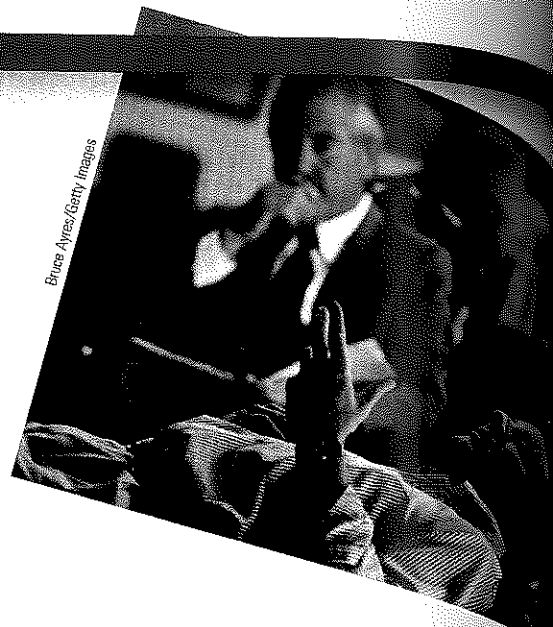


# Module 55

## Freud's Psychoanalytic Perspective: Exploring the Unconscious

### Module Learning Objectives

- 55-1** Explain how Freud's treatment of psychological disorders led to his view of the unconscious mind.
- 55-2** Describe Freud's view of personality.
- 55-3** Identify Freud's developmental stages.
- 55-4** Describe Freud's views on how people defend themselves against anxiety.
- 55-5** Discuss how contemporary psychologists view Freud's psychoanalytic perspective.



Bruce Ayres/Gistty Images

Freud's work is so well known that you may assume it's the most important theory in psychology. It's not. However, Freud was the first to focus clinical attention on the unconscious mind, and he is part of psychology's historical development.

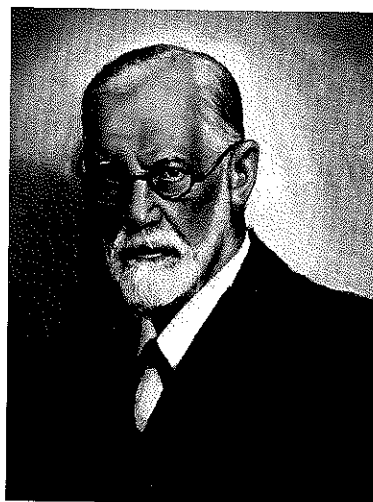
### Psychoanalytic Theory's Core Ideas

- 55-1** How did Sigmund Freud's treatment of psychological disorders lead to his view of the unconscious mind?

Ask 100 people on the street to name a notable deceased psychologist, suggested Keith Stanovich (1996, p. 1), and "Freud would be the winner hands down." In the popular mind, he is to psychology's history what Elvis Presley is to rock music's history. Freud's influence not only lingers in psychiatry and clinical psychology, but also in literary and film interpretation. Almost 9 in 10 American college courses that reference psychoanalysis are outside of psychology departments (Cohen, 2007). His early twentieth-century concepts penetrate our twenty-first-century language. Without realizing their source, we may speak of *ego*, *repression*, *projection*, *sibling rivalry*, *Freudian slips*, and *fixation*. So, who was Freud, and what did he teach?

Like all of us, Sigmund Freud was a product of his times. His Victorian era was a time of tremendous discovery and scientific advancement, but it is also known today as a time of sexual repression and male dominance. Men's and women's roles were clearly defined, with male superiority assumed and only male sexuality generally acknowledged (discreetly).

Sigmund Freud, 1856–1939  
"I was the only worker in a new field."



