

SAFETY DEVICE

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1. Core Definition

The Safety Device is a fundamental psychological construct within the revisionist psychoanalytic framework developed by Karen Horney, representing any mental or behavioral strategy employed by an individual to secure self-protection from perceived external or internal threats. This concept describes the habitual, often compulsive, maneuvers adopted to mitigate the intense, debilitating feeling of basic anxiety--Horney's term for the sense of being isolated and helpless in a potentially hostile world. While the Safety Device shares functional overlap with the classical psychoanalytic concept of the defense mechanism, its primary distinction lies in its focus: it is fundamentally a defense against interpersonal vulnerability and insecurity rather than purely instinctual drives.

Horney emphasized that these devices arise not from conscious choice but from deep, unconscious compulsion, serving as automatic reactions to threats against psychic equilibrium. They are rigid and indiscriminate in their application, meaning they are deployed regardless of whether the current situation realistically warrants such extreme caution or avoidance. The central goal of every Safety Device is the attainment of security, often prioritized above genuine satisfaction, love, or self-realization. These behaviors are designed to maintain a fragile, artificial sense of stability in a world the individual perceives as fundamentally unsafe and threatening, especially concerning relationships.

The chronic reliance on Safety Devices is what ultimately distinguishes a neurosis from healthy adaptation. Healthy coping mechanisms are flexible, reality-tested, and aimed at solving actual problems; conversely, the Safety Device is rigid, often detached from reality, and primarily aimed at reducing the internal tension of anxiety. When these devices are consistently used and become deeply integrated into the personality, they solidify into the major neurotic trends--moving toward, moving against, or moving away from others--thereby shaping the individual's character structure and limiting their capacity for authentic emotional engagement and growth.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The theory of the Safety Device was systematically introduced by Karen D. Horney (1885-1952) during her period of major theoretical departures from orthodox Freudianism in the 1930s and 1940s. Horney, a foundational figure in Neo-Freudian thought, sought to reorient the genesis of neurosis away from psychosexual stages and biological instincts toward the crucial impact of cultural and interpersonal factors, particularly the quality of early childhood relationships. This shift provided the essential intellectual foundation for the Safety Device concept.

Horney posited that a child raised in an environment characterized by parental indifference, inconsistency, rejection, or overt hostility develops a state of **Basic Hostility**--a natural, angry response to the frustrating and dangerous environment. Because the child is utterly dependent on the parents, expressing this hostility is fraught with danger (potential abandonment or punishment), leading to the necessary repression of this anger. The repressed hostility is then transformed into basic anxiety. Historically, the Safety Device emerges as the inevitable, secondary psychological structure mobilized to counteract and suppress this overwhelming basic anxiety. It is the child's attempt to manage life without the necessary experience of genuine warmth and security.

The very nomenclature "Safety Device" reflects Horney's emphasis on mechanism and survival. It suggests a technical, mechanical response to danger, underscoring the urgency and rigidity with which the individual attempts to establish control over their internal and external environment. This conceptual evolution marked a significant contribution to psychology by focusing clinical attention on current defensive strategies and interpersonal conflicts rather than exclusively on infantile history, thereby making psychoanalysis more accessible to understanding culturally mediated neurotic patterns.

3. Key Characteristics of Safety Devices

Safety Devices possess specific characteristics that differentiate them from healthy coping mechanisms, ensuring their function as neurotic stabilizers. Foremost among these is their **compulsive and rigid nature**. The individual does not choose to use the device; they are driven by an irresistible, unconscious necessity. This compulsion means that the behavior is deployed automatically, often inappropriately, severely restricting the individual's freedom of response and flexibility in adapting to new or complex situations. This rigidity is precisely what makes the device pathological, forcing the individual to fit all reality into the narrow confines of their defensive strategy.

A second defining characteristic is their **self-deceptive functionality**. Safety Devices are highly effective at temporarily reducing conscious anxiety, offering immediate relief from tension. However, this success is illusory because the devices fail to address the core conflicts or environmental deficits that generate the basic anxiety in the first place. For example, a device based on withdrawal (detachment) successfully prevents rejection, but simultaneously guarantees isolation, which only exacerbates the underlying feeling of being alone and helpless, thus reinforcing the need for the device in a continuous, self-perpetuating cycle.

Finally, Safety Devices are typically utilized in the service of the individual's **Idealized Self-Image**. In Horney's view, the neurotic individual, unable to tolerate their vulnerable Real Self, constructs a magnificent, perfect, and often unattainable image of who they feel they *should* be. The Safety Devices act as the operational tools necessary to maintain this idealized self and

prevent any perceived reality--such as failure, criticism, or vulnerability--from shattering this fragile internal construct. When a device fails (e.g., the perfectionist makes a mistake), the ensuing intense anxiety is rooted in the threat to the idealized image, not merely the error itself.

4. The Connection to Basic Anxiety and Hostility

The operational role of the Safety Device is inextricably linked to the sequence of basic hostility leading to basic anxiety. Horney articulated that when a child's legitimate need for safety and genuine affection is thwarted by deficient parenting, the child develops hostility. When this hostility is repressed due to fear, it transforms into basic anxiety--the profound, pervasive dread of being utterly helpless in a hostile world. The Safety Devices are the desperate, automatic psychic responses to manage this intolerable state of fear. Without the pressure of basic anxiety, these mechanisms would not be necessary, and the individual would instead develop healthy, flexible coping strategies.

