

# Identification With The Aggressor

Authored by  
**mohammad looti**

September 30, 2025

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *Identification With The Aggressor*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES.  
Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=30833>

## Identification With The Aggressor

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Psychology, Psychoanalysis

### 1. Core Definition

Identification with the aggressor is a profound psychological phenomenon characterized by an individual developing positive emotional attachments, including feelings of empathy and sympathy, towards their captor or abuser. This intricate psychological response is most famously recognized by its alternative name, Stockholm Syndrome, a term that has permeated both academic discourse and popular culture to describe situations where victims align themselves with their oppressors. The core of this condition lies in a paradoxical shift in perception, where the aggressor, who is the source of fear and trauma, gradually becomes a figure of protection or even affection in the victim's psyche, leading to behaviors such as defending the captor against external rescue attempts or authorities.

This complex dynamic is fundamentally understood as a form of traumatic bonding, where an intense emotional connection forms under conditions of extreme stress, fear, and dependency. The bond is often fueled by intermittent positive reinforcement from the aggressor amidst continuous negative treatment, creating a cycle of abuse and affection that disorients the victim's emotional landscape. While the term originated from a formal hostage crisis, its application extends far beyond such dramatic scenarios. It encompasses any situation where one individual systematically beats, terrorizes, harasses, abuses, or intimidates another, leading to a coercive and dependent relationship. This includes, but is not limited to, domestic violence, cults, child abuse, and even certain institutional settings where power imbalances are significant.

A prevalent theoretical framework for understanding identification with the aggressor draws upon Freudian theory, which posits it as an ego defense mechanism. In this psychoanalytic view, the ego, overwhelmed by an immediate and overwhelming threat, attempts to cope by psychologically aligning itself with the source of the threat. By identifying with the aggressor, the victim unconsciously attempts to neutralize the perceived danger, gain a sense of control, or even internalize the aggressor's power to mitigate their own feelings of helplessness. This defensive strategy allows for a form of psychological survival, as bonding with the captor may appear, at an unconscious level, to be the most viable path to safety or reduced harm, even if it comes at the expense of one's own identity and well-being.

### 2. Etymology and Historical Development

The concept of identification with the aggressor, particularly under the nomenclature of Stockholm Syndrome, gained prominence following a dramatic bank robbery and hostage crisis that unfolded in Stockholm, Sweden, in August 1973. This pivotal Stockholm bank robbery standoff captivated

international attention as bank employees were held captive for six harrowing days within the Kreditbanken. During this intense period of negotiation between the robbers and the police, an unexpected and profoundly perplexing psychological phenomenon began to emerge among the hostages. They started to develop an inexplicable sense of empathy and even affection for their captors, demonstrating a remarkable shift in their emotional allegiance under duress.

As the standoff progressed, the emotional bonds between the hostages and their captors deepened to such an extent that by the time of their eventual release, the bank employees had developed profound sympathy for the robbers. This sympathy manifested in their overt rejection of assistance from government authorities and, in some cases, active defense of their captors, expressing concern for the robbers' well-being and even refusing to testify against them. This extraordinary turn of events prompted criminologist and psychologist Nils Bejerot, who assisted the police during the crisis, to coin the term "Stockholm Syndrome" to describe this peculiar psychological response, highlighting the city where this paradoxical victim behavior was first extensively observed and documented.

While the term "Stockholm Syndrome" provided a vivid label for this specific event, the broader concept of "identification with the aggressor" has deeper roots in psychoanalytic theory, particularly the work of Anna Freud. She elaborated on this ego defense mechanism, describing it as a process where an individual adopts the characteristics, attitudes, or even the symptoms of an aggressor or a feared object. This historical development intertwines the acute observational naming of a specific event with a pre-existing theoretical framework, offering a psychological lens through which to understand not just the Stockholm incident, but a wide array of similar responses to coercive and threatening situations, thereby broadening its applicability to diverse contexts of trauma and abuse.

### 3. Key Characteristics

**Development of Positive Feelings Towards the Aggressor:** A hallmark of identification with the aggressor is the victim's gradual development of empathy, sympathy, and even affection for their captor or abuser. This is not necessarily a conscious choice but an unconscious psychological adaptation, where the victim begins to view the aggressor not merely as a threat but as a complex individual, sometimes even perceiving small acts of kindness as significant gestures of humanity amidst the cruelty. These feelings can manifest as loyalty or a desire to protect the aggressor, leading to a profound distortion of the typical victim-aggressor dynamic.

**Perception of the Aggressor as a Protector:** In many instances, the victim comes to perceive the aggressor as their primary source of protection, particularly if the aggressor shields them from external threats or from other, potentially more dangerous, individuals. This creates a deeply dependent relationship where the aggressor controls the victim's survival and well-being, fostering

a sense of gratitude or loyalty for the mere absence of harm, or for any perceived benevolent act, however small, against the backdrop of constant threat. This distorted perception reinforces the traumatic bond, making separation from the aggressor incredibly difficult for the victim.

