

BASIC ANXIETY

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BASIC ANXIETY

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology, Psychoanalysis (Neo-Freudian Theory)

1. Core Definition

Basic anxiety, a fundamental concept within the psychoanalytic framework of Karen Horney, is defined as a deep, pervasive feeling of being isolated and helpless in a potentially hostile world. This emotional state is not simply transient nervousness or situational worry, but a profound and enduring sense of insecurity rooted in early childhood experiences. Horney posited that this anxiety is the primary driving force behind the development of neuroses, as the individual continuously seeks ways to cope with this intolerable feeling of vulnerability and existential threat. The term encapsulates the dread that arises from realizing one's complete dependence on others, specifically caregivers, who have proven to be unreliable or emotionally indifferent.

The core experience of basic anxiety involves an intense awareness of one's own weakness and fragility when faced with perceived dangers originating from the environment, leading to a feeling of being exposed and unprotected. It is crucial to understand that Horney viewed this anxiety as distinct from the Freudian concept of castration anxiety or instinctual conflicts; instead, it is socio-culturally derived, stemming directly from disturbances in interpersonal relationships. The child feels unable to influence or control the actions of the adults upon whom their survival and emotional well-being depend, resulting in a constant, low-level fear of abandonment or harm. This perpetual state of unease forms the foundation upon which the adult personality structure is built, often manifesting in rigid and maladaptive coping strategies intended to minimize this underlying emotional pain.

Horney's emphasis on the helplessness and isolation components highlights the deep relational trauma associated with this condition. The feeling of being "deeply insecure" suggests a lack of stable internal resources or resilience, while "isolated" speaks to the failure of the relational environment to provide adequate warmth and security. The combination of these factors compels the individual to develop defensive measures--known as neurotic needs--that are designed to restore a sense of safety, whether through seeking excessive affection, power, or withdrawal. Therefore, basic anxiety is the psychological epicenter from which all subsequent neurotic tendencies radiate, functioning as the engine of defensive personality formation in Horney's schema.

2. Theoretical Origin (Karen Horney)

The concept of basic anxiety originates entirely within the theoretical structure developed by German-born psychoanalyst Karen Horney (1885-1952), a prominent figure among the Neo-Freudians who critiqued and modified classical psychoanalytic theory, particularly regarding the

role of culture and environment. Horney shifted the focus away from biological drives and toward the impact of social relationships, arguing that neurosis is primarily caused by disturbed human relationships during childhood. She specifically identified **poor parenting**, characterized by indifference, excessive demands, rejection, or inconsistent affection, as the immediate antecedent to the development of this fundamental anxiety.

Horney argued that the child, inherently dependent on the parents for survival, possesses an innate drive toward safety and satisfaction. When parents fail to provide genuine warmth, respect, and reliable affection--behaving with **parental indifference** or hostility--the child's basic need for security is thwarted. This failure creates a situation where the child must repress their natural reactive anger, known as basic hostility, because expressing it would jeopardize their necessary relationship with the powerful caregivers. This repressed hostility then turns inward, leading to the subjective experience of a hostile world and generating the internal state of **basic anxiety**. The anxiety is thus a secondary reaction, born out of the primary conflict between the child's dependence and the caregivers' failure to provide a safe, nurturing environment.

This theoretical foundation contrasts sharply with Freudian perspectives, which emphasized psychosexual stages and instinctual conflicts. For Horney, the decisive factor is the interpersonal dynamic. The environment itself does not have to be objectively dangerous; rather, the subjective perception of the world as hostile is generated by the way the child is treated. This psychological environment of cruelty, neglect, or inconsistent behavior creates a toxic atmosphere where the child constantly fears being "abandoned to the dangers of a hostile world." Consequently, Horney's framework places profound emphasis on understanding the early family structure as the determinant of adult psychological health and the origin point for all defensive, neurotic patterns.

3. Key Characteristics and Affective States

Basic anxiety is characterized by a specific cluster of affective states and cognitive perceptions that color the individual's view of themselves and their environment. The defining features include the overwhelming sense of **helplessness**, manifesting as the conviction that one is too weak or insignificant to cope with life's challenges independently. This helplessness is often internalized as a permanent state, leading to a reliance on external figures for security and decision-making, even when the individual reaches physical maturity. This affective profile is further amplified by the accompanying feeling of **isolation**, which is the emotional consequence of relational failure, implying a belief that one is fundamentally alone and misunderstood, cut off from genuine connection and support.

A primary cognitive component is the fear of **being abandoned**, which stems directly from the infantile experience of parental unreliability. This fear is not limited to physical desertion but includes emotional abandonment--the withdrawal of love, respect, or protection. Individuals

suffering from high basic anxiety often exhibit hypervigilance regarding signs of rejection or disapproval in their adult relationships, constantly testing the loyalty of partners or friends. This hyper-sensitivity fuels the perception of the external environment as intrinsically **hostile**, meaning the world is viewed not as a neutral or benevolent place, but as one filled with potential threats, dangers, and individuals who might exploit or harm them. This persistent state of apprehensive expectation ensures that the anxiety remains chronic and pervasive.

