

Unconscious Conflicts in Psychodynamic Theory

In psychodynamic theory, unconscious conflicts are hidden psychological struggles between competing wishes, desires, feelings, impulses, rules or values that exist outside conscious awareness. These conflicts influence thoughts, emotions, behaviour, relationships and are a cause of anxiety and depression.

Freud's tripartite model of personality

Freud proposed that unconscious conflicts are hidden battles inside the mind between competing drives, moral rules and reality limits. These secret struggles involve the id, superego and ego.

Id

The id is the primitive part of the mind and is the source of instinctual impulses (e.g., hunger, aggression, sex) and operates from the pleasure-pain principle, seeking immediate gratification of needs and avoidance of pain.

Thought: "You're an idiot!"

Example: wanting to shout at someone when you're angry.

Superego

The part of the mind associated with internalised rules, morals, prohibitions and standards.

The internal moral conscience learned from parents and society that strives for perfection.

Thought: "I shouldn't do that, it's wrong."

Example: feeling guilty for wanting to shout at someone and cause them distress, even if you don't act on it.

Ego

The ego is the conscious part of the mind that plans and directs our conscious activities and is governed primarily by the reality principle. It delays or approves gratification of desires from the id according to the conditions of the external world and the rules of the superego.

Thought: "How can I handle this without causing problems?"

Example: feeling angry but deciding to calmly explain why you're upset.

Intrapsychic Conflict

The ego acts as a middleman that faces constant conflict between the primitive, pleasure-seeking id and the strict, moral-driven superego.

Id: "I want to tell my boss exactly what I think!"

Superego: "That's disrespectful. You shouldn't even think that."

Ego: "I'm angry, but I'll find a professional way to express my concerns."

This is what psychodynamic theory means by intrapsychic conflict—conflict occurring within a person's psyche (mind).

Defence mechanisms

When the ego experiences anxiety due to conflicts between the id, superego or reality, it unconsciously uses defence mechanisms to reduce that anxiety and protect the individual from psychological distress. Some examples include:

Introjection

A person unconsciously takes in and internalises the ideas, beliefs, values or traits of other people and makes them their own. It blurs the line between self and others, helping a person reduce anxiety or keep a connection with someone important.

Repression

Pushing distressing thoughts out of awareness.

Displacement

Redirecting emotions toward a safer target.

Denial

Refusing to accept reality.

Projection

Attributing one's own unacceptable feelings onto others.

Regression

A person reverts to an earlier, more childish stage of development to cope with stress, trauma or anxiety.

Rationalization

Creating logical explanations for unacceptable behaviour, failures or painful feelings.

How unconscious conflicts arise

According to Freud, unconscious conflicts often develop in childhood when natural desires or emotions clash with parental expectations, social rules or moral standards. Instead of being resolved, these conflicts may be pushed into the unconscious through repression. For example, a child feels anger toward a parent but has learned that expressing anger is unacceptable. The anger is repressed, but it may later appear indirectly as anxiety, irritability, passive-aggression or difficulty with authority figures.

Examples of unresolved conflicts

Love vs. Anger

Wanting to care for someone while also feeling resentment toward them.

Closeness vs. Fear of Rejection

Longing for intimacy while avoiding it because it feels dangerous.

For example, a person might want closeness with others but also fear being hurt or rejected. They may consciously want a relationship while unconsciously protecting themselves by keeping people at a distance.

Self-esteem vs. Criticism

Wanting to feel confident while having an internal belief that one is inadequate.

Dependency vs. Independence

Someone wants close relationships but fears relying on others.

Connection vs. Fear of Intimacy

The tension between the deep human need for connection and the fear of intimacy creates an internal push-pull conflict. People naturally crave closeness and belonging, yet perceive vulnerability as a threat, triggering self-protective defence mechanisms that sabotage close relationships.

Success vs. Fear of Success

A person wants to succeed but unconsciously fears the expectations that come with success. They may procrastinate or self-sabotage.

Aggression vs. Guilt

A person feels angry toward someone they love.

Therapy

Psychodynamic therapy is a form of talk therapy that aims to help people understand how past experiences influence their current feelings, behaviours and relationships. It can treat conditions like anxiety, depression, personality disorders and aims to resolve deep-seated emotional conflicts. Unresolved conflicts contribute to psychological distress and bringing these conflicts into conscious awareness can reduce symptoms and promote lasting change. Key elements of therapy include: exploring a client's personal history, linking the past with the present, recognising defence mechanisms, analysing transference and working through resistance.

johngallagher.online
strath.academia.edu/JohnGallagher