

## Id, Ego, and Superego

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The Id, Ego, and Superego are components of Freud's psychoanalytic theory. The Id represents our basic instincts and desires, seeking immediate gratification. The Ego, guided by reality, balances the Id's impulses with social norms. The Superego is our moral conscience, pushing us to follow ethical standards. Together, they shape our behavior and personality.

### Key Takeaways

- **Id:** The instinct-driven, pleasure-seeking part of the mind, focused on immediate gratification.
- **Ego:** The rational mediator that balances the Id's impulses with real-world constraints.
- **Superego:** The moral conscience representing societal and parental standards, striving for ideal behavior.
- **How they interact:** The Ego negotiates between the impulsive Id and the judgmental Superego, often using defense mechanisms to reduce conflict or anxiety.
- **Why it matters:** Freud's model helped shape modern psychotherapy by highlighting unconscious motives, the importance of childhood experiences, and how internal conflicts can affect behavior.

Sigmund Freud's structural model of the psyche divides the personality into three interacting components: the id, ego, and superego

Freud introduced this tripartite model in *The Ego and the Id* (1923) as an amendment to his earlier topographical model of the conscious and unconscious mind.

These are systems, not parts of the brain, or in any way physical, but rather hypothetical conceptualizations of important mental functions.

# Freud's Structure of the Human Psyche



**Id:**  
Instincts



**Ego:**  
Reality



**Superego:**  
Morality

Freud's saw the psyche structured into three parts (i.e., tripartite), the id, ego, and superego, all developing at different stages in our lives.

## According to Freud's psychoanalytic theory:

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- The id: primal drives and hidden memories.
- The ego: realistic mediator of mind's parts.
- The super-ego: moral conscience and guiding force.

Although each part of the personality comprises unique features, they interact to form a whole, and each part makes a relative contribution to an individual's behavior.

The basic dilemma of all human existence is that each element of the psychic apparatus makes demands upon us incompatible with the other two.

Inner conflict is inevitable. For example, the superego can make a person feel guilty if rules are not followed.

When there is a conflict between the goals of the id and superego, the ego must act as a referee and mediate this conflict.

The ego can deploy various defense mechanisms (Freud, 1894, 1896) to prevent it from becoming overwhelmed by anxiety.

## What is the Id?

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The id is the primitive and instinctive component of personality. Freud described the id as a “cauldron of seething excitations” filled with energy striving for immediate release.

The id is a part of the unconscious that contains all the urges and impulses, including what is called the libido, a kind of generalized sexual energy that is used for everything from survival instincts to appreciation of art.

The id is the impulsive (and unconscious) part of our psyche that responds directly and immediately to basic urges, needs, and desires.

The personality of the newborn child is all id, and only later does it develop an ego and super-ego.

Importantly, the id lacks any sense of right or wrong. It is *amoral* – concerned only with fulfilling instinctive needs.

The id engages in primary process thinking, which is primitive, illogical, irrational, and fantasy-oriented. This form of process thinking has no comprehension of objective reality, and is selfish and wishful in nature.

The id operates on the **pleasure principle** (Freud, 1920), that every unconscious wishful impulse should be satisfied immediately, regardless of the consequences.

When the id achieves its demands, we experience pleasure, and when it is denied, we experience ‘unpleasure’ or tension.

The id comprises two kinds of biological instincts (or drives), including the sex (life) instinct called Eros (which contains the libido) and the aggressive (death) instinct called Thanatos.

Eros, or life instinct, helps the individual to survive; it directs life-sustaining activities such as respiration, eating, and sex (Freud, 1925). The energy created by the life instinct is known as libido.