Long before entering the University of Vienna in 1873, young Freud showed signs of independence and brilliance. He so loved reading plays, poetry, and philosophy that he once ran up a bookstore debt beyond his means. As a teen he often took his evening meal in his tiny bedroom in order to lose no time from his studies. After medical school he set up a private practice specializing in nervous disorders. Before long, however, he faced patients whose disorders made no neurological sense. For example, a patient might have lost all feeling in a hand—yet there is no sensory nerve that, if damaged, would numb the entire hand and nothing else. Freud's search for a cause for such disorders set his mind running in a direction destined to change human self-understanding.

Might some neurological disorders have psychological causes? Observing patients led Freud to his "discovery" of the unconscious. He speculated that lost feeling in one's hand might be caused by a fear of touching one's genitals; that unexplained blindness or deafness might be caused by not wanting to see or hear something that aroused intense anxiety. After some early unsuccessful trials with hypnosis, Freud turned to **free association**, in which he told the patient to relax and say whatever came to mind, no matter how embarrassing or trivial. He assumed that a line of mental dominoes had fallen from his patients' distant past to their troubled present. Free association, he believed, would allow him to retrace that line, following a chain of thought leading into the patient's unconscious, where painful unconscious memories, often from childhood, could be retrieved and released. Freud called his theory of personality and the associated treatment techniques **psychoanalysis**.

Basic to Freud's theory was his belief that the mind is mostly hidden (**FIGURE 55.1**). Our conscious awareness is like the part of an iceberg that floats above the surface. Beneath our awareness is the larger **unconscious** mind with its thoughts, wishes, feelings, and memories. Some of these thoughts we store temporarily in a *preconscious* area, from which we can retrieve them into conscious awareness. Of greater interest to Freud was the mass of unacceptable passions and thoughts that he believed we *repress*, or forcibly block from our consciousness because they would be too unsettling to acknowledge. Freud believed that without our awareness, these troublesome feelings and ideas powerfully influence us, sometimes gaining expression in disguised forms—the work we choose, the beliefs we hold, our daily habits, our troubling symptoms.

### AP® Exam Tip

The boldfaced key terms that you read in this module are all quite famous terms. Even though modern psychology rejects many of the specifics of psychoanalysis, the fame of Freud's concepts makes them likely topics for AP® exam questions.

**free association** in psychoanalysis, a method of exploring the unconscious in which the person relaxes and says whatever comes to mind, no matter how trivial or embarrassing.

**psychoanalysis** Freud's theory of personality that attributes thoughts and actions to unconscious motives and conflicts; the techniques used in treating psychological disorders by seeking to expose and interpret unconscious tensions.

**unconscious** according to Freud, a reservoir of mostly unacceptable thoughts, wishes, feelings, and memories. According to contemporary psychologists, information processing of which we are unaware.