**Rejection of External Assistance or Authority:** A critical characteristic is the victim's distrust of, or even hostility towards, external authorities, rescuers, or anyone attempting to intervene on their behalf. This rejection stems from their developed loyalty to the aggressor and a fear that these outsiders might harm their "protector" or exacerbate their own precarious situation. This resistance to help complicates rescue efforts and can delay the victim's recovery, as they may actively defend their abuser or resist efforts to remove them from the harmful environment.

**Survival Mechanism and Ego Defense:** At its core, identification with the aggressor is understood as a potent psychological survival strategy. Faced with extreme trauma, helplessness, and the constant threat of death or severe harm, the victim's ego employs this defense mechanism to cope. By aligning with the aggressor, the victim unconsciously attempts to reduce the psychological terror, regain a sense of control, or even feel a perceived safety that comes from not being seen as an adversary. This defensive adaptation allows the individual to endure unbearable circumstances by psychologically minimizing the threat and fostering a bond, however unhealthy, as a means to survive.

**Context-Independent Manifestation:** While famously linked to hostage situations, this phenomenon is not confined to such specific events. It is observed in a wide range of coercive environments, including domestic violence, child abuse, cults, prisoner-of-war camps, and human trafficking. The underlying conditions--a severe power imbalance, prolonged periods of isolation, perceived threats to survival, and intermittent kindness from the abuser--are present in these diverse contexts, leading to similar patterns of traumatic bonding and identification, underscoring its broad applicability in understanding psychological responses to sustained abuse and control.

## 4. Significance and Impact

The concept of identification with the aggressor holds immense significance within the field of psychology, providing a critical framework for understanding human responses to extreme trauma, abuse, and coercive control. Its emergence shed light on the complex and often counterintuitive behaviors exhibited by victims, challenging simplistic notions of victimhood and introducing nuance into how psychological resilience and coping mechanisms operate under duress. By recognizing this phenomenon, clinicians, law enforcement, and victim advocates are better equipped to comprehend why victims may resist help, defend their abusers, or struggle to disengage from harmful relationships, thus informing more empathetic and effective intervention strategies.

Beyond clinical applications, the impact of this concept extends into various societal domains, including criminal justice and hostage negotiation. Understanding that hostages or victims might

develop positive feelings towards their captors is crucial for developing negotiation tactics that acknowledge and navigate these complex emotional dynamics without pathologizing the victims. It influences how criminal investigations are conducted, how victim testimonies are interpreted, and how legal systems approach cases involving domestic abuse or coercive control, where the victim's apparent loyalty to the abuser can be misinterpreted as consent or complicity rather than a symptom of a profound psychological defense.

Furthermore, identification with the aggressor has broadened our understanding of power dynamics in interpersonal relationships and group settings. It illuminates how individuals can become deeply enmeshed in cults or abusive partnerships, where a charismatic leader or dominant partner exerts profound control. The concept helps explain the mechanisms through which victims internalize the abuser's narratives, adopt their ideologies, or even participate in their own subjugation. This insight is vital for developing prevention programs, educational initiatives, and support systems aimed at empowering individuals to recognize and resist manipulative tactics and break free from cycles of abuse by understanding the psychological underpinnings of such entrapment.

## 5. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its widespread recognition, the concept of identification with the aggressor, particularly as Stockholm Syndrome, has faced considerable academic and clinical debate and criticism. One of the primary concerns revolves around its lack of official recognition as a formal diagnosis within major psychiatric manuals, such as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). Critics argue that without clear diagnostic criteria and a standardized definition, the term remains largely a descriptive label rather than a scientifically validated psychological condition, potentially leading to inconsistent application and misinterpretation in clinical and legal contexts.

A significant ethical and clinical criticism centers on the potential for the concept to pathologize victims. Labeling a victim's survival mechanism as a "syndrome" can inadvertently imply a psychological flaw or disorder on their part, shifting focus away from the abuser's actions and the systemic factors that enabled the abuse. This perspective risks blaming the victim for their adaptive responses to trauma, which can further disempower them and create barriers to seeking help or achieving justice. Critics argue that understanding these behaviors as survival strategies, rather than a "syndrome," offers a more compassionate and accurate perspective on the victim's experience.

Moreover, there are debates regarding the universality and underlying mechanisms of the phenomenon. While the Freudian interpretation as an ego defense mechanism is prevalent, alternative psychological explanations exist, and some researchers question the extent to which these "positive feelings" are genuine affection versus a pragmatic, albeit unconscious, strategy for

survival and de-escalation of threat. The complexity of human response to trauma suggests that identification with the aggressor might be one of several possible adaptive strategies, and its prominence may vary based on individual psychological predispositions, the specific dynamics of the abusive situation, and cultural contexts, warranting further empirical research to fully elucidate its nature and limitations.

## Further Reading

[Identification with the aggressor - Wikipedia](#)

[Stockholm Syndrome - Wikipedia](#)

[Traumatic bonding - Wikipedia](#)

[Stockholm bank robbery - Wikipedia](#)

[Sigmund Freud - Wikipedia](#)

[Ego defence mechanisms - Wikipedia](#)

ARABPSYCHOLOGY.COM