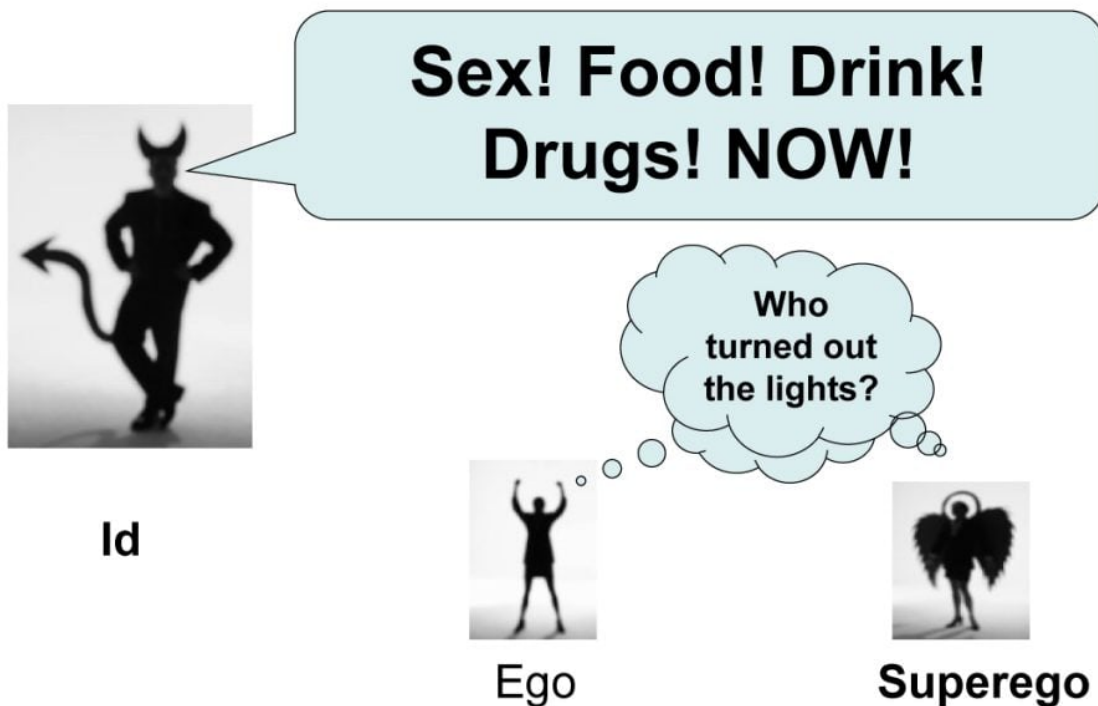
In contrast, Thanatos, or death instinct, is viewed as a set of destructive forces in all human beings (Freud, 1920).

When this energy is directed outward onto others, it is expressed as aggression and violence. Freud believed that Eros was stronger than Thanatos, thus enabling people to survive rather than self-destruct.

The id remains infantile in its function throughout a person's life and does not change with time or experience, as it is not in touch with the external world.

The id is not affected by reality, logic, or the everyday world, as it operates within the unconscious part of the mind.

## Psychotic Psyche



An overdominant id causes psychoses.

### What is the Ego?

Freud's ego is the rational part of the psyche that mediates between the instinctual desires of the id and the moral constraints of the superego, operating primarily at the conscious level.

The ego is "that part of the id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world."

(Freud, 1923, p. 25)

The ego (Latin for “I”) is the only part of the conscious personality. It’s what the person is aware of when they think about themselves and what they usually try to project toward others.

The ego develops to mediate between the unrealistic id and the real external world. It is the decision-making component of personality.

Ideally, the ego works by reason, whereas the id is chaotic and unreasonable.

The ego develops from the id during infancy. The ego’s goal is to satisfy the id’s demands in a safe and socially acceptable way. In contrast to the id, the ego follows the **reality principle** as it operates in both the conscious and unconscious mind.

The ego operates according to the reality principle, working out realistic ways of satisfying the id’s demands, often compromising or postponing satisfaction to avoid negative consequences of society.

The ego considers social realities and norms, etiquette, and rules in deciding how to behave.



Freud’s theory implies that a healthy personality is one in which an effective ego balances the demands of the id, the mandates of the superego, and the constraints of external reality.

Like the id, the ego seeks pleasure (i.e., tension reduction) and avoids pain, but unlike the id, the ego is concerned with devising a realistic strategy to obtain pleasure.

