

# REVERSAL OF AFFECT

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## REVERSAL OF AFFECT

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

### 1. Core Definition and Context

The concept of **Reversal of Affect** (or Reversal of Aim) describes a fundamental psychological process, rooted deeply within classical psychoanalytic theory, wherein an instinctual aim or emotional impulse is transformed into its direct opposite. This modification is typically employed by the ego to manage intolerable internal conflict or acute anxiety stemming from the original impulse. Unlike simple repression, which buries the impulse, reversal involves an active metamorphosis of the direction or object of the drive. The core mechanism hinges upon taking a powerful, often harmful or unacceptable drive--such as aggression, pain-seeking, or sexual desire--and flipping its orientation 180 degrees. This results in the external manifestation of the antithetical feeling or behavior, thereby protecting the psyche from the full destructive force of the original, unmodified urge.

In psychoanalysis, drives are understood as possessing four key characteristics: impetus, source, object, and aim. Reversal of Affect specifically targets the **aim** of the drive. For instance, if the original aim is to inflict pain upon oneself (masochism), the reversal mechanism changes the aim to inflicting pain upon others (sadism). This is not merely a change in the *object* (the target of the action), but a change in the fundamental intention or direction of the action itself. The original affective state or impulse is deemed too threatening to the ego or too socially unacceptable to be tolerated, necessitating this radical internal shift. Understanding this process requires acknowledging the primary tension between the internal demands of the id, the moral constraints of the superego, and the mediating function of the ego seeking psychological equilibrium.

While often discussed interchangeably with **Reaction Formation**, Reversal of Affect represents a more fundamental, primary transformation occurring at the level of the instinctual drive itself, whereas Reaction Formation is a broader, more defensive maneuver involving consciously expressed behavior and attitude. Reversal of Affect provides the foundational mechanism for complex pathological and normative behaviors alike, illustrating the profound plasticity of the human instinctual apparatus when confronted with the necessity of adaptation and self-preservation. It is a testament to the psychic economy's ability to find outlets for powerful energy, even if those outlets are distorted mirror images of the initial drive.

### 2. Psychoanalytic Origins (Freudian Framework)

The theoretical basis for **Reversal of Affect** is firmly established in the work of **Sigmund Freud**, particularly in his metapsychological papers concerning instinctual drives and their vicissitudes.

Freud identified four primary fates, or vicissitudes, that an instinct might undergo: reversal into its opposite, turning against the self, repression, and sublimation. Reversal into the opposite is perhaps the most dramatic of these transformations, illustrating the dynamic interplay between libido (life instincts) and thanatos (death instincts).

Freud extensively detailed this mechanism through the duality of active and passive forms of instincts, notably in relation to sadism and masochism, and voyeurism and exhibitionism. He posited that the transformation involves two distinct processes: the reversal of the instinct's aim and the shifting of the object. When considering the aim, a subject who desires to look (active voyeurism) might reverse this aim to desire being looked at (passive exhibitionism). Critically, the aggressive or sexual energy remains constant; only its directional flow changes. This reversal serves the crucial function of mitigating the anxiety inherent in the active pursuit of the drive, especially when that pursuit is inhibited by external reality or internal conscience.

Furthermore, the mechanism highlights Freud's concept of instinctual ambivalence. The ability to reverse an aim suggests that the two opposing forces--such as inflicting pain and receiving pain--are often closely connected and can easily transition into one another under psychological pressure. This intrinsic link makes the reversal a highly efficient, though potentially maladaptive, defense mechanism. The ultimate goal, in the Freudian view, is often to convert an aim that would lead to conflict or punishment into one that is more tolerable, even if the resulting behavior--like passive suffering--is still a source of psychological distress.