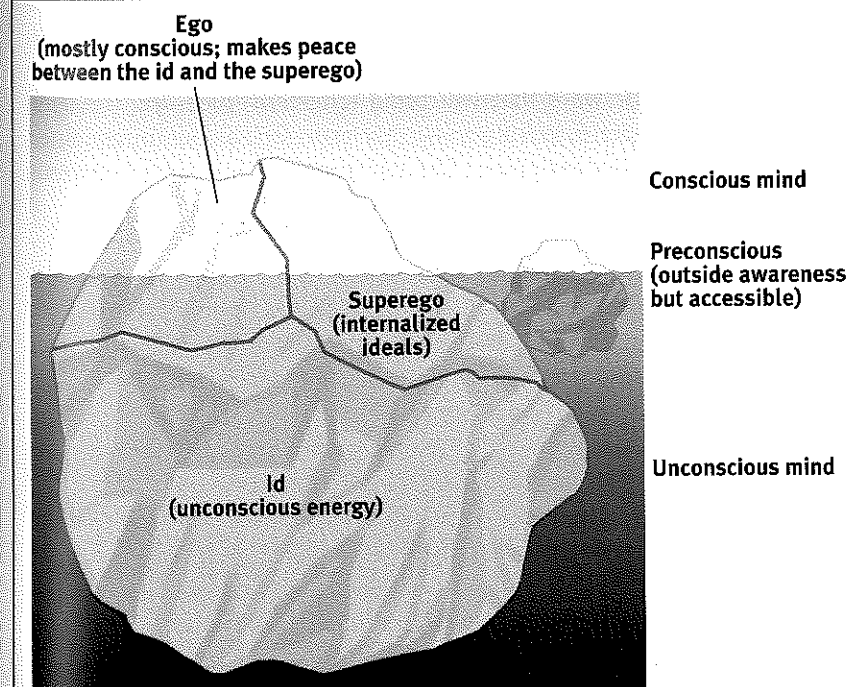
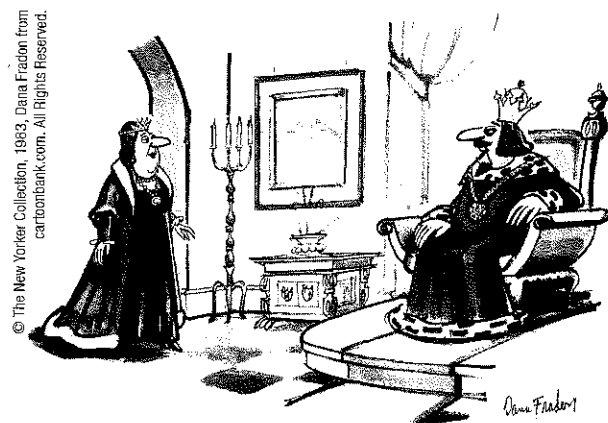


Figure 55.1

Freud's idea of the mind's structure Psychologists have used an iceberg image to illustrate Freud's idea that the mind is mostly hidden beneath the conscious surface. Note that the id is totally unconscious, but ego and superego operate both consciously and unconsciously. Unlike the parts of a frozen iceberg, however, the id, ego, and superego interact.

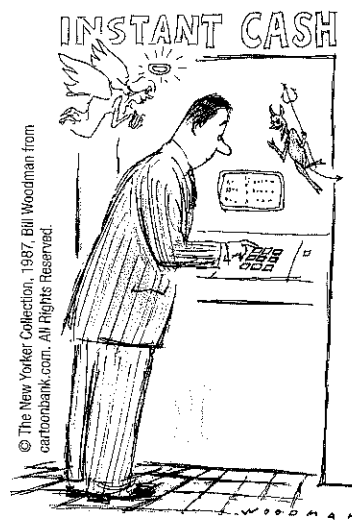


"Good morning, beheaded—uh, I mean beloved."

"I remember your name perfectly but I just can't think of your face."  
—OXFORD PROFESSOR W. A. SPOONER (1844–1930), FAMOUS FOR HIS LINGUISTIC FLIP-FLOPS (SPOONERISMS). SPOONER REBUKED ONE STUDENT FOR "FIGHTING A LIAR IN THE QUADRANGLE" AND ANOTHER WHO "HISSED MY MYSTERY LECTURE," ADDING "YOU HAVE TASTED TWO WORMS."

### AP® Exam Tip

Be careful: It's easy to confuse Freud's three layers of the mind (conscious, preconscious, and unconscious) with the three parts of personality (id, ego, superego).



"Fifty is plenty." "Hundred and fifty."

The ego struggles to reconcile the demands of superego and id, said Freud.

## Personality Structure

### 55-2 What was Freud's view of personality?

In Freud's view, human personality—including its emotions and strivings—arises from a conflict between impulse and restraint—between our aggressive, pleasure-seeking biological urges and our internalized social controls over these urges. Freud believed personality arises from our efforts to resolve this basic conflict—to express these impulses in ways that bring satisfaction without also bringing guilt or punishment. To understand the mind's dynamics during this conflict, Freud proposed three interacting systems: the *id*, *ego*, and *superego* (Figure 55.1).

