

BASIC CONFLICT

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November 6, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *BASIC CONFLICT*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=66839>

BASIC CONFLICT

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychoanalysis (Neo-Freudian School), **Ego Psychology**

1. Core Definition

The **Basic Conflict** is a fundamental theoretical concept introduced by psychoanalyst Karen Horney (1885-1952) within her revision of psychoanalytic theory. It describes the intense, unconscious psychological tension that arises when an individual's dominant, compulsive behavior pattern--known as a **neurotic trend**--is fundamentally incompatible with a contradictory, underlying neurotic need. This conflict is not merely a situational disagreement but an ongoing structural dilemma within the personality, demanding constant management and resulting in profound internal strain.

In the study of ego, the conflict specifically centers on the collision between the adopted defensive strategy and the suppressed opposing need. For example, if a person compulsively adopts the solution of "moving against people" (an aggressive trend focused on power and control), any underlying need for affection or dependence ("moving toward people") becomes intolerable because fulfilling it would undermine the dominant defense mechanism. Since the two neurotic needs cannot be simultaneously satisfied within the rigid framework of the neurotic personality, the less dominant, opposing need is forcefully excluded from consciousness, a mechanism Horney identifies as **repression**.

2. Origin and Historical Context

The concept of **Basic Conflict** crystallized as Horney developed her critique of orthodox Freudian psychoanalysis in the mid-20th century. Horney argued that neurosis was not primarily the result of repressed sexual or aggressive instincts, but rather a consequence of cultural and social factors, particularly disturbed interpersonal relationships experienced during childhood. These early difficulties, such as parental indifference, inconsistency, or hostility, generate what Horney termed **basic anxiety**--the feeling of being isolated and helpless in a potentially hostile world.

The **Basic Conflict** serves as the central operational structure through which this basic anxiety is managed. To achieve a semblance of safety, the individual unconsciously adopts one of three principal neurotic solutions (trends) as a rigid, compulsive strategy for relating to others. This adaptation, however, comes at the cost of suppressing the needs associated with the other two solutions, thereby guaranteeing an internal state of perpetual conflict. Horney's formulation of this concept marked a significant shift toward viewing neurosis as a disorder of relationship and self-concept, positioning her firmly within the Neo-Freudian school.

3. The Role of Neurotic Trends

Horney categorized compulsive neurotic behavior into three primary, incompatible orientations, which she labeled the major **neurotic trends** or solutions. The **Basic Conflict** is the inevitable collision between the needs inherent in these trends when one is rigidly prioritized over the others. The three trends are:

Moving Toward People (Compliance): This solution involves an excessive, compulsive need for affection, approval, and dependence. The associated needs include being loved, protected, and conforming to others' expectations.

Moving Against People (Aggression): This solution emphasizes power, exploitation, and dominance. The associated needs include control over others, prestige, and success, necessitating the suppression of tender or vulnerable feelings.

Moving Away From People (Detachment): This solution stresses independence, perfection, and self-sufficiency, leading to emotional distance and withdrawal. The associated needs involve maintaining emotional distance and suppressing all needs for close emotional engagement.

While a healthy individual can integrate and flexibly utilize all three movements based on environmental demands, the neurotic individual is compelled to adopt one as a primary, non-negotiable strategy for survival. This dominant trend attempts to resolve **basic anxiety**, but in doing so, it forces the repression of the psychological energy associated with the opposing trends, generating the core structural tension of the **Basic Conflict**.

4. Mechanics of the Conflict and Repression

The mechanics of the **Basic Conflict** involve a process where the dominant neurotic trend structures the individual's conscious perception and behavior, forming their surface personality. The needs of the opposing trends remain active in the unconscious, creating a persistent pressure that threatens the stability of the dominant solution. This latent pressure generates secondary anxiety, distinct from the initial basic anxiety.

When circumstances trigger the latent, opposing need--for example, when a compulsively aggressive person faces a situation requiring genuine intimacy--the threat to the dominant structure is immense. The individual experiences a severe psychological crisis, recognizing that fulfilling the repressed need means dismantling the entire defensive structure that provides their neurotic sense of safety. To avoid this catastrophic collapse of identity, the opposing need is subjected to immediate and forceful **repression**, preventing it from entering conscious awareness or influencing behavior.

This cycle of dominance, pressure, and repression is continuous, ensuring that the **Basic Conflict** remains the driving force behind the neurotic individual's actions. The conflict is never truly

resolved internally until the compulsive nature of the dominant trend is recognized and abandoned.

5. Consequences: Alienation and the Idealized Self

The most significant consequence of the chronic **Basic Conflict** and resulting repression is the deepening of the individual's **alienation from the self**. By constantly denying and repressing genuine needs that conflict with the dominant neurotic trend, the individual loses touch with their authentic feelings and desires--Horney's concept of the "real self."

In place of the real self, the neurotic creates an elaborate, flawless substitute called the **idealized image**. This idealized self is designed specifically to resolve the incompatibilities inherent in the **Basic Conflict** and to make the neurotic acceptable to themselves. However, the gap between the fallible real self and the perfect idealized self generates intense self-hatred and forces the individual into the grip of the **tyranny of the shoulds**. The tyranny refers to the compulsive, internal demands ("I should be perfect," "I should always be right," "I should never need anyone") necessary to maintain the illusion of the idealized self, which only serves to perpetuate the fundamental tension of the **Basic Conflict**.

6. Distinction from Other Psychoanalytic Conflicts

Horney deliberately differentiated the **Basic Conflict** from the intrapsychic struggles central to classical psychoanalysis. Unlike Freudian conflicts, such as the tension between the id, ego, and superego, or the developmental struggles of the Oedipus complex, Horney's conflict is fundamentally concerned with defensive relational strategies.

Freudian theory views conflict as stemming from innate biological drives struggling against societal prohibition. Horney, conversely, viewed the conflict as a struggle between competing, learned psychological needs developed in response to inadequate social environments. The **Basic Conflict** is therefore socio-cultural and existential, focused on the loss of self and the compulsive search for safety, rather than purely instinctual repression. This distinction highlights Horney's emphasis on the self's potential for growth when freed from the rigidity imposed by neurotic defense structures.

7. Therapeutic Implications

For Horney, the resolution of the **Basic Conflict** is the primary aim of therapy. Treatment focuses not just on symptom relief, but on dismantling the entire neurotic structure built around the conflict. The therapist assists the patient in achieving deep insight into their dominant neurotic trend and the destructive nature of the idealized image it supports.

The key therapeutic step involves helping the patient recognize that the repressed needs (the non-

dominant trends) are not inherently dangerous or catastrophic, but simply components of a holistic self. By making the unconscious conflict conscious, the patient can begin to integrate these previously incompatible needs into a more flexible personality structure. This integration enables the patient to move away from the compulsive, self-alienating defenses and toward the utilization of their "real self," thereby neutralizing the chronic, debilitating tension of the **Basic Conflict** and fostering genuine psychological growth.

Further Reading

[Karen Horney \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Horney's Neurotic Needs \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Psychoanalysis \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Oedipus Complex \(Wikipedia\)](#)

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