The ego has no concept of right or wrong; something is good simply if it achieves its end of satisfying without causing harm to itself or the id.

Often the ego is weak relative to the headstrong id, and the best the ego can do is stay on, pointing the id in the right direction and claiming some credit at the end as if the action were its own.

Freud made the analogy of the id being a horse while the ego is the rider. The ego is “like a man on horseback, who has to hold in check the superiour strength of the horse.”

*(Freud, 1923, p. 15)*

If the ego fails to use the reality principle and anxiety is experienced, unconscious defense mechanisms are employed to help ward off unpleasant feelings (i.e., anxiety) or make good things feel better for the individual.

The ego engages in secondary process thinking, which is rational, realistic, and orientated toward problem-solving. If a plan of action does not work, then it is thought through again until a solution is found.

This is known as reality testing and enables the person to control their impulses and demonstrate self-control, via mastery of the ego.

An important feature of clinical and social work is to enhance ego functioning and help the client test reality through assisting the client to think through their options.

According to Freudians, some abnormal upbringing (particularly if there is a cold, rejecting ‘schizogenic’ mother) can result in a weak and fragile ego, whose ability to contain the id’s desires is limited.

This can lead to the ego being ‘broken apart’ by its attempt to contain the id, leaving the id in overall control of the psyche.

## **What is the Superego?**

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Freud's superego is the moral component of the psyche, representing internalized societal values and standards. It contrasts with the id's desires, guiding behavior towards moral righteousness and inducing guilt when standards aren't met.

The superego (Latin for "over-I" or "above the ego") incorporates the values and morals of society, which are learned from one's parents and others. It develops around 3 – 5 years during the phallic stage of psychosexual development.

The superego develops during early childhood, ages 3-6, (when the child identifies with the same-sex parent) and is responsible for ensuring moral standards are followed.

Through this process, the child's psyche introjects (takes in) parental rules: "*Thou shalt*" and "*Thou shalt not*."

The superego operates on the morality principle and motivates us to behave in a socially responsible and acceptable manner.

The superego is seen as the purveyor of rewards (feelings of pride and satisfaction) and punishments (feelings of shame and guilt), depending on which part (the ego-deal or conscious) is activated.

The superego is a part of the unconscious that is the voice of conscience (doing what is right) and the source of self-criticism.

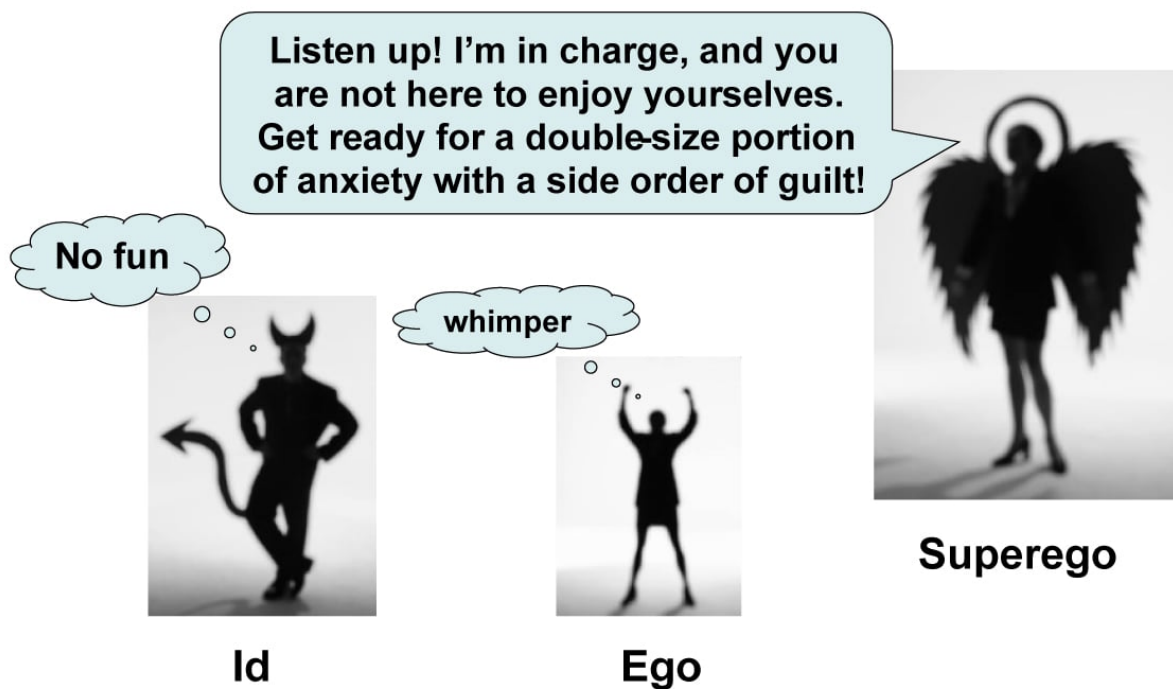
In everyday terms, the superego is like one's inner critic or inner angel, providing a sense of right and wrong.