The *id*'s unconscious psychic energy constantly strives to satisfy basic drives to survive, reproduce, and aggress. The *id* operates on the *pleasure principle*: It seeks immediate gratification. To envision an *id*-dominated person, think of a newborn infant crying out for satisfaction, caring nothing for the outside world's conditions and demands. Or think of people with a present rather than future time perspective—those who abuse tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs, and would sooner party now than sacrifice today's pleasure for future success and happiness (Keough et al., 1999).

As the *ego* develops, the young child responds to the real world. The *ego*, operating on the *reality principle*, seeks to gratify the *id*'s impulses in realistic ways that will bring long-term pleasure. (Imagine what would happen if, lacking an *ego*, we expressed all our unrestrained sexual or aggressive impulses.) The *ego* contains our partly conscious perceptions, thoughts, judgments, and memories.

Around age 4 or 5, Freud theorized, a child's *ego* recognizes the demands of the newly emerging *superego*, the voice of our moral compass (conscience) that forces the *ego* to consider not only the real but the *ideal*. The *superego* focuses on how we *ought* to behave. It strives for perfection, judging actions and producing positive feelings of pride or negative feelings of guilt. Someone with an exceptionally strong *superego* may be virtuous yet guilt-ridden; another with a weak *superego* may be wantonly self-indulgent and remorseless.

Because the *superego*'s demands often oppose the *id*'s, the *ego* struggles to reconcile the two. It is the personality "executive," mediating among the impulsive demands of the *id*, the restraining demands of the *superego*, and the real-life demands of the external world. If chaste Jane feels sexually attracted to John, she may satisfy both *id* and *superego* by joining a volunteer organization that John attends regularly.

For Freud the determinist, nothing was ever accidental. He believed he could glimpse the unconscious seeping not only into people's free associations, beliefs, habits, and symptoms but also into slips of the tongue and pen. He illustrated with a financially stressed patient who, not wanting any large pills, said, "Please do not give me any bills, because I cannot swallow them." Similarly, Freud viewed jokes as expressions of repressed sexual and aggressive tendencies, and dreams as the "royal road to the unconscious." The remembered content of dreams (their *manifest content*) he believed to be a censored expression of the dreamer's unconscious wishes (the dream's *latent content*). In his dream analyses, Freud searched for patients' inner conflicts.

## Personality Development

### 55-3 What developmental stages did Freud propose?

Analysis of his patients' histories convinced Freud that personality forms during life's first few years. He concluded that children pass through a series of **psychosexual stages**, during which the *id*'s pleasure-seeking energies focus on distinct pleasure-sensitive areas of the body called *erogenous zones* (TABLE 55.1). Each stage offers its own challenges, which Freud saw as conflicting tendencies.

Table 55.1 Freud's Psychosexual Stages

Stage	Focus
Oral (0–18 months)	Pleasure centers on the mouth—sucking, biting, chewing
Anal (18–36 months)	Pleasure focuses on bowel and bladder elimination; coping with demands for control
Phallic (3–6 years)	Pleasure zone is the genitals; coping with incestuous sexual feelings
Latency (6 to puberty)	A phase of dormant sexual feelings
Genital (puberty on)	Maturation of sexual interests

Freud believed that during the *phallic stage*, for example, boys seek genital stimulation, and they develop both unconscious sexual desires for their mother and jealousy and hatred for their father, whom they consider a rival. Given these feelings, he thought boys also experience guilt and a lurking fear of punishment, perhaps by castration, from their father. Freud called this collection of feelings the **Oedipus complex** after the Greek legend of Oedipus, who unknowingly killed his father and married his mother. Some psychoanalysts in Freud's era believed that girls experienced a parallel *Electra complex*.

Children eventually cope with the threatening feelings, said Freud, by repressing them and by identifying with (trying to become like) the rival parent. It's as though something inside the child decides, "If you can't beat 'em [the parent of the same sex], join 'em." Through this **identification** process, children's *superegos* gain strength as they incorporate many of their parents' values. Freud believed that identification with the same-sex parent provides what psychologists now call our *gender identity*—our sense of being male or female.



