Sigmund Freud holds a psychosexual viewpoint on human behavior. It centers around the unconscious forces motivating human behavior. Originating at the beginning of the twentieth century, Freud, a Viennese physician, developed psychoanalysis, as a therapeutic approach based on giving people insights into the unconscious conflicts that stemmed from their childhoods and affected their behavior and emotions.

Freud delves below the surface of our feelings to explore unconscious forces, which people are unaware of but which motivate behavior. Freud’s ideas have been since their inception expanded and modified by others. Even though contemporary psychologists subscribe to few Freudian concepts—partly because so few have held up to efforts to test them scientifically—Freud’s theory has historic importance and has generated considerable debate.

Sigmund Freud: Psychosexual Theory. Sigmund Freud (1856—1939) wanted to devote himself to medical research, but limited funds and barriers in Austria to academic advancement for Jews forced him into the private practice of medicine. One of his interests was neurology, the study of the brain and treatment of disorders of the nervous system, a branch of medicine then in its infancy. To relieve symptoms with no apparent physical cause, Freud came upon the idea of free association; a “talking therapy” for patients where what was causing their neurotic behavior would begin to surface. With this “couch approach” Freud would ask questions designed to summon up long-buried memories. He then concluded that the source of emotional disturbances lay in repressed traumatic experiences of early childhood.

Freud believed that personality is formed in the first few years of life, as children deal with conflicts between their inborn biological, sexually related urges and the requirements of society. As the development stages suggest, he proposed that these conflicts occur in an unvarying sequence of stages of psychosexual development, in which pleasure shifts from one bodily zone to another—from the mouth to the anus and then to the genitals. At each stage, the behavior that is the chief source of gratification changes—from feeding to elimination and eventually to sexual activity.

Conscious I Pre-Conscious I Unconscious Mind

Freud described this using the analogy of an iceberg, which isn’t really adequate (since it implies something rigid rather than fluid) but it’s a start.

The Conscious (top 1/7th) — the awareness we have when we are awake.

The Pre-Conscious (boundary) containing memories of dreams, “Slips of the tongue”, etc. It also gives clues about the Unconscious from thoughts and actions that appear there. If you remember a dream, you are not directly revealing unconscious thoughts but recalling highly coded ideas or coded messages of your unconscious. This symbolism protects us, so we are not upset or disturbed by what our Unconscious is REALLY thinking!

The Unconscious (6/7th) - containing secret wishes and fears; traumatic memories of the past, etc. All these thoughts are completely hidden and totally unavailable to us. This is necessary for survival — forgetting past traumas in order to get on with our lives. We can NEVER directly see into the Unconscious. In strict Freudian terms, it’s wrong to say “Subconscious” when referring to the Unconscious. He was adamant that it’s totally unseen and unknown.

The Libido

“Libido” is often used today to mean “sex drive”, but this is a corruption or, at least, over-simplification of Freud’s meaning. It is the INBORN ENERGY we have that motivates and enables us to survive — sexual activity is one manifestation. Freud used the Steam Engine Model to describe this. The level of Libido (“steam”) we are born with is a central aspect of our personalities. Some people are born with more than others. How we
use that energy also depends on our personalities (needs and desires) and our activities (work, hobbies, and interests).

**Stages of Psychosexual Development.** Of the five stages of personality development Freud described, he considered crucial the first three—those of the first few years of life. He believed that children are at risk of fixation—an arrest in development—if they receive too little or too much gratification in any of the stages. A child may become emotionally “stuck” and may need help to move beyond that stage. He believed that evidence of childhood fixation shows up in adult personality.

1. **Oral Stage (Birth to 12—18 Months)** During infancy, the oral region (the mouth) is the primary erogenous zone, and feeding is the main source of sensual pleasure. Babies whose oral needs are not met may grow up to become nail-biters or develop “bitingly” critical personalities. Babies who received so much oral pleasure that they do not want to abandon this stage may grow up to become compulsive eaters or smokers. *Oral Dependent* is too needy and deals with loss issues. *Oral Aggressive* is too picky.

2. **Anal Stage (12-18 Months to 3 Years).** During toddlerhood, the chief source of pleasure is moving the bowels. Too-strict toilet training may lead a child to hold back feces or release them at inappropriate times. An adult fixated at the anal stage may have a “constipated” personality, becoming obsessively clean and neat or rigidly tied to schedules and routines. Or the person may become defiantly messy. *Anal-retentive*, commonly abbreviated to “anal”, is used conversationally to describe a person with such attention to detail that it is an obsession. An anal expulsive personality is broadly defined as exhibiting cruelty, emotional outbursts and disorganization.