It reflects society's moral values to some degree, and a person is sometimes aware of their own morality and ethics, but the superego contains many codes, or prohibitions, that are issued mostly unconsciously in the form of commands or "don't" statements.

The superego's function is to control the id's impulses, especially those which society forbids, such as sex and aggression.

It also persuades the ego to turn to moralistic goals rather than simply realistic ones and strive for perfection.

# Neurotic Psyche



Neuroses, according to Freud caused by an overdominant superego, the resultant defense mechanisms implemented by the ego in an attempt to regain control. Because the defense mechanisms are being over-used, too much psychic energy is used, allowing the maladaptive behavior to emerge.

## **The superego consists of two systems: The conscience and the ideal self.**

The **moral conscience** is our "inner voice" that tells us when we have done something wrong.

The conscience can punish the ego by causing feelings of guilt. For example, if the ego gives in to the id's demands, the superego may make the person feel bad through guilt.

The superego is also somewhat tricky, in that it will try to portray what it wants the person to do in grandiose, glowing terms, what Freud called the ego-ideal, which arises out of the person's first great love attachment (usually a parent).

The **ideal self** (or ego-ideal) is an imaginary picture of how you ought to be, and represents career aspirations, how to treat other people, and how to behave as a member of society.



It comes from all the behaviors one was praised or rewarded for in childhood, and the child internalizes these experiences as a series of real or imagined judgmental statements.

Behavior which falls short of the ideal self may be punished by the superego through guilt.

The super-ego can also reward us through the ideal self when we behave 'properly' by making us feel proud.

The balance of the superego's strength is important. Freud noted that an overly harsh or punitive superego can be problematic: it may flood a person with excessive guilt or feelings of inferiority, even for minor transgressions or mere thoughts.

This can contribute to anxiety or depressive tendencies (Freud's study of *melancholia* suggested that in depression, the superego mercilessly attacks the ego with self-criticism)

There are various ways an individual handles guilt, which are called defense mechanisms.

Conversely, a weak or underdeveloped superego might result in a person with poor morals or antisocial behavior, since the internal "brakes" on the id are insufficient.

Indeed, traditional psychoanalytic theory sometimes viewed criminal or antisocial personalities as having a deficient superego (no strong conscience to restrain impulses).

## Examples of the Id, Ego, and Superego

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An example of the id, ego, and superego interaction can be illustrated through a person on a strict diet who is tempted by a box of delicious donuts at work. The id impulsively desires immediate gratification by indulging in the donuts.

At the same time, the superego reminds the person of their commitment to a healthy lifestyle and instills feelings of guilt for considering breaking the diet.

The ego mediates between the id's cravings and the superego's moral standards, potentially allowing the person to eat just one donut as a compromise, demonstrating its role in maintaining psychological balance amidst conflicting desires.

### | Skipping a workout:

- **The id:** I want to skip my workout because I feel lazy and just want to relax.