Identification I want to be like Dad.

**id** a reservoir of unconscious psychic energy that, according to Freud, strives to satisfy basic sexual and aggressive drives. The *id* operates on the *pleasure principle*, demanding immediate gratification.

**ego** the largely conscious, "executive" part of personality that, according to Freud, mediates among the demands of the *id*, *superego*, and reality. The *ego* operates on the *reality principle*, satisfying the *id*'s desires in ways that will realistically bring pleasure rather than pain.

**superego** the part of personality that, according to Freud, represents internalized ideals and provides standards for judgment (the conscience) and for future aspirations.

**psychosexual stages** the childhood stages of development (oral, anal, phallic, latency, genital) during which, according to Freud, the *id*'s pleasure-seeking energies focus on distinct erogenous zones.

**Oedipus [ED-uh-puss] complex** according to Freud, a boy's sexual desires toward his mother and feelings of jealousy and hatred for the rival father.

**identification** the process by which, according to Freud, children incorporate their parents' values into their developing *superegos*.





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"Oh, for goodness' sake! Smoke!"

Freud presumed that our early childhood relations—especially with our parents and caregivers—influence our developing identity, personality, and frailties.

In Freud's view, conflicts unresolved during earlier psychosexual stages could surface as maladaptive behavior in the adult years. At any point in the oral, anal, or phallic stages, strong conflict could lock, or **fixate**, the person's pleasure-seeking energies in that stage. A person who had been either orally overindulged or deprived (perhaps by abrupt, early weaning) might fixate at the oral stage. This orally fixated adult could exhibit either passive dependence (like that of a nursing infant) or an exaggerated denial of this dependence (by acting tough or uttering biting sarcasm). Or the person might continue to seek oral gratification by smoking or excessive eating. In such ways, Freud suggested, the twig of personality is bent at an early age.

Freud's ideas of sexuality were controversial in his own time. "Freud was called a dirty-minded pansexualist and Viennese libertine," notes historian of psychology Morton Hunt (2007, p. 211). Today his ideas of Oedipal conflict and castration anxiety are disputed even by later *psychodynamic* theorists and therapists (see Module 56) (Shedler, 2010b). Yet we still teach them as part of the history of Western ideas.

dipal conflict and castration anxiety are disputed even by later *psychodynamic* theorists and therapists (see Module 56) (Shedler, 2010b). Yet we still teach them as part of the history of Western ideas.

## Defense Mechanisms

### 55-4 How did Freud think people defend themselves against anxiety?

**fixation** according to Freud, a lingering focus of pleasure-seeking energies at an earlier psychosexual stage, in which conflicts were unresolved.

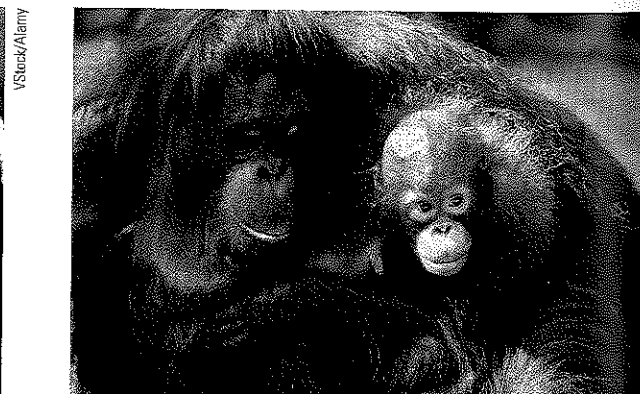
**defense mechanisms** in psychoanalytic theory, the ego's protective methods of reducing anxiety by unconsciously distorting reality.

**repression** in psychoanalytic theory, the basic defense mechanism that banishes from consciousness anxiety-arousing thoughts, feelings, and memories.