Furthermore, the experience of basic anxiety often involves a chronic sense of **insecurity**, which permeates all aspects of life--professional, social, and personal. This insecurity prevents the individual from forming a robust, authentic sense of self (the real self). Instead, they become reliant on defensive strategies aimed at artificially boosting their self-worth or manipulating their environment to minimize risk. The energy expended in maintaining these defenses against the underlying anxiety is substantial, leading to fatigue, rigidity, and the inability to engage in spontaneous, growth-oriented behavior. The individual is essentially trapped in a cycle of defense mechanisms designed to manage the intolerable dread of being weak, alone, and threatened.

4. Behavioral Manifestations

The intense discomfort generated by basic anxiety compels the individual to adopt rigid behavioral patterns intended to secure safety and alleviate the internal tension. Horney noted that the person suffering from basic anxiety can exhibit behaviors that appear contradictory yet serve the same underlying defensive function. One classic manifestation is extreme **submissiveness**, where the individual seeks safety by "moving toward" people. This involves desperately trying to win affection and approval, often by sacrificing their own needs, opinions, and autonomy. They become overly dependent, compliant, and attempt to merge with others, believing that if they are indispensable or sufficiently loved, they will not be abandoned or harmed by the hostile environment.

Conversely, other individuals may adopt highly **controlling** or aggressive behaviors by "moving against" people. This defense mechanism involves seeking power and mastery over others and the environment as a means of ensuring safety. By dominating or exploiting others, the individual attempts to neutralize the perceived threat of the hostile world, believing that if they are strong and superior, they cannot be hurt. This orientation often presents as excessive neediness masked by aggression or a drive for perfection and recognition. In both submissive and controlling orientations, the behavior is ultimately driven by the same underlying fear of helplessness, leading to relationships that are fundamentally defensive and conditional, rather than genuinely intimate.

The common thread linking these behavioral extremes is the underlying pathology of being "much too needy." Whether through aggressive demanding or passive pleading, the neediness reflects the individual's inability to find security within themselves. This excessive dependence on others (either to affirm their worth or to submit to their control) prevents true self-realization and

perpetuates the neurotic cycle. These behavioral patterns solidify into what Horney termed the three neurotic trends: moving toward (compliance), moving against (aggression), and moving away (detachment), all serving as desperate attempts to manage the unbearable pressure exerted by **basic anxiety**.

5. Relationship to Neurotic Needs

Basic anxiety serves as the wellspring from which all of Horney's ten neurotic needs arise. These needs are not healthy desires but compulsive, indiscriminate attempts to reduce the anxiety by seeking guarantees of safety in various forms. When basic anxiety is high, the individual cannot tolerate the uncertainty and vulnerability of life, and therefore the defense mechanisms--the neurotic needs--become rigid and disproportionately important, often conflicting with reality and genuine relationships.

The neurotic needs are classified under the three major coping strategies: the search for love and affection (moving toward), the search for power and exploitation (moving against), and the search for self-sufficiency and independence (moving away). For instance, basic anxiety might fuel a neurotic need for affection and approval, compelling the individual to constantly seek affirmation from everyone they meet, or it might manifest as a neurotic need for power, driving them to dominate every situation. These needs are considered neurotic because they are compulsive, insatiable, and fundamentally unrealistic; no amount of external affection or power can truly eliminate the internalized dread and insecurity caused by early parental failures.

The defensive nature of these needs is key. They are not chosen consciously but are automatic, rigid responses developed in childhood to manage the overwhelming anxiety. Because the basic anxiety remains repressed or unresolved, the individual is forced to dedicate immense psychic energy to maintaining these neurotic structures. This continuous defensive effort ultimately leads to the individual moving further away from their "real self" and toward a constructed, idealized self-image--a false identity designed to withstand the perceived hostility of the world, further cementing the neurotic personality.

6. Connection to Basic Hostility

Basic anxiety is inextricably linked to the concept of **basic hostility**, representing a cause-and-effect relationship in Horney's theory. Basic hostility is the initial, natural reaction of the child to parental mistreatment, indifference, or neglect. When parents fail to provide a safe, nurturing environment, the child experiences anger and resentment toward these powerful caregivers. This hostility is instinctive, stemming from the frustration of fundamental needs for security and affection.

However, the child is simultaneously dependent on these same parents for survival, making the

open expression of hostility dangerous. If the child expresses anger, they risk further retaliation, abandonment, or loss of love--the very things they fear most. Consequently, the child must repress this hostility. It is the repression of this basic hostility, coupled with the continued objective dependence on unreliable caregivers, that transforms the situation into the chronic, subjective state of basic anxiety. The unexpressed anger generates internal conflict and projects outward, leading the child to perceive the entire world as hostile and threatening.

Thus, Horney established a critical sequence:

Parental Indifference/Neglect (The Cause).

Basic Hostility (The Child's Reaction/Anger).

Repression of Hostility (Due to dependence and fear).

Basic Anxiety (The Psychological Consequence of repressed hostility projected onto a hostile world).

This dynamic illustrates that basic anxiety is the internalization of the external threat experienced in childhood, rooted in the conflict between the child's anger and their desperate need for security. The relationship is fundamental to understanding the pathology of neurosis in Horney's model.

7. Further Reading

Karen Horney. Wikipedia.

Karen Horney. Encyclopædia Britannica.

Horney's 10 Neurotic Needs. Verywell Mind.

BASIC ANXIETY. Psychology Dictionary.