- **The superego:** I shouldn't skip the workout because it's essential for my health and discipline.
- **The ego:** I can do a shorter workout today and make up for it with a longer session tomorrow.

| **Buying an expensive item:**

- **The id:** I want this luxury bag now because it's stylish and will make me feel good.
- **The superego:** I shouldn't spend so much on a bag when I could save or use that money for more essential things.
- **The ego:** I'll save a portion of my salary for a few months, and if I still want it, I'll buy the bag as a reward.

| **Reacting to criticism:**

- **The id:** I'm upset and want to snap back immediately because they hurt my feelings.
- **The superego:** I should remain calm and composed, taking criticism professionally and not personally.
- **The ego:** I'll consider the feedback, see if there's any truth to it, and respond diplomatically, asking for clarification if needed.

## Supporting Evidence

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| **Within the psychoanalytic tradition, Freud's model is foundational. Many theorists have built upon it rather than rejecting it.**

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### Ego psychology

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Pioneered by Anna Freud, Heinz Hartmann, and others, this school focused on the **ego's adaptive capacities**.

Therapists in this tradition might work directly on enhancing ego functions like insight, judgment, and frustration tolerance, considering these skills as crucial for mental health. T

hey extended Freud's ideas by exploring how the ego can function autonomously of the id (for instance, Hartmann believed the ego has conflict-free spheres that handle adaptation to reality).

### Object relations and self psychology

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These later psychoanalytic models shifted focus to interpersonal relationships and self-cohesion, but they still utilize the language of ego and superego to some extent.

For example, an object relations therapist might interpret a client's self-sabotaging behaviors as stemming from an internalized punitive parent (a harsh superego representation) that the client unconsciously recreates in their life.

### **Transactional Analysis (TA)**

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Eric Berne's Transactional Analysis simplified Freudian structural theory into three "ego states": Parent, Adult, and Child.

These roughly correspond to superego (Parent = internalized authority and teachings), ego (Adult = rational problem-solver), and id (Child = feelings and impulses)

TA therapy involves identifying which ego state is dominating a person's interactions and encouraging healthier Adult (ego) functioning.

This is a direct application of Freud's concepts in a more approachable format.

**There is also a strand of modern research called neuropsychanalysis that seeks to find neural correlates of Freud's constructs.**

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Some neuroscientists propose that the id, ego, and superego may parallel certain brain systems or functions

For example, the id's operation has been likened to the activity of the limbic system (which generates basic drives and emotions), the ego to functions of the frontal lobes (planning, impulse control), and the superego to higher-order self-reflective processes that likely also involve frontal and social brain networks.

These are theoretical mappings, but they show an attempt to integrate Freud's model with contemporary neuroscience.

Some studies of decision-making and impulse control do echo Freud's concepts: modern dual-process models distinguish between a fast, automatic, impulsive system (roughly analogous to id-like impulses) and a slower, deliberative, self-controlled system (analogous to ego/superego functions).

The dual-systems concept [System 1 vs. System 2] is strikingly reminiscent of Freud's thinking on the dual nature of mental processes.

This doesn't prove Freud was "right," but it suggests he intuited some enduring truths about the mind's workings (e.g., that much of our thought is unconscious and driven by emotional impulses, and that other parts act as a check).

## Critiques and challenges

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From the standpoint of scientific psychology, Freud's structural model has been heavily criticized on several grounds.

### **Lack of empirical evidence and falsifiability:**

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The id, ego, and superego are abstract constructs; they cannot be directly observed or measured.

Critics argue that Freud's theory is not testable in a rigorous way – it explains behavior post-hoc but doesn't easily generate predictions that can be confirmed or refuted experimentally.

Famed philosopher of science Karl Popper cited psychoanalytic theory as an example of a pseudo-science because its claims are so flexible that they can accommodate any outcome, making them unfalsifiable.