3. **Phallic Stage (3 to 6 Years).** During early childhood, the site of pleasure shifts from the anus to the genitals. In this stage, boys are influenced by sexual attachments to their mothers and girls to their fathers, and by rivalry with the same-sex parent. The boy learns that little girls do not have penises, assumes they were cut off, and worries that his father will castrate him too. The girl experiences what Freud called penis envy and blames her mother for not having given her a penis. Children eventually resolve the anxiety from both situations by identifying with the same-sex parent. Boys and girls deal with guilt and fear by identifying with the same-sex parent when developing a superego. The early superego is rigid. The daughter of parents who value cleanliness may want to change her clothes six times a day; a little boy may be tormented by guilt because he wrestled harmlessly with a friend. With maturity, the superego becomes more realistic and flexible, as it is better controlled by the ego. The *Oedipus* and *Electra* complexes are part of this stage.

4. **Latency (6 to 12 Years).** Freud considered middle childhood relatively calm sexually. Youngsters have identified with the same-sex parent, adopted gender roles, and developed superegos. Because of this sexual calm, they can become socialized, develop skills, and learn about themselves and society.

5. **Genital Stage (Adolescence and Adulthood).** The physical changes of puberty reawaken the libido, the basic energy that fuels the sex drive. The sexual urges of the phallic stage, repressed during latency, now resurface to flow in socially approved channels—heterosexual relations with people outside the family. The genital stage, the final psychosexual stage, lasts through adulthood.

**Id, Ego, and Superego.** Freud proposed three hypothetical parts of the personality, the id, the ego, and the superego. At first, he said, newborns are governed by the Id, a source of motives and desires that is present at birth. The id seeks immediate satisfaction under the pleasure principle. Initially, infants do not see themselves as separate from the outside world; all they care about is what they want. But when gratification is delayed (as when they have to wait for food), they begin to see themselves as separate from their surroundings. Sometime during the first year of life they begin to develop an ego. The ego, which represents reason, or common sense, operates according to the reality principle. The ego's aim is to find realistic ways to gratify the id. Finally, at about age 5 or 6, the superego develops. This includes the conscience. The superego is the result of the child's
identification with the parent of the same sex. It incorporates socially approved “shoulds” and “should nots” into the child’s own values.

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**Freud Defense Mechanisms**

Freud described defense mechanisms as ways in which people unconsciously distort reality to protect their egos against anxiety. Everyone uses defense mechanisms at times. Only when they are so overused that they interfere with normal emotional development are they unhealthy.

**Regression**- During stressful times, return to behavior of an earlier age to try to recapture remembered security. A girl who has just entered school may go back to sucking her thumb or wetting the bed, or a high school student may react to his parents’ recent separation by asking them to make decisions for him as they did when he was a child. When the crisis becomes less acute or the person is able to deal with it, the inappropriate behavior usually disappears.

**Repression**- Blocking from consciousness those feelings and experiences that arouse anxiety. Freud believed that people’s inability to remember much about their early years is due to their having repressed disturbing sexual feelings toward their parents.

**Sublimation**- Channeling of disturbing sexual or aggressive impulses into such “acceptable” activities as study, work, sports, and hobbies.

**Displacement**- Same thing as sublimation however the channeling is into unacceptable and damaging behaviors like drinking, risky actions, smoking or eating.

**Projection**- Attribution of unacceptable thoughts and motives to another person. For example, a little girl talks about how jealous of the new baby her brother is, when she herself is actually jealous of the new baby. It is a primitive form of paranoia. It reduces anxiety by allowing the expression of the undesirable impulses or desires without becoming consciously aware of them; attributing one’s own unacknowledged unacceptable/unwanted thoughts and emotions to another; includes severe prejudice, severe jealousy, hypervigilance to external danger, and “injustice collecting”.

**Reaction formation**- Saying the opposite of what one really feels. Buddy says, “I don’t want to play with Tony because don’t like him,” when the truth is that Buddy likes Tony a lot but is afraid that Tony does not want to play with him.

**Identification**- The unconscious modeling of one’s self upon another person’s character and behavior.

**Rationalization**- Where a person convinces him or herself that no wrong was done and that all is or was all right through faulty and false reasoning. An indicator of this defense mechanism can be seen socially as the formulation of convenient excuses.

**Denial**- Refusal to accept external reality because it is too threatening; arguing against an anxiety-provoking stimulus by stating it doesn’t exist; resolution of emotional conflict and reduction of anxiety by refusing to perceive or consciously acknowledge the more unpleasant aspects of external reality.

**Distortion**- A gross reshaping of external reality to meet internal needs.

**Passive aggression**- Aggression towards others expressed indirectly or passively.

*There are, of course, many more of these!!!*