

HORNEY, KAREN (1885-1952)

Authored by
mohammad looti

October 11, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *HORNEY, KAREN (1885-1952)*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES.
Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=40988>

Karen Horney

Born: 1885 | **Died:** 1952

Nationality: German/American

Primary Field(s): Psychoanalysis, Psychodynamic Theory, Social Psychology

1. Summary

Karen Horney was a highly influential German psychoanalyst who significantly challenged and reformulated the tenets of classical Freudian theory. Initially trained and practicing as a Freudian analyst in Germany, she relocated to the United States in the early 1930s. Upon arrival, she quickly established a prominent association and training institute which she headed until her death. Since then, the institute has grown substantially in size and importance, ensuring that exponents of the Horney approach are currently found throughout the United States and abroad, maintaining a distinct perspective within psychodynamic thought.

Horney accepted the general psychodynamic methodology pioneered by Freud but profoundly disagreed with classical psychoanalysis, which she felt overemphasized man's **biological endowment** while relegating crucial **social and cultural factors** to a minor, secondary role. She explicitly rejected Freud's instinct theory, his structural approach to the mind (the id, ego, and superego), and his assertion that an unresolved Oedipal conflict must be the root of all neuroses. Instead of placing the primary emphasis on innate sex and aggression, Horney proposed that the underlying determinant of human behavior is the fundamental **need for emotional security**. Her most important books, including *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time* (1937), *New Ways in Psychoanalysis* (1939), and *Neurosis and Human Growth* (1950), presented a "correction" of Freudian concepts that amounted to a comprehensive reformulation of the entire development, structure, and dynamics of neurosis.

2. Key Contributions

Socio-Cultural Emphasis: Horney pioneered the socio-cultural perspective within psychoanalysis, arguing that cultural context and disturbed social relationships, rather than inherent biological instincts, form the basis of character development and neurotic conflict.

Basic Anxiety: She developed the concept of **basic anxiety**--a pervasive feeling of dread, uneasiness, and impending disaster--which arises primarily from disturbed parent-child relationships and is the foundation upon which neuroses are built.

The Ten Neurotic Needs: Horney categorized maladaptive coping strategies stemming from basic anxiety into ten specific, irrational, and insatiable needs, such as the need for affection and approval, for power, or for personal admiration.

Three Neurotic Orientations: These ten needs were further grouped into three distinct, rigid interpersonal orientations (Moving Toward, Moving Against, and Moving Away), which characterize the defensive structure of the neurotic personality.

The Idealized Self-Image: She described how the neurotic individual unconsciously develops an **idealized but false image** of the self and dedicates immense life energy to living up to this image, thereby inhibiting genuine personal growth and destroying authentic relationships.

3. Intellectual Context and Impact

Horney's work represents a pivotal shift within the psychodynamic tradition, defining her as a Neo-Freudian. Her primary intellectual contribution was the successful challenge to the biological determinism prevalent in early 20th-century psychoanalysis. She argued persuasively that conflicts embedded within the culture itself--such as the emphasis on aggressive competition and success versus religious dictates stressing humility and brotherly love--are central to understanding modern psychological distress. These contradictions are precisely what the neurotic struggles to reconcile: their tendencies toward aggression versus yielding, their excessive demands versus fears of getting nothing, and their striving toward self-aggrandizement versus feelings of personal helplessness.

Since Western culture places a high value on competitiveness and prestige-striving, Horney observed that the "**neurotic personality of our time**" is most frequently characterized by an insatiably competitive drive, rather than the tendency to be submissive or withdrawn. Her emphasis on interpersonal relationships and social context paved the way for modern relational psychoanalysis and humanistic psychology. Her influence redirected therapeutic focus toward understanding current situational conflicts and coping mechanisms rather than solely excavating repressed childhood sexuality. Her legacy is defined by her creation of a more humanistic and sociologically sophisticated understanding of the development of psychological illness.