### **Freud overemphasized sexual and aggressive drives at the expense of social and cognitive motives:**

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Empirical research on personality and motivation has unveiled many drivers of behavior (need for attachment, for achievement, etc.) that Freud's id concept doesn't cover well.

### **Cultural and Gender Bias:**

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Freud's theories are often criticized for reflecting the cultural and social norms of his time, particularly Victorian-era views on sexuality and gender.

From the 1960s onward, feminist scholars and social theorists began criticizing Freud's focus on male-centered family structures and Victorian sexual morality.

They argued that his assumptions often reinforced patriarchal biases.

Furthermore, anthropologists and cross-cultural psychologists pointed out that Freud's universal claims about psychosexual development were deeply rooted in Western, Judeo-Christian contexts

Some criticize that the superego concept, for example, is too tied to outdated notions of authority and guilt.

Academic psychologists like John Kihlstrom have noted that Freud's ideas remain influential in culture (how we think about ourselves), but in scientific psychology they are largely seen as obsolete or superseded:

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Cognitive-behavioral models, neuroscience models, and trait theories dominate current research because they lend themselves to objective measurement.

For example, rather than explaining a phobia as a battle between id impulses and superego repression, a behaviorist would explain it in terms of conditioned fear responses, and a cognitive psychologist in terms of maladaptive thought patterns – frameworks that can be tested with experiments.

## Therapeutic Implications

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Freud believed that mental illness is caused by conflicts in the unconscious between the id, ego, and superego.

According to this theory, the mind consists of these three competing forces: the id (primitive desires and impulses), the superego (internalized moral standards), and the ego (the realistic mediator between the two).

Different forms of mental illness arise from imbalances in this system. Neuroses, according to Freud, are caused by an overdominant superego, while psychoses, in contrast, are caused by an overdominant id.

When these imbalances occur, the ego implements defense mechanisms in an attempt to regain control. Because these defense mechanisms are being over-used, too much psychic energy is expended, which allows maladaptive behaviors to emerge.

## Interpreting defenses

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Ego defense mechanisms serve as clues to inner conflict. If a patient frequently **rationalizes** failures, the therapist might infer a strong superego producing guilt that the ego is trying to cover up by making excuses.

If a patient **projects** hostility onto others (“Why is everyone angry at me?!” when in fact it’s *their* anger being externalized), this reveals how the ego manages unacceptable impulses from the id.

According to the psychodynamic approach, the therapist would resolve these problems by assisting the client in delving back into their childhood and identifying when the problem arose.

By analyzing defenses, therapy gradually reduces their need – the client can face underlying feelings more directly once the ego is supported by the therapeutic relationship.

## **Strengthening the ego**

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A fundamental therapeutic goal in classical psychoanalysis is to strengthen the ego so that it can better manage the id and superego.

In practical terms, this might mean helping the client develop greater impulse control, or easing an overly punitive conscience.

The therapist's neutral and accepting stance can provide a model of understanding that tempers the harsh self-criticism clients often direct at themselves (their internalized superego voice).

## **Superego modification**

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In some cases, therapy involves challenging an excessively harsh superego. Through the therapist's empathic and non-judgmental feedback, patients begin to internalize a kinder, more realistic superego.

Essentially, the therapeutic relationship itself can provide a new model for the superego – often described as developing a “compassionate inner voice” to replace the punitive one.

Psychoanalyst Karen Horney, for example, talked about “tyrannical shoulds” in neurotic individuals and the need to relax them.

Modern relational psychodynamic therapies similarly work on softening rigid self-standards and resolving internal shame.

## **Analysis is time-consuming**

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However, psychoanalysis, the method used to produce this new balance, is time-consuming and costly.

Furthermore, no objective measurement can be taken to demonstrate that a cure has been effected; it is reliant on the client's subjective report of their improvement.

There is concern that clients may claim they are better, not because they are, but because of the time and expense involved.