### 3. Relationship to Defense Mechanisms (Reaction Formation and Turning Against the Self)

While **Reversal of Affect** is an intrinsic vicissitude of the instinct, it serves as the underlying dynamic for several major defense mechanisms, most notably Reaction Formation and **Turning Against the Self**. Distinguishing these concepts is essential for a precise understanding of psychodynamic function. Reaction formation involves replacing an unacceptable wish or impulse with its opposite in consciousness or behavior. For example, excessive friendliness masking deep hostility. In this scenario, the affective reversal has led to a consistent, socially visible behavioral pattern.

The distinction lies in the level of operation. Reversal of Affect is a primal transformation of the drive itself--the foundational energy shifts its direction. Reaction Formation, conversely, is the ego's complex, often conscious or preconscious, attempt to manage the anxiety produced by the *reversed* or unacceptable drive, resulting in a defensive character trait. While Reversal of Affect explains why the aim might flip from hating to loving, Reaction Formation explains the excessive, often brittle, manifestation of that apparent love to ensure the underlying hatred remains suppressed. Reaction formation, therefore, requires the initial reversal of the aim to have taken

place at a deeper structural level.

**Turning Against the Self** is another closely related mechanism. This occurs when the object of an aggressive or hostile impulse is switched from an external target to the self. For example, aggression intended for a parent is internalized and becomes self-blame or self-punishment (masochism). Although this mechanism involves a switch in the *object*, the underlying aim--aggression--often remains. However, when combined with Reversal of Affect, the impulse can both turn against the self *and* reverse its aim, leading to complex clinical pictures where the individual seeks out pain, having reversed the aggressive aim (inflicting) into a passive aim (receiving). This overlap demonstrates the intricate and layered nature of the psychic defenses.

#### 4. Operational Characteristics and Dynamics

The operation of **Reversal of Affect** is characterized by its totality and dramatic quality. It is rarely a subtle adjustment; rather, it represents a complete inversion of psychological energy. This mechanism is crucial because it allows the ego to maintain stability when faced with drives that are incompatible with internalized moral standards or societal expectations. By converting a forbidden active impulse into a permissible passive one, the individual avoids confrontation and potential punishment, whether real or imagined. This maneuver is highly efficient in reducing immediate conflict, though it often comes at the cost of genuine emotional expression and psychological freedom.

One of the most defining characteristics is the potential for the original, reversed impulse to resurface, especially under stress. Because the energy of the drive has only been redirected, not eliminated, the underlying affective pressure persists. This dynamic explains why individuals demonstrating extreme reaction formations (e.g., profound purity masking hidden promiscuity) can sometimes experience sudden, dramatic collapses of their defenses, resulting in a swift return to the original, unmodified impulse. The constant maintenance required to sustain the reversed aim contributes significantly to ongoing psychic tension.

Furthermore, the mechanism often results in the creation of characteristic personality structures. The person whose aggression is completely reversed and turned against the self may develop traits characterized by chronic self-criticism, guilt, and a tendency toward victimhood. Conversely, the reversal of a passive, pain-receiving drive into an active, pain-inflicting one (as noted in the source content's example of masochism to sadism) structures a personality that seeks external control and dominance. This intricate process of internal negotiation, where a drive is transformed to be palatable, defines much of the underlying psychopathology explored in dynamic therapies.

#### 5. Clinical Manifestations and Examples

The most cited and theoretically pure example of **Reversal of Affect** involves the transformation

between **sadism** and **masochism**. Sadism is defined as the active instinctual aim of inflicting pain or humiliation on another person. Masochism is the passive aim of receiving pain or humiliation from another. According to the principle of reversal, the individual whose initial drive is sadistic may find that this impulse is intolerable due to guilt, fear of retaliation, or moral condemnation from the superego. The aggressive aim is thus reversed, leading to a masochistic orientation where the subject places themselves in a position to receive the pain originally intended to be inflicted.