4. Major Works

The Neurotic Personality of Our Time (1937)

New Ways in Psychoanalysis (1939)

Neurosis and Human Growth (1950)

5. The Dynamics of Neurosis and Basic Anxiety

Horney held that neuroses arise fundamentally out of the "strategies" an individual adopts in a futile attempt to handle what she termed **basic anxiety**. Basic anxiety is defined as a feeling of uneasiness, dread, and impending disaster, and its major source lies in disturbed relations between the child and their parents. Examples of such disturbed relations include parental

indifference to the child's needs, a cold family atmosphere, the imposition of excessively high standards, or constant, caustic criticism. These environments inevitably make the child feel isolated, helpless, and insecure in what is perceived as a hostile world.

These hostile circumstances simultaneously generate powerful feelings of counterhostility in the child. However, when the child is prevented from expressing this anger due to overwhelming guilt, fear, or helplessness, the anger is repressed. Paradoxically, the more the child represses their hostility, the more intense the underlying basic anxiety becomes. The neurosis itself is the maladaptive reaction to this intolerable anxiety. Because the feeling is so pervasive, devastating, and frightening, the child undertakes various strategies to counteract it, such as attempting to placate parents to win love, seeking revenge through spiteful behavior, or trying to compensate for helplessness by exerting excessive power over others. All these strategies share the common goal of coping with a world that the individual feels is threatening to overpower and crush them.

6. Neurotic Needs and Orientations

The unfortunate characteristic of these coping strategies is that they begin merely as devices to temporarily allay anxiety but evolve into **persistent needs** that become an irrational and integral part of the adult personality. Horney termed these needs neurotic for two reasons: first, they are irrational and unrealistic attempts to resolve disturbed relationships; and second, they generate vicious circles, producing more problems and anxiety than they alleviate, which forces the individual to resort to these strategies even more intensely.

Horney enumerates ten specific neurotic needs, including the insatiable need for affection and approval, the need for a partner who will take over one's life, the need for power, and the need for self-sufficiency and independence. These ten needs group themselves into three overarching, general categories, or orientations:

Moving Toward People: This represents an excessive need for love and a strong tendency to depend on others, arising out of intense feelings of **helplessness**.

Moving Away from People: This is an inordinate drive for independence, self-sufficiency, and setting up one's own limited world. It stems from the painful feeling that one is misunderstood by others or has nothing substantial in common with them.

Moving Against People: Characterized by an inordinate need for power, prestige, or possessions obtained at the expense of others, this orientation arises from the deep conviction that the environment is fundamentally **hostile**.

Crucially, every individual possesses urges for affection, independence, and recognition. The normal person is flexible, able to integrate these three orientations, and utilize them appropriately as circumstances require. The neurotic, however, is rigidly dominated by only one of these three needs, employing it inappropriately and extremely. They attempt to solve every problem by clinging

to others, restricting their life, or exploiting people. To rationalize this one-tracked approach, they unconsciously develop an idealized self-image--such as a self-sacrificing martyr or a powerful figure--and exhaust their energies living up to this false image.

7. Therapeutic Goals

In the Horneyan approach, the ultimate object of therapy is to help the individual overthrow their rigid, defensive idealized self-image and replace it with the "**real self.**" The real self is viewed as the entity that will release the individual's inherent capacities for genuine personal growth and realization. This therapeutic journey necessitates that the patient undergo a crucial "**disillusioning process,**" during which they are systematically made aware of their faulty, self-defeating strategies.

Horney believed the patient must come to fully realize that these defensive strategies are futile and harmful before they can effectively deal with the underlying reasons for which the strategies were set up. Once the patient attains some recognition of the defense system they employ, the subsequent step is to help them gain deep insight into the core conflicts that lie beneath it. In this process, the therapist utilizes many techniques adapted from Freudian practice but generally plays a more direct and active role than the classical psychoanalyst, driving toward the ultimate goal of authentic self-realization.

Further Reading

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

[Psychoanalysis \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Basic anxiety \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Neurosis and Human Growth \(Wikipedia\)](#)