

Moral Disengagement

“**Moral disengagement** is the process that enables people to engage in negative behaviors, from small misdeeds to great atrocities, without believing that they are causing harm or doing wrong.” –Albert Bandura

Stanford psychologist Albert Bandura identified eight mechanisms by which people can disengage from the self-regulatory function that normally keeps us from behaving badly. These moral disengagement mechanisms basically allow us to ignore the little “voice in our head” that tells us when our behavior is wrong. These mechanisms fall into four categories:

Downplay the behavior itself	Obscure or distort personal agency regarding the behavior	Disregard or distort the consequences of the behavior	Change how the victim is perceived
<p>Moral justification (making bad conduct seem good): “We tortured people in order to protect our families.”</p> <p>Euphemistic language (soft, indirect language that covers up negative acts): “He cooked the books.”</p> <p>Advantageous comparison: “I ran over someone with my car, but that guy hit <i>eight</i> people!”</p>	<p>Displacing responsibility: “I was just following orders,” or “I gave the order but he actually committed the crime.”</p> <p>Diffusing responsibility: “I only flipped the switch on the electric chair; many others were involved in the trial, conviction, incarceration, and transportation of the death row prisoner.”</p>	<p>Minimizing, misconstruing or ignoring the consequences of the actions: “Losing your house to foreclosure isn’t so bad, really.”</p>	<p>Dehumanizing the victims (framing them as members of an outgroup that doesn’t deserve basic human consideration): “Yes, we treat them terribly, but they’re just INTERNS!”</p> <p>Blaming the victims: “I wouldn’t have had to rob that bank if they’d paid better interest!”</p>

Think about how these mechanisms contribute to unethical business behavior. Can you connect some of the cases you’ve read about in the news with some of these mechanisms? How might people have “morally disengaged” and acted the way they did without feeling that they were doing anything wrong? How can you use this knowledge to prevent yourself and those around you from acting unethically at work?