The original source content provides a clear articulation of this dynamic: "Metamorphosis of a masochistic impulse to a sadistic impulse, trading off inflicting pain on oneself to inflict pain on others, is an example of reversal of affect." This specific phrasing highlights the reversibility of the mechanism. Whether the reversal moves from sadism to masochism (more common in initial development as the ego seeks control) or masochism to sadism (often seen pathologically when the individual attempts to externalize internalized self-aggression), the core mechanism remains the inversion of the instinctual aim regarding pain and control.

Another classic manifestation is observed in the dynamics of attachment and caregiving. An individual who feels profound, unacceptable rage toward a dependent figure (e.g., an infant or elderly relative) might reverse this aggressive impulse into excessive, almost suffocating devotion and care. The hostility is inverted into a hyper-active, protective stance. While the behavior appears laudable, the intensity and often anxious quality of the care betray the underlying reversed impulse. Clinically, this extreme form of over-compensation serves as a rigid defense against the breakthrough of aggressive urges that could jeopardize the relationship or violate the person's self-image as a moral caregiver.

## 6. Developmental Significance

Reversal of Affect plays a critical, if often subtle, role in normal psychological development. As the child navigates the shift from the pleasure principle to the reality principle, they constantly encounter limits on their immediate gratification and aggressive impulses. The ability to reverse or redirect drives is essential for socializing these raw energies. For instance, the transition from active, demanding infancy to cooperative peer interaction often involves reversing the aim of control from external dominance to self-control and internalization of rules.

The proper integration of active and passive aims is paramount during early stages, particularly in navigating the Oedipal complex and developing object relations. If the reversal mechanism is overly utilized or becomes too rigid, it can lead to fixation points that result in enduring neurotic patterns. For example, if aggression is consistently and entirely turned against the self in response to parental strictness, the child may develop a debilitating sense of guilt and self-punishment that persists into adulthood, severely limiting their capacity for assertiveness and healthy external aggression.

Conversely, a healthy developmental trajectory allows for flexible deployment of active and passive modes. The mature individual is capable of both asserting their needs (active aim) and receiving input or care (passive aim) without feeling threatened or overwhelmed by the non-dominant mode. Pathological reliance on reversal, however, locks the individual into one extreme, forcing them to live out the opposite of their true impulse, thereby sacrificing authenticity for psychological safety. This rigidity is a hallmark of defensive character styles.

## 7. Contemporary Critique and Differentiation

While **Reversal of Affect** remains a foundational concept within classical psychoanalysis, contemporary psychodynamic theory and modern psychology often integrate or reframe the concept within broader cognitive and behavioral contexts. Critics acknowledge the phenomenon of behavioral reversal but often dispute the necessity of positing it as a primal "vicissitude of the instinct." Instead, modern approaches tend to view the observed reversal as the outcome of complex cognitive schemas, internalized attachment patterns, or specific learning histories related to punishment and reward.

For example, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) might explain the shift from masochism to sadism not through the reversal of an instinctual aim, but through a learned pattern where the subject discovered that inflicting pain relieves their own internal suffering or provides a momentary sense of control previously lacking. The focus shifts from the internal transformation of drive energy to the external contingency and reinforcement history that shapes behavior. Furthermore, modern attachment theory emphasizes that early relationship experiences dictate which forms of affect--active or passive, aggressive or submissive--are deemed safe or necessary for survival, thus shaping the directional flow of behavior.

Despite these critiques, the concept retains significant clinical utility within psychodynamic practice. It provides a powerful explanatory model for sudden, seemingly irrational shifts in behavior and affect, and helps clinicians trace complex pathological patterns back to their instinctual origins. The concept's enduring value lies in its emphasis on the **dynamic** nature of the psyche--the idea that psychological energies are constantly moving, transforming, and seeking equilibrium, often through dramatic inversion when direct expression is impossible. The core insight--that forbidden feelings manifest as their opposite--remains a vital tool for understanding deep psychological conflict.

### Further Reading

[Freud, S. - Wikipedia Entry](#)

[Reaction Formation - Wikipedia Entry](#)

[Sadism and Masochism in Psychoanalysis - Wikipedia Entry](#)