

Anna Freud writes:

Since regression is instinctually determined, and since there is a representation of its needs in the form of ideational content, I believe it would be misleading to place regression with the expression of the drives where, I think, it does not belong. As a process for the purpose of avoiding or lessening danger it can affect either the drives or the ego functions; and, with all the other defensive processes, it proceeds without being accompanied by consciousness.

One can say, of course, that the tendency to regress, as well as the tendency to progress, is inherent in the human personality. If this were not so, it could not be made use of for the purpose of defence; but this does not imply that it has the status of an instinctive wish with striving toward gratification.

The "ideational content" in connection with regression, means surely the ideational content of the libidinal phase or of the earlier wish to which the individual has regressed.

Since Regression is an ego defence, the statement frequently made that it is also a danger to the integrity of the ego, to the ego identity, and therefore at the same time a source of anxiety to the ego, cannot be correct. In all cases it is not the "process" of regression which becomes a source of anxiety to the ego, but the "result" of regression. Regression brings back earlier and abandoned modes of satisfaction which constitute as a consequence of the process a condition of conflict in the ego being possibly a source of danger and anxiety and, therefore, leading to symptom- and other compromise formations.

Fenichel discusses the concept of regression as a tendency to long for earlier periods in life and for earlier types of satisfaction, whenever a person meets frustration. The intensity increases with two closely interrelated factors: the degree of hesitancy with which newer modes of satisfaction are accepted, and the degree of fixation to earlier types. Glover in "Early development of mind" calls regression simply a strategic withdrawal to an earlier psychic level: having by this withdrawal secured the mental rights, privileges and methods of defence peculiar to that earlier level, the individual once more advances on life with these reinforced but antiquated methods. When we say that the danger of regression is that it may proceed too far, we imply also that each phase of development must have offered a sanctuary from the dangers of the preceding stage.