Anxiety, said Freud, is the price we pay for civilization. As members of social groups, we must control our sexual and aggressive impulses, not act them out. But sometimes the ego fears losing control of this inner war between the id and superego. The presumed result is a dark cloud of unfocused anxiety that leaves us feeling unsettled but unsure why.

Freud proposed that the ego protects itself with **defense mechanisms**—tactics that reduce or redirect anxiety by distorting reality. Defense mechanisms protect our self-understanding. For Freud, *all defense mechanisms function indirectly and unconsciously*. Just as the body unconsciously defends itself against disease, so also does the ego unconsciously defend itself against anxiety. For example, **repression** banishes anxiety-arousing wishes and feelings from consciousness. According to Freud, *repression underlies all the other defense mechanisms*. However, because repression is often incomplete, repressed urges may appear as symbols in dreams or as slips of the tongue in casual conversation. **TABLE 55.2** describes a sampling of seven other well-known defense mechanisms.

**Regression:** Faced with a mild stressor, children and young orangutans will seek protection and comfort from their caregivers. Freud might have interpreted these behaviors as regression, a retreat to an earlier developmental stage.



**Table 55.2** Seven Defense Mechanisms

Freud believed that **repression**, the basic mechanism that banishes anxiety-arousing impulses, enables other defense mechanisms, seven of which are listed here.

Defense Mechanism	Unconscious Process Employed to Avoid Anxiety-Arousing Thoughts or Feelings	Example
<i>Regression</i>	Retreating to a more infantile psychosexual stage, where some psychic energy remains fixated.	A little boy reverts to the oral comfort of thumb sucking in the car on the way to his first day of school.
<i>Reaction formation</i>	Switching unacceptable impulses into their opposites.	Repressing angry feelings, a person displays exaggerated friendliness.
<i>Projection</i>	Disguising one's own threatening impulses by attributing them to others.	"The thief thinks everyone else is a thief" (an El Salvadoran saying).
<i>Rationalization</i>	Offering self-justifying explanations in place of the real, more threatening unconscious reasons for one's actions.	A habitual drinker says she drinks with her friends "just to be sociable."
<i>Displacement</i>	Shifting sexual or aggressive impulses toward a more acceptable or less threatening object or person.	A little girl kicks the family dog after her mother sends her to her room.
<i>Sublimation</i>	Transferring of unacceptable impulses into socially valued motives.	A man with aggressive urges becomes a surgeon.
<i>Denial</i>	Refusing to believe or even perceive painful realities.	A partner denies evidence of his loved one's affair.

## Evaluating Freud's Psychoanalytic Perspective

### 55-5 How do contemporary psychologists view Freud's psychoanalysis?

#### Modern Research Contradicts Many of Freud's Ideas

We critique Freud from an early twenty-first-century perspective, a perspective that itself will be subject to revision. Freud did not have access to neurotransmitter or DNA studies, or to all that we have since learned about human development, thinking, and emotion. To criticize his theory by comparing it with today's thinking, some say, is like criticizing Henry Ford's Model T by comparing it with today's hybrid cars. (How tempting it always is to judge people in the past from our perspective in the present.)

But both Freud's admirers and his critics agree that recent research contradicts many of his specific ideas. Today's developmental psychologists see our development as lifelong, not fixed in childhood. They doubt that infants' neural networks are mature enough to sustain as much emotional trauma as Freud assumed. Some think Freud overestimated parental influence and underestimated peer influence. They also doubt that conscience and gender identity form as the child resolves the Oedipus complex at age 5 or 6. We gain our gender identity earlier and become strongly masculine or feminine even without a same-sex parent present. And they note that Freud's ideas about childhood sexuality arose from his skepticism of stories of childhood sexual abuse told by his female patients—stories that some scholars believe he attributed to their own childhood sexual wishes and conflicts (Esterson, 2001; Powell & Boer, 1994).