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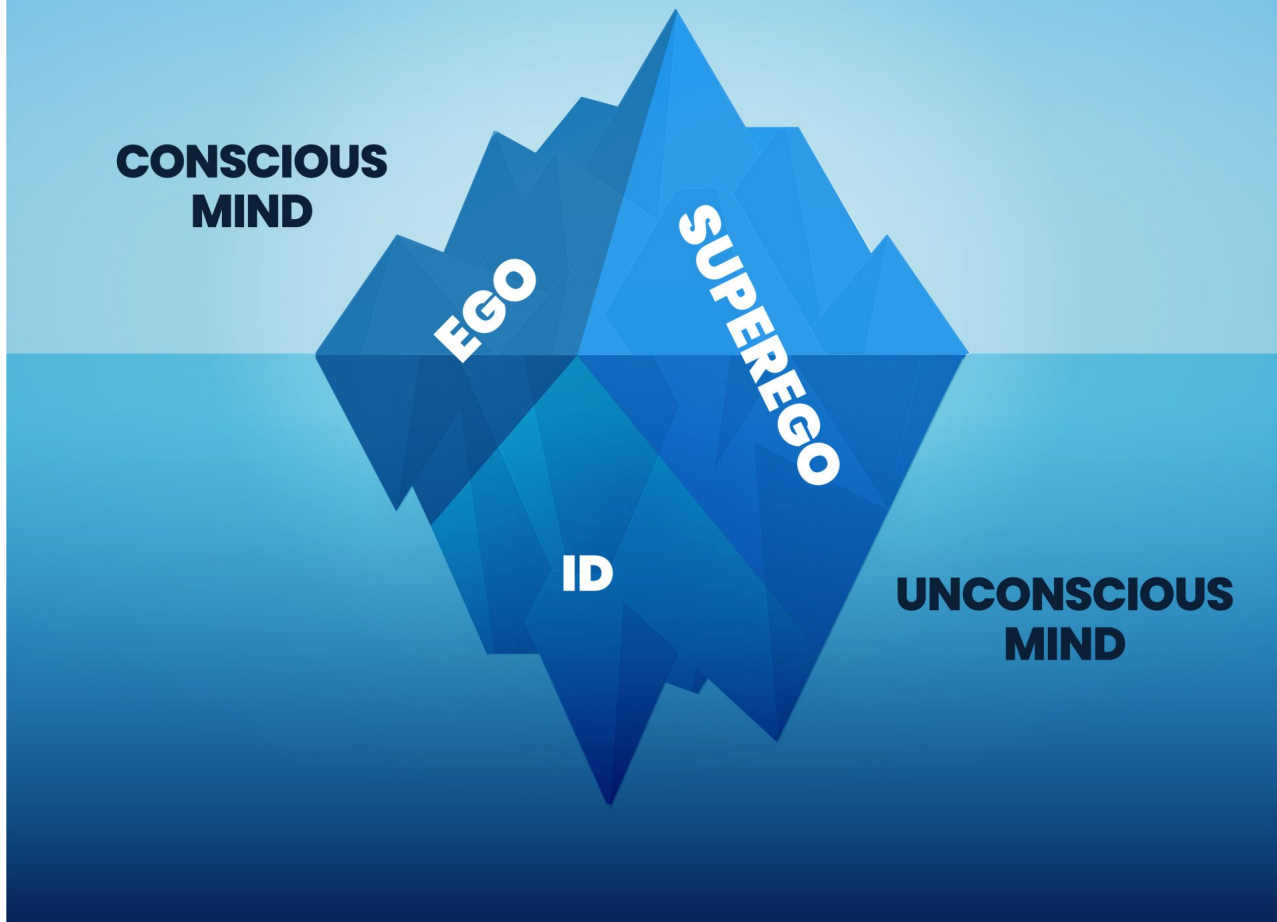
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# FREUD'S ICEBERG MODEL

UNCONSCIOUS & CONSCIOUS



**Freud's Iceberg Model of the Mind:** The conscious mind with the ego at its helm is the visible tip of the iceberg. Beneath the surface, the larger unconscious realm houses the primal instincts of the id and the moral compass of the superego, steering our actions and reactions in subtle and complex ways.

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