The Basic Structure of Personality

In Freud theory, the mind is structured into two main parts: the conscious and unconscious mind. The conscious mind includes all the things we are aware of or can easily bring into awareness. The unconscious mind, on the other hand, includes all of the things outside of our awareness — all of the wishes, desires, hopes, urges and memories that lie outside of awareness yet continue to influence behaviour. Freud compared the mind to an iceberg. The tip of the iceberg that is actually visible above the water represents just a tiny portion of the mind, while the huge expanse of ice hidden underneath the water represents the much larger unconscious. In addition to these two main components of the mind, Freud’s theory also divides human personality up into three major components: the id, ego and superego. The id is the most primitive part of personality that is the source of all our most basic urges. This part of personality is entirely unconscious and serves as the source of all libidinal energy. The ego is the component of personality that is charged with dealing with reality and helps ensure that the demands of the id are satisfied in ways that are realistic, safe and socially acceptable. The superego is the part of personality that holds all of the internalized morals and standards that we acquire from our parents, family and society at large. You can learn more about each of these three aspects of personality and how they interact in this overview of the id, ego and superego.

Freud’s theory suggests that as children develop, they progress through a series of psychosexual stages. At each stage, the libido’s pleasure-seeking energy is focused on a different part of the body. The successful completion of each stage leads to a healthy personality as an adult. If, however, a conflict remains unresolved at any particular stage, the individual might remain fixated or stuck at that particular point of development. A fixation can involve an overdependence or obsession with something related to that phase of development. For example, a person with an "oral fixation" is believed to be stuck at the oral stage of development. Signs of an oral fixation might include an excessive reliance on oral behaviours such as smoking, biting fingernails or eating. Discover more about each of the individual stages in this overview of psychosexual development. "Defence mechanisms" bandied about a few times. When someone seems unwilling to face a painful truth, you might accuse them of being "in denial." When a person tries to look for a logical explanation for unacceptable behaviour, you might suggest that they are "rationalizing." These things represent different types of defence mechanisms, or tactics that the ego uses to protect itself from anxiety. Some of the best-known mechanisms of defence include denial, repression and regression.