

# ADULT INFANTILE REGRESSION: NATURE'S TIME TRAVEL

## WHAT IS REGRESSION?

It is time that we defined what we are talking about when we talk about regression.

**Psychological regression** is controversial to many therapists, rejected by some and considered unsupported by empirical evidence by others. Still others see it at work in their patients' lives.

*Regression, according to psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, is a defense mechanism leading to the temporary or long-term reversion of the ego to an earlier stage of development rather than handling unacceptable impulses in a more adult way. The defense mechanism of regression, in psychoanalytic theory, occurs when an individual's personality reverts to an earlier stage of development, adopting more childish mannerisms.*

Another definition is:

*[Regression is] a return to earlier, especially to infantile, patterns of thought or behaviour, or stage of functioning, e.g., feelings of helplessness and dependency in a patient with a serious physical illness. (From APA, Thesaurus of Psychological Index Terms, 1994).*

Anna Freud listed regression as the major defence mechanism. When faced by stress, attack or other adverse circumstances or emotions, a defence mechanism may kick in to allow us to cope with it. Certainly, regression can be a valid and very effective defence mechanism. Other such mechanisms are listed below.

Mechanism	Description	Example
<b>Repression</b>	Repression is an unconscious mechanism employed by the ego to keep disturbing or threatening thoughts from becoming conscious.	During the Oedipus complex aggressive thoughts about the same sex parents are repressed
<b>Denial</b>	Denial involves blocking external events from awareness. If some situation is just too much to handle, the person just refuses to experience it.	For example, smokers may refuse to admit to themselves that smoking is bad for their health.
<b>Projection</b>	This involves individuals attributing their own unacceptable thoughts, feeling and motives to another person.	You might hate someone, but your superego tells you that such hatred is unacceptable. You can 'solve' the problem by believing that they hate you.
<b>Displacement</b>	Satisfying an impulse (e.g. aggression) with a substitute object.	Someone who is frustrated by his or her boss at work may go home and kick the dog,
<b>Regression</b>	This is a movement back in psychological time when one is faced with stress.	A child may begin to suck their thumb again or wet the bed when they need to spend some time in the hospital.
<b>Sublimation</b>	Satisfying an impulse (e.g. aggression) with a substitute object. In a socially acceptable way.	Sport is an example of putting our emotions (e.g. aggression) into something constructive.

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Professor Laura Freberg (California Polytechnic State University) puts the case that what is often called regression is simply operant conditioning or nothing more complex than bad behaviour.

*Regression is typically missing from lists of Freud's defense mechanisms that show some empirical support from controlled research. This is not to say that people never behave in immature ways, as they certainly do so frequently. What is not necessarily supported by research is the Freudian explanation for regressions (returning to a fixated stage) or the likelihood that regressions avoid or decrease high levels of anxiety. A more likely explanation for the types of behaviors we see as examples of regression comes from operant conditioning. If a strategy is followed by a desired outcome, it is likely to be repeated in the future. If crying helps you avoid a speeding ticket or distracts your partner from an argument, it is likely that you will cry again in similar circumstances in the future. Regression might also take advantage of a somewhat instinctive response we have to avoid hurting children. If you are concerned about being harmed, perhaps reverting to more childlike behavior will prevent the harm by signaling helplessness to another adult. In arguments between romantic partners, the crying of one partner might prevent the other from pressing his or her side of the discussion, even if the person's position is completely justified.*

*Like many of Freud's defense mechanisms, we can find a kernel of truth in the observation, but do not necessarily agree on the causes behind the behavior. People certainly regress by acting immaturity, but the idea that they do so according to the processes described by Freud seems to have little scientific support.*

While she has a point regarding some regressive-like adult behaviours, operant conditioning is not a viable explanation for infantile and diaper-related behaviours. They all start far too young for that and the drive can be so powerful to be explained in such a cavalier manner.

Another therapist observed that soldiers who had returned from the Vietnam War some 30 years previously often displayed inappropriate behaviour for someone in their 50s, but which was consistent with someone in their 20s. Many soldiers in that war were drafted in the 18-24 year age range during which full brain development had not yet completed and the experience of war prevented them from fully experiencing what normal 18-24 year olds would have. A 'fixation' had been formed and the person many years later would express themselves or behave - often unconsciously - in a way that the 18-24 would, instead of the more mature mid 50s man. This is clearly a form of regression.

What is worth noting is that the individual was often not aware that they were behaving inappropriately for their age unless it was pointed out. From their perspective they *were* behaving their age. They had just temporarily forgotten that they were no longer that physical age. However, their psychological age was right back where they had become fixated decades earlier. This is more like the type of regression we are dealing with.

What we see as incredibly important is the concept of **fixation**. Freud proposed that psychological development in childhood takes place in fixed stages which he called psychosexual stages. While Freud's stages are no longer considered to be accurate, the concept of fixed stages themselves

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remains valid. Other psychologists such as Jean Piaget have developed their own sets of stages which appear to more accurately mirror child development. However, it is not the stages themselves that are important to us in this session, but rather the fact that there are separate, *distinct* stages of development in infants and young children. Development is not linear and contiguous, but rather in steps and stages. Parents will often note the sudden development of a new skill, especially speech that can sometimes literally appear almost overnight.

No matter whose model of childhood development you favour, the important thing is to recognise that it is *stepped* and that failure to properly and completely go from one stage to another can leave the individual with unmet needs that can cause **fixations**. These fixations can leave behavioural 'anchors' to which we can be dragged back to.

One smart-mouth opined that 'no one gets out of childhood undamaged!'. While humour was the goal, it is also largely accurate. None of us get to make the march from birth to adulthood without some failures, some damage and a slew of unmet needs and wants. It is just part of the human condition. As a result, we become adults with some curious behaviours, wants and needs, many of them pointing back to childhood.

This is not a slight on parents, as the role of parent is a massive one at best and beset with many practical limitations. Most people however, make it to adulthood reasonably intact and with no more than a few quirks (and irritations) but otherwise, in one piece. We realise our strengths, our weaknesses, our desires and even our 'dark side', but we know enough and are strong enough to handle all these sometimes contradictory forces. We know how to deal with them, limit them and recognize the acceptable from the unacceptable. But sometimes, that task can be herculean and often, impossible to do completely.

For others however, something much stronger does get left behind.

Psychological regression is a large topic, but we are going to focus on just one part of it - the part that applies to Adult Babies - regression to the infant stage or what we call **Adult Infantile Regression**.

While regression to earlier stages of development may be controversial, the regression to the infant state is not quite so easy to dispute. The evidence is substantial that adult babies psychologically regress to the infant state in a classic Freudian manner. Adult Babies are classic examples of regression to the infant/toddler state.

We have chosen to use a specific term for this: **Adult Infantile Regression**. The reason we use this is to separate it from any other experience of regression.

***DEFINITION: Adult Infantile Regression is where an adult or adolescent experiences psychological regression to the infant or toddler developmental level and expresses a subset of age-appropriate behaviours and perceptions.***

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In the rest of this text and future sessions we will refer to AIR as the regression that occurs when adult babies take on some of the perceptions and behaviours of infants and especially the wearing and use of diapers.