# Anaclitic Depression Encyclopedia Article

## Anaclitic Depression

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# Anaclitic Depression

*A form of depression in young children that is caused by maternal deprivation.*

The concept of anaclitic depression was introduced in 1946 by psychiatrist René Spitz to refer to children who became depressed after being separated from their mothers for a period of three months or longer during the second six months of life. Since these children had no one to "lean on" for the nurturance they required, Spitz coined the term anaclitic (leaning upon) depression to identify their condition. Without an adquate mother substitute, the children exhibited a number of physical and psychological symptoms. They were socially withdrawn and suffered from weight loss, sleeplessness, retarded psychomotor development, and a greater-than-average incidence of physical illness. After three months, some developed physical rigidity.

In those children who were reunited with their mothers within six months, the condition was completely reversed, and they were restored to normal emotional health. However, children who continued without adequate mothering did not improve, eventually exhibiting further signs of deterioration, including agitation, **mental retardation,** or lethargy. In the most extreme cases, their depressed state led to death from marasmus, a condition in which a child wastes away from starvation. The clinical recognition of anaclitic depression as a reaction to maternal separation helped stimulate interest in mothering as an important behavioral and developmental factor in infants.

## See Also

Attachment; Depression.

## For Further Study

### Books

Cytryn, Leon, and Donald H. McKnew. *Growing Up Sad: Childhood Depression and Its Treatment.* New York: Norton, 1996.