



# Simple Affect Coding System (SACS)

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The Simple Affect Coding System (SACS) is a several category coding system intended to capture the objective display of affect as relationship interactions. The SACS is inspired by several affect coding systems employed over the years. Specifically the work of Paul Ekman and John Gottman has inspired this simple, yet dynamic attempt at operationalizing the often-subjective material of emotional display.

The central tenet of the SACS is to ignore verbal content and to rather, base all coding on the affect displayed by the participants in an interaction. The cues that are used for reliable code selection will be based on a gestalt of constructs including vocal quality, facial cues, and body posture and/or orientation. Each code is outlined in the pages that follow.

## SACS Crib Sheet

All codes in the SACS are scored based on affect demonstrated, not verbal content. The gestalt of cues used to score the emotions that are observed will include vocal tone, facial affect and body posture and/or orientation. Again, verbal content will be ignored.

### **15 Positive Affect**

- Laughter
- Joy
- Smiling
- General Positive Affect
- Enjoyment
- Shock
- Anticipation

### **12 Validation**

- Physical Back Channels
- Physical Orientation Towards Speaker
- Voice Tone Neutral or Up
- Eye Contact

### **43 Anger/Disgust**

- Raised Voice
- Irritation/Annoyance
- Constrained Anger
- Frustration
- Furrowed Brow
- Sickened
- Fed-Up
- Repulsed
- Rejection
- Aversion
- Contempt
- Eye Rolls

### **46 Distress**

- Passivity
- Resignation
- Crying
- Slow Sighing
- Remorse
- Depressed
- Fear
- Nervous Laughter
- Speech Disturbances
- Fidgeting
- Fear Face
- Postures of Withdrawal/Fear
- Whining

### **55 Neutral**

- Resting Affect
- Un-codeable Affect

## **15 Positive Affect**

The positive affect code is comprised of happiness and surprise attributes. This code is characterized by a general appearance of a positive emotional state. This is an active code, as opposed to one's resting emotional state. Look for smiles, happy eyes, raised cheeks, lips apart or together and turned up.

### **Attributes:**

**Caring-** This attribute is characterized by a positive, warm, loving expression during interaction. Look for a dreamy, happy face. This may also appear as warm flirtation or love with a small smile.

**Laughter/Smiling-** This attribute includes the clear and often audible laughter that can erupt during an interaction. The cheeks are raised and the lips may or may not be parted in a smile. This is the site of someone who is truly happy.

**Enjoyment-** Often when participants are experiencing enjoyment they demonstrate happiness, smiles and amusement.

### **General Positive Affect**

**Shock**

**Unexpected News**

**Surprise**

## **12 Validation**

Validation is intended to capture the affective essence of the participant that is actively communicating that they are listening, tracking and engaged in what the speaker is saying. This is a very active code and is not to be confused with neutral.

### **Attributes**

**Back-Channels-** These indicate the individual is listening to the speaker in an affirmative fashion by using paralinguistic cues such as head nods and other physical and vocal assenting behaviors. *It must be very clear that the participant is oriented towards the speaker* for back-channels to be coded validation. Be **cautious** of meaningless headnods.

**Physical Orientation-** This attribute includes eye contact and being actively positioned towards the speaker.

**Requirements:** There is a communication on the part of the listener that the speaker makes sense, that the listener is tracking what the speaker is saying in an active manner. The voice tone will be either neutral or up. Eye contact is important.

### **43 Anger/Disgust**

In the SACS anger and disgust are combined as one code. Lowered brows and a slight hint of tension in the jaw and clenched teeth characterize anger. The vocal quality is raised beyond the limits of a normal tone. The angry person may sound fed up, like they've 'had it up to here'. Words may be biting or abrupt with one word or syllable more strongly stressed. The disgusted person is repulsed and completely disgusted by something that the other participant has said or done.