### AP® Exam Tip

The differences between these defense mechanisms aren't always clear. For example, *repression* can be found in almost every example. Focus on the key feature of each given example. If the key feature is seeing your own impulse in someone else, it's projection. If the key feature is shifting your aggression from one target to another, it's displacement.

"Many aspects of Freudian theory are indeed out of date, and they should be: Freud died in 1939, and he has been slow to undertake further revisions."  
—PSYCHOLOGIST DREW WESTEN (1998)



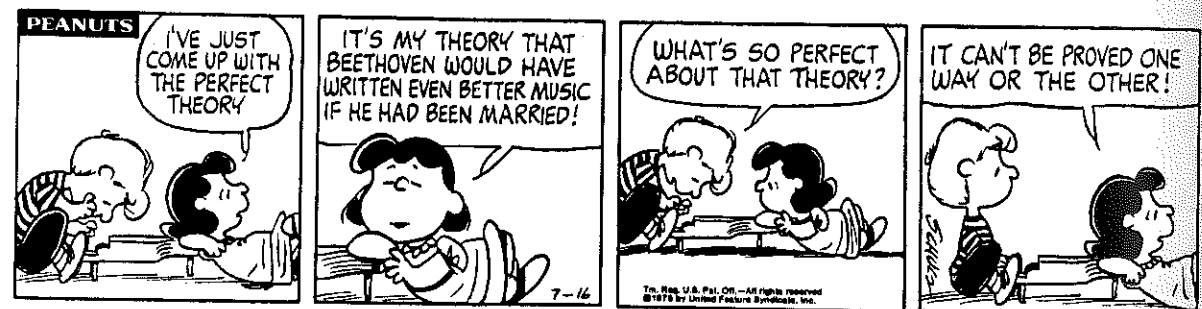
ScienceCartoonsPlus.com

As we saw in Module 24, new ideas about why we dream dispute Freud's belief that dreams disguise and fulfill wishes. And slips of the tongue can be explained as competition between similar verbal choices in our memory network. Someone who says "I don't want to do that—it's a lot of brothel" may simply be blending *brother* and *trouble* (Foss & Hakes, 1978). Researchers find little support for Freud's idea that defense mechanisms disguise sexual and aggressive impulses (though our cognitive gymnastics do indeed work to protect our self-esteem). History also has failed to support another of Freud's ideas—that suppressed sexuality causes psychological disorders. From Freud's time to ours, sexual inhibition has diminished, psychological disorders have not.

Psychologists also criticize Freud's theory for its scientific shortcomings. Recall from Module 5 that good scientific theories explain observations and offer testable hypotheses. Freud's theory rests on few objective observations, and parts of it offer few testable hypotheses. (For Freud, his own recollections and interpretations of patients' free associations, dreams, and slips were evidence enough.)

What is the most serious problem with Freud's theory? It offers after-the-fact explanations of any characteristic (of one person's smoking, another's fear of horses, another's sexual orientation) yet fails to *predict* such behaviors and traits. If you feel angry at your mother's death, you illustrate his theory because "your unresolved childhood dependency needs are threatened." If you do not feel angry, you again illustrate his theory because "you are repressing your anger." That, said Calvin Hall and Gardner Lindzey (1978, p. 68), "is like betting on a horse after the race has been run." A good theory makes testable predictions.

"We are arguing like a man who should say, 'If there were an invisible cat in that chair, the chair would look empty; but the chair does look empty; therefore there is an invisible cat in it.'" —C. S. LEWIS, *FOUR LOVES*, 1958



So, should psychology post an "Allow Natural Death" order on this old theory? Freud's supporters object. To criticize Freudian theory for not making testable predictions is, they say, like criticizing baseball for not being an aerobic exercise, something it was never intended to be. Freud never claimed that psychoanalysis was predictive science. He merely claimed that, looking back, psychoanalysts could find meaning in their clients' state of mind (Rieff, 1979).

