Primitive Withdrawal: Finding a way to escape from our reality. Sometimes through healthy methods such as sleep and daydreaming. Sometimes through less healthy ways such as substance abuse and a psychotic break.

Denial: Refusing to accept reality.

Omnipotent Control: An unrealistic belief that one can influence others or control a situation.

Projection: Not accepting a part of who we are (e.g. insecure) while demanding that others have that trait.

Projective Identification: Not accepting a part of who we are, while demanding that others have that trait; followed by treating the other person as if they had that trait in an effort to get them to believe it. (e.g. "I'm not jealous, you are. Oh and by the way, my ex-girlfriend called me today.")

Splitting of the Ego: Not accepting parts of another person (E.g. A child's idealization of their abusive father and denial of negative aspects)

Dissociation: Under specific circumstances (trauma), an ability to remove oneself from reality/distress by going into a fantasy.

Reaction Formation: Adopting the opposite feeling or belief about something (e.g. to cope with insecurity a person acts overconfident).

More Healthy

(Minimal violation of reality)

Repression: Motivated forgetting of something distressing (e.g. forgetting that your car payment is due).

Regression: Returning to a way of coping typically utilized at an earlier age (e.g. fighting, breaking things).

Isolation of Affect: Temporarily ignoring distress (e.g. firefighters running into a burning building).

Intellectualization: Removing all emotion and only focusing on the logic of a situation (e.g. a person hears about a disaster. Instead of feeling emotion, they go into problem solving mode).

Rationalization: offering some degree of explanation for a situation that makes us feel better.

Compartmentalization: Putting the distress away until it can be dealt with in a more effective way.

Turning Against the Self: Placing negative emotion that you feel towards someone else on yourself (e.g. It was my fault that they did that to me).

Displacement: Redirecting distress from its original source to something different (e.g. upset about work yet you yell at your spouse).

Sublimation: One of the healthiest of all coping strategies. Directing the energy caused by the distress, anxiety or displeasure into a positive activity (e.g. a spouse worried about divorce takes to studying how to be a better spouse.)

