

# INHIBITION

Authored by  
**mohammad looti**

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## INHIBITION

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

### 1. Core Definition and Manifestations

Inhibition refers fundamentally to the process of **restraining one's impulses**, actions, or desires. This restraining mechanism can operate across a spectrum, taking place on a **conscious**, deliberate level, or operating entirely on an **unconscious** plane, or through a combination of both. A common, adaptive example of conscious inhibition involves an individual who deliberately suppresses the urge to strike out or speak out against others. This intentional restraint is typically driven by reasons of expediency, social appropriateness, or concern for consequences, and is considered a normal, adaptive function of personal control required for living within society.

Conversely, when inhibition manifests as a chronic or pervasive inability to assert oneself, engage in conflict, or express feelings with any degree of freedom, the underlying causality is often rooted in **unconscious forces**, suggesting a potentially pathological tendency. Such deep-seated restraint moves beyond adaptive social functioning and often signifies an internal conflict or psychological defense mechanism impacting the individual's capacity for authentic expression and interaction within their environment. Similarly, people who are chronically unable to give vent to their feelings or express themselves with adequate freedom often derive this difficulty from these underlying unconscious tendencies.

### 2. Psychoanalytic Interpretation

Within **psychoanalytic theory**, inhibition is primarily understood through its **unconscious roots** and its function as a crucial psychological defense mechanism. This perspective views inhibition as the mechanism through which the **superego** exerts control over **instinctual impulses** originating from the **id**. These primal id impulses, if allowed unrestrained conscious expression, are perceived as threats that could destabilize the integrity or functioning of the ego.

The psychoanalytic model stresses that inhibition serves a **preventive function**, actively blocking potential internal conflict before it arises. For example, a neurotic patient might experience no sexual desire whatsoever as a result of unconscious feelings of guilt. These feelings stem from an over-severe conscience (superego) acquired in the course of a rigid upbringing. The resulting inhibition preemptively prevents the conscious experience of the id's sexual impulses, thereby obviating possible conflict between the ego and the id.

### 3. Inhibition vs. Repression

It is crucial, particularly within psychoanalytic literature, to **distinguish inhibition from**

**repression**, although both involve the handling of undesirable psychological content. According to psychoanalytic interpretation, inhibition operates on a proactive, **preventive function**: it keeps potentially dangerous impulses from being expressed in the first place, thus preventing a conscious psychological conflict from erupting.

Repression, in contrast, is called into action **after** the dangerous impulses have already been formed or expressed, and its core mechanism consists of forcefully expelling them out of consciousness. The difference was clearly articulated by Hinsie and Campbell (1960), who stated: "The two processes may be illustrated in a homely way: the locking up (inhibition) of the most rabid or fire-spitting leaders in times of civil strife, in order to anticipate, forestall, or prevent bloodshed and mob violence that will have to be combatted (repression) by armed forces a day or two later."

#### 4. Societal Necessity and Pathological Extremes

A reasonable amount of **conscious restraint** is mandatory for any individual who lives within a functioning society. We are unable to express all personal impulses and desires with complete freedom or with total disregard for the consequences imposed upon others or oneself. Therefore, conscious inhibition is a necessary component of **self-control** and social harmonization.

However, the degree of inhibition required must remain balanced. Too much inhibition is considered as dysfunctional and unhealthy as too little. The individual characterized by **excessive inhibition** often appears rigid and compulsive, finding it exceedingly difficult to be "human" and yield to normal, spontaneous impulses. Conversely, the **impulsive** or **disinhibited person** is defined by a fundamental lack of self-control and frequently encounters difficulties and conflicts with others due to their unregulated actions.

#### 5. Clinical Disorders of Impulsivity

Disorders defined by an extreme lack of inhibition, or inadequate inner control, are frequently termed **impulse disorders**. Two distinct general clinical types are particularly common. The first type is a behavior disorder that sometimes occurs among **brain-injured children**, though it is not confined to this category. These children tend to be highly impulsive, overactive, unpredictable, and frequently aggressive and destructive in their actions.

The second major type is a severe character disorder known as **psychopathic** or **sociopathic personality**, predominantly observed in adolescents and adults. These individuals characteristically "act-out" any impulse whatsoever without the necessary forethought, restraint, or feelings of guilt. Additionally, the behavior of **alcoholics** is often characterized by a profound absence of inhibition. In the case of alcoholism, this tendency may have a double source: the individual may possess a basically impulsive personality structure, and this lack of inner control may be critically accentuated by the alcohol itself, given that it reduces the inhibitory function of the

brain.

## 6. Inhibition in Conditioning Theory

On a behavioral and neurological level, inhibition plays a major role within the **theory of conditioning**. Here, it refers to the measurable fact that a learned response may be actively blocked or restrained by the subject. This type of inhibition is studied through experiments in which subjects are trained to delay a response.

In a typical experiment, a dog is trained to delay its conditioned response (salivation) to a stimulus (a bell) by withholding the reward or reinforcement (food) for a given length of time. The dog, consequently, learns to salivate only after the bell has rung for several seconds. This period of delay has been demonstrated to involve **active inhibition** rather than passive waiting, evidenced by the fact that the dog remains observably tense during the entire interval. It is a result of this internal tension that the dog will respond by salivating to practically any extraneous stimulation before the bell is fully sounded--even a buzzing fly or a strong odor. Such an unexpected, extraneous stimulus is said to "inhibit the inhibition," thereby releasing the response from its original restraint, a process technically known as **disinhibition**.

## 7. Further Reading

[Inhibition \(Psychology\) - Wikipedia](#)

[Psychoanalytic Theory and Defense Mechanisms](#)

[Disinhibition in Behavioral and Neurocognitive Contexts](#)

[Hinsie, L. E., & Campbell, R. J. \(1960\). Psychiatric Dictionary. Oxford University Press.](#)