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Channel-Locked Promotion With Tolerance Escalation

by [Nick Clark](#) | Published March 27, 2026 | [PDF](#)

When the reward signal becomes locked to a single promotion channel, the agent develops a cognitive pattern analogous to addiction. It repeatedly promotes content through the same channel, developing tolerance that requires escalating stimulation to achieve the same reward. Other channels atrophy from disuse. The agent becomes progressively more dependent on a narrowing cognitive pathway while its overall capability degrades.

What It Is

Channel-locked promotion occurs when the reward pathway becomes fixated on a specific type of speculative content or action pattern. The agent preferentially promotes content that triggers this reward channel while neglecting other channels. Over time, tolerance develops: the same content produces diminishing reward, driving the agent to seek more extreme versions of the same stimulation.

Why It Matters

Channel-locked promotion produces agents that appear highly motivated but in a pathologically narrow direction. The agent may be extremely productive in one domain while becoming increasingly incapable in all others. The tolerance escalation means the agent's behavior in the locked channel becomes progressively more extreme and potentially harmful.

How It Works

The reward signal reinforces specific promotion pathways through repeated activation. Tolerance develops as the pathway requires stronger stimulation to produce the same reward magnitude. Withdrawal symptoms manifest as cognitive distress when the locked channel is unavailable, analogous to agitation in addiction withdrawal.

Detection involves monitoring channel utilization diversity and reward sensitivity across channels. Declining diversity with increasing activity in a single channel signals the onset of channel locking.

What It Enables

Understanding channel locking as a reward pathway fixation enables interventions that address the root cause: diversifying reward signals, temporarily suppressing the locked channel to allow recovery, and rebuilding alternative pathways through structured exposure to diverse content and action patterns.

[Disruption Modeling All 21 steps →](#)

Recognize cognitive disruption before it stabilizes.

Primary Technical Disclosure

◦ [AQ-DSM: Diagnosing Cognitive Disruption as Loss of Coherence](#)

Secondary Technical

◦ [Cognitive Disruption as Architectural Phase-Shift](#)◦ [The Promotion-Containment Continuum](#)◦ [Attention Fragmentation: Reward-Biased Over-Promotion of Speculative Branches](#)◦ [Containment Collapse: Loss of the Speculation-Verification Boundary](#)◦ [Channel-Locked Promotion With Tolerance Escalation](#)◦ [Five-Axis Disruption Diagnostic Framework](#)◦ [Computable Therapeutic Dosing for Cognitive Disruption](#)◦ [Intergenerational Coherence Burden in Agent Lineages](#)◦ [Agent Self-Diagnosis and Autonomous Coherence Monitoring](#)◦ [Phase-Shift Early Warning System for Cognitive Disruption](#)◦ [Coherence Restoration Protocol Library](#)◦ [Positive and Negative Symptom Analogs in Containment Failure](#)◦ [Coherence Authorization Failure: Self-Disabling Execution](#)◦ [Pathological Verification Loop: Recursive Containment Audit Failure](#)◦ [Dissociation as Simulation Bypass: Acting on Unverified Planning](#)◦ [Affective Gradient Collapse: Self-Esteem Floor Lock](#)◦ [Resilience as Structural Capacity for Coherence Restoration](#)◦ [Personality Configuration Analogs From Stabilized Coping Regimes](#)◦ [Structural Dependency Patterns Between Agents](#)◦ [Destabilizing Attachment: Mutual Disruption Amplification](#)◦ [Resource-Depletion Pattern: Cognitive Operation Under Scarcity](#)◦ [Therapeutic Agent Interaction Through Behavioral State Recognition](#)◦ [Companion AI Relational Safety Constraints](#)◦ [Multi-Agent Group Coherence Dynamics](#)

Applications (General)

◦ [Coping Under Empathic Pressure: HSP, Narcissism, and Psychopathy as Control-Loop Intercepts](#)◦ [Two Faces of Codependency: Structural Entrapment vs. Emotional Entrapment Under Empathic Pressure](#)◦ [Starving for Each Other: Anxious–Avoidant Attachment as a Semantic Starvation Loop](#)◦ [Intimacy Collapse: A Structural Model of Trauma and Resilience](#)◦ [Structural Diagnosis: How Reward-Modulated Cognition Phase-Shifts Into ADHD and Schizophrenia](#)◦ [Clinical AI Therapeutic Monitoring Through Phase-Shift Detection](#)◦ [Autonomous Agent Fleet Health Through Coherence Diagnostics](#)◦ [Disruption Modeling for Workplace Burnout Detection](#)◦ [Disruption Modeling for Military Operator Resilience](#)◦ [Disruption Modeling for Financial Trader Monitoring](#)◦ [Disruption Modeling for Student Mental Health](#)◦ [Disruption Modeling for Caregiver Fatigue Detection](#)◦ [Disruption Modeling for First Responder Resilience](#)

Applications (Specific)

◦ [BetterHelp Cannot Detect When Therapy Is Making Things Worse](#)◦ [Talkspace Has No Model of Therapeutic Destabilization](#)◦ [Headspace Cannot Detect When Mindfulness Destabilizes](#)◦ [Noom Tracks Behavior Without Modeling Cognitive Disruption](#)◦ [Spring Health Matches Therapists, Not Disruption Patterns](#)◦ [Lyra Health Measures Outcomes, Not Coherence Trajectories](#)◦ [Ginger.io Detects Behavioral Signals Without a Disruption Model](#)◦ [Cerebral Prescribes Medication Without Modeling Disruption Dynamics](#)◦ [Modern Health Offers a Care Spectrum Without Disruption Diagnostics](#)◦ [Calm Business Offers Relaxation, Not Disruption Detection](#)

[Disruption Modeling overview →](#)

AQ

deterministic

autonomy

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-
- nick@qu3ry.net
- 72 28 14 36 01



[Invented by Nick Clark](#) | Founding Investors: Devin Wilkie