Supporters also note that some of Freud's ideas *are* enduring. It was Freud who drew our attention to the unconscious and the irrational, to our self-protective defenses, to the importance of human sexuality, and to the tension between our biological impulses and our social well-being. It was Freud who challenged our self-righteousness, punctured our pretensions, and reminded us of our potential for evil.

### Modern Research Challenges the Idea of Repression

Psychoanalytic theory rests on the assumption that the human mind often *represses* offending wishes, banishing them into the unconscious until they resurface, like long-lost books in a dusty attic. Recover and resolve childhood's conflicted wishes, and emotional healing should follow. Repression became a widely accepted concept, used to explain hypnotic phenomena and psychological disorders. Some of Freud's followers extended repression to explain apparently lost and recovered memories of childhood traumas (Boag, 2006; Cheit, 1998; Erdelyi,

2006). In one survey, 88 percent of university students believed that painful experiences commonly get pushed out of awareness and into the unconscious (Garry et al., 1994).

Today's researchers agree that we sometimes spare our egos by neglecting threatening information (Green et al., 2008). Yet, many contend that repression, if it ever occurs, is a rare mental response to terrible trauma. Even those who have witnessed a parent's murder or survived Nazi death camps retain their unrepressed memories of the horror (Helmreich, 1992, 1994; Malmquist, 1986; Pennebaker, 1990). "Dozens of formal studies have yielded not a single convincing case of repression in the entire literature on trauma," concluded personality researcher John Kihlstrom (2006).

Some researchers do believe that extreme, prolonged stress, such as the stress some severely abused children experience, might disrupt memory by damaging the hippocampus (Schacter, 1996). But the far more common reality is that high stress and associated stress hormones *enhance* memory (see Module 32). Indeed, rape, torture, and other traumatic events haunt survivors, who experience unwanted flashbacks. They are seared onto the soul. "You see the babies," said Holocaust survivor Sally H. (1979). "You see the screaming mothers. You see hanging people. You sit and you see that face there. It's something you don't forget."

"The overall findings . . . seriously challenge the classical psychoanalytic notion of repression." —PSYCHOLOGIST YACOV ROFÉ, "DOES REPRESSION EXIST?" 2008

"During the Holocaust, many children . . . were forced to endure the unendurable. For those who continue to suffer [the] pain is still present, many years later, as real as it was on the day it occurred." —ERIC ZILLMER, MOLLY HARROWER, BARRY RITZLER, AND ROBERT ARCHER, *THE QUEST FOR THE NAZI PERSONALITY*, 1995

### Before You Move On

#### ▶ ASK YOURSELF

Which of Freud's presumed defense mechanisms have you found yourself employing?

#### ▶ TEST YOURSELF

How does today's psychological science assess Freud's theory?

Answers to the Test Yourself questions can be found in Appendix E at the end of the book.

## Module 55 Review

- *Personality* is an individual's characteristic pattern of thinking, feeling, and acting.
- Sigmund Freud's theory of *psychoanalysis* is not the most important theory in psychology, but his famous work is historically and culturally significant.

### 55-1 How did Sigmund Freud's treatment of psychological disorders lead to his view of the unconscious mind?

- In treating patients whose disorders had no clear physical explanation, Freud concluded that these problems reflected unacceptable thoughts and feelings, hidden away in the *unconscious* mind.
- To explore this hidden part of a patient's mind, Freud used *free association* and dream analysis.

### 55-2 What was Freud's view of personality?

- Freud believed that personality results from conflict arising from the interaction among the mind's three systems: the *id* (pleasure-seeking impulses), *ego* (reality-oriented executive), and *superego* (internalized set of ideals, or conscience).

### 55-3 What developmental stages did Freud propose?

- Freud believed children pass through five *psychosexual stages* (oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital).
- Unresolved conflicts at any stage can leave a person's pleasure-seeking impulses *fixated* (stalled) at that stage.