

# Identification With the Aggressor

## How crime victims often cope with trauma

In the early 1970s four Swedish men were held captive in a bank vault for six days during a robbery attempt. The captives reported an emotional bonding with their captors, essentially identifying with their aggressors; this phenomenon was dubbed the Stockholm Syndrome.

The most notorious instance of this syndrome came when heiress Patty Hearst was kidnapped by the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA), and after many months of being terrorized by her captors, re-defined herself as "Tanya" and joined their ranks.

The original idea of Identification with the Aggressor was formulated by Anna Freud in her paper titled (The Ego, 1936). According to her it was a defense mechanism that was used to "protect the self from hurt and disorganization". Prior to that time the explanation for various forms of psychopathology had remained elusive to our understanding.

Throughout one's life cycle children as well as adults can be faced with an event that produces intense anxiety. It can be a parent who abuses a child, a priest or an angry police officer who prefers to intimidate rather than educate.

In the military a drill instructor attempts to scare recruits into believing that they can not succeed in the service unless they have been terrorized. This overwhelming fear and anxiety is then used at times to insure that the recruit will morph into that person that they have so feared, thus changing that fearful and dependent feeling into becoming the person in charge which is often displayed in an autocratic and intimidating manner. All is justified under the umbrella that abuse can lead to effective leadership.

The child as well as the adult thus learns to reduce their anxiety by changing from the passive to the active role. This is one possible explanation of why abused children often become abusive adults. (Goleman, 1989))

Instead of being the object of the ridicule, you become the one causing the terror.

The Swedish captives and Patty Hearst experienced a process where their fear changed to relief when they began to identify with their captors. Many argue that knowledge will reduce this occurrence. This author believes that under the right set of circumstances training might reduce the intensity but not eliminate the possible emergence of the syndrome.

However, not everyone exposed to the same abuse becomes an abuser. A recent New York Times article (Ex-hostages Differ on Captors. Summer 2008), illustrates the point that individuals respond to similar situations in different ways. The "hostages freed this year in Colombia offered vastly different messages about their former captors." Ingrid Betancourt urged Colombia's president to tone down their extremist language of hate toward the rebels who held her captive for six years. But Marc Gonsalves, one of the three American freed hostages, denounced his kidnappers as "terrorists with a capital 'T'."

One possible conclusion for these different reactions could be based upon the fact that people respond differently to fear and their own loss of control. The former could be the identification with the aggressor and the latter could be righteous indignation.

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In today's society the latest culprit is the video game. Once only a means of recreation, it has now become the most recent manner in which the player learns to hurt, intimidate and kill based upon the dehumanization of its victims.

Through observation learning (Bandura, 1977) the player watches the action and because the game is interactive, is able to score points if he or she can harm fictional characters. Thus the game is also Operantly Conditioning (Pavlov, 1927) or rewarding the player when he or she aims and executes.

Television tends to over represent the amount of violence in society, and the research of Bandera, 1989, shows that people who watch excessive amounts of TV report more fear and anxiety and will use aggressive behavior in response to frustration, more often than those who watch less TV.

With the multitude of video games and television that condition a person to participate in fictional killing, one has to ask, what are the controls that may be lacking for a person to go the extra distance and commit that terrible crime in reality?

Research does show that alcohol and anti anxiety drugs are disinhibitors (Taylor, 1995) which essentially reduce fear and anxiety. So when you add these ingredients to the mix of aggressive revenge and conditioned behavior-  
**The Results Can Be Deadly.**

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