#### **Attributes:**

**Raised Voice-** This is an open anger, often with a loud voice tone, while in the midst of confronting, scolding or accusing the participant. The speaker may sound irrational or show evidence of being upset with involuntary twitches or jerks.

**Irritation/Annoyance-** The speaker is frustrated and will employ changes in the rhythm of speech and the way certain words are stressed.

**Constrained Anger-** Attempts made to control being angry. An example of this is the lowering of the voice and speaking in an even, staccato rhythm, as if to communicate to the partner that the speaker is at the end of her/his rope.

**Physical Cues-** Voice is raised or lowered beyond the limits of a normal tone, there may be involuntary jerks or twitches, a tight jaw and/or clenched teeth. The brows are drawn together and lowered, the upper eyelids may be lowered and lips are pressed or tight.

**Physical Cues of Disgust-** The disgust face is usually easy to recognize. It is characterized by the wrinkling of the nose and the drawing up of the upper lip. In extreme displays the cheeks may raise and the eyelids narrow. The mouth may be open or closed.

**Contempt-** Contempt will include, but is not limited to, mockery of the present participant, eye rolls, and lip smacking/teeth sucking.

## **46 Distress**

The distress code is marked by decrease in energy and a passive, resigned countenance. It can be expressed in a very subdued, quiescent state or in a plaintive, poignant way. This code is generally displayed with a low volume of the voice and a slowness of speech. It may resemble fear, sound like whining or appear as sadness.

### **Attributes:**

**Resigned/Passive-** Sometimes there is an evenness in the tempo (a kind of monotony) with lowered amplitude. The participant may behave as if resigned or hopeless. They may appear unable to cope with other participant's behavior. They lack energy, maybe sorry for themselves, feel a minor loss, or miss something or someone. Sometimes this is characterized by long pauses between phrases or words—as if it takes an extra effort to speak.

**Poignant/Crying-** Code all crying as sadness if the context suggests grief, remorse, regret, rejection or hopelessness. Sometimes this also looks like someone trying *not* to cry.

**Feels Hurt-** The participant demonstrates grief, remorse or desolation. There may be a quavering voice tone and it may be either abnormally high or low in pitch. There may also be a sense of depression or hopelessness.

**Whining-** The words of a whining participant will sound very nasal and sing-songy and may resemble the sound of fingernails on a chalkboard.

**Slow Sighing-** Slow sighing (as opposed to quick exhalations of air) are coded sadness. Look for the deep intake of breath and slow droop to the shoulders as they let the air go. They may appear tired.

**Fear-** Fear can result from the feeling of anxiety, feeling worried or uncomfortable. The expression of fear may include raised eyebrows that are drawn together. The general appearance may be tense, as if the person cannot sit still.

**Fidgeting-** Excessive or repeated plucking at clothing and/or hands. Rubbing areas of the face or lip biting.

**Fear Face-** The mouth may or may not be open but the lips are stretched back. The upper eyelids are raised giving the eyes the appearance of bulging. The eyebrows may also be raised and/or drawn towards the center of the forehead.

**Speech Disturbances-** The speaker is obviously having a difficult time expressing what it is they want to say. This may include several incomplete statements or unfinished thoughts within one speaking turn. Stuttering or repetitive utterances of “uh” or “uhm” may also be indicative of fear.

## **55 Neutral**

Neutral is sometimes thought of as the dividing line between negative and positive codes. It is recognized as being non-emotional in content and voice tone. The voice has an even, relaxed quality, without marked stress on individual syllables and within a comfortable pitch range. When observing something that cannot be defined by the SACS or it is too subtle to recognize immediately, then code neutral. Become familiar with the participants resting face. S/He may naturally have turned down lips, or other permanent features that may appear to be emotional expressions.

### **Attributes:**

**Statements/Information Exchange-** Matter of fact, non-emotional content.

**Non-Codable Interactions-** Any affective behavior that is not defined by the SACS or does not adequately fit into the described code categories.