The intensity of the individual's basic anxiety directly correlates with the severity and inflexibility of the Safety Devices adopted. An individual experiencing high basic anxiety will cling to their neurotic strategies with an almost fanatic fervor, viewing them not as problems but as essential life support. For example, a person with acute anxiety regarding rejection might develop the compliance device (moving toward people), believing that being perfectly subservient and agreeable guarantees safety, even if it means profound self-denial. The device functions as a psychological firewall against the perceived emotional chaos of vulnerability.

Understanding this linkage is vital for therapy. If a therapist attempts to dismantle a Safety Device too quickly, the patient will experience a flood of their underlying basic anxiety, often resulting in resistance, premature termination, or the rapid substitution of one device for another. Effective treatment requires patiently helping the patient recognize that the device, while once necessary for survival, is now the primary obstacle to growth, and gradually fostering the internal strength necessary to tolerate the anxiety inherent in authentic living.

5. Categorization into Neurotic Trends and Needs

Horney categorized the various forms that Safety Devices take into ten specific ****Neurotic Needs****, which are compulsive, rigid demands for security or satisfaction. These ten needs are further consolidated into three overarching, fundamental patterns of interpersonal relating, known as the Neurotic Trends. Each trend represents a distinct class of Safety Device employed to manage basic anxiety.

Moving Toward People (The Compliant Solution): This trend encompasses Safety Devices aimed at eliciting affection, approval, and dependence. The individual operates on the premise that "If I submit and am perfectly loved, I will not be harmed." Specific needs include the neurotic need

for affection and approval, and the need for a powerful partner who will take responsibility for one's life. Safety is sought through self-effacement and the avoidance of any action that might provoke disapproval or rejection, ensuring protection via subservience.

Moving Against People (The Aggressive Solution): This trend involves Safety Devices designed to achieve mastery, control, and exploitation over others. The underlying premise is that "If I have power, no one can hurt me." This includes the neurotic need for power, the need to exploit others, and the need for social recognition and prestige. Safety is achieved by viewing the world as a hostile arena where strength and domination are the only reliable defenses, preemptively ensuring one's own superiority and invulnerability.

Moving Away from People (The Detached Solution): This trend focuses on achieving emotional distance, radical self-sufficiency, and independence. The guiding principle is that "If I withdraw completely, I cannot be hurt." The Safety Devices here manifest as the neurotic need for self-sufficiency and independence, and the need for perfection and unassailability. The individual seeks safety by minimizing needs, avoiding emotional investment, and cultivating an aloof, impenetrable exterior, thereby reducing contact with potential sources of disappointment and pain.

6. Implications for Psychic Structure (The Idealized Self)

The proliferation and rigidification of Safety Devices have profound implications for the overall psychic structure, particularly in the formation of the **Idealized Self**. In Horney's schema, the true self, or the Real Self, is the center of one's potential for growth, but the neurotic cannot tolerate its perceived weaknesses. Consequently, they abandon the Real Self and construct the Idealized Self--an elaborate, flattering image of perfection based on their primary safety trend.

The Idealized Self becomes the central organizing principle of the neurosis, and the individual subsequently enters into a **Search for Glory**, which is the compulsive attempt to actualize this impossible image. In this context, the Safety Devices function as the tactical means by which the individual defends the Idealized Self from injury. For example, the Safety Device of compulsive modesty (part of the compliant trend) ensures that the idealized image of being humble and selfless remains intact, protecting it from the threat of being exposed as arrogant or selfish.

The tragedy of the Safety Device is that while it temporarily secures the idealized image, it simultaneously distances the person further from their Real Self. The energy and effort required to maintain the rigid façade of the devices--the internal effort to repress spontaneity, authentic feeling, and natural drives--creates immense internal conflict. Horney referred to this as the "tyranny of the shoulds," where the individual is relentlessly driven by compulsive internal mandates (rooted in the Safety Devices) concerning how they must perform, feel, and appear in order to sustain the idealized self and avoid basic anxiety.

7. Significance and Therapeutic Impact

Horney's concept of the Safety Device is highly significant for modern psychodynamic therapy, offering a clear, functional framework for interpreting patient behavior. Unlike models that might view neurotic behaviors as inexplicable symptoms, Horney's model allows the clinician to interpret these behaviors as purposeful, albeit self-defeating, attempts to resolve basic anxiety. This shift in perspective leads directly to therapeutic strategies focused on present-day interpersonal issues and intrapsychic conflict.

The therapeutic goal is not merely to alleviate symptoms but to help the patient recognize the self-paralyzing cost of their chosen Safety Devices. This process involves working through the resistance generated when the device is challenged, as abandoning the device feels equivalent to surrendering one's only source of security. By gently exposing the underlying basic anxiety and helping the patient tolerate it, the therapist encourages the patient to shift their energy away from the compulsive maintenance of the idealized self toward the development of the authentic Real Self.

The impact of this concept extends beyond psychoanalysis, influencing humanistic and relational therapies. It provides a robust explanatory model for understanding rigid patterns seen in many personality disorders and chronic relationship difficulties, wherein individuals compulsively utilize defensive patterns (Safety Devices) that sabotage the very connections they desperately seek. By identifying whether a client is primarily moving toward, against, or away from others, clinicians gain powerful insight into the individual's core strategy for managing fear and insecurity.

8. Criticisms and Debates

While Horney's framework is foundational to Neo-Freudian thought, the concept of the Safety Device and its associated theory of neurosis face several criticisms, largely stemming from traditional psychoanalytic quarters. A primary critique involves Horney's significant de-emphasis on biological and instinctual drives in favor of sociocultural determinants. Critics argue that attributing neurotic mechanisms almost entirely to interpersonal trauma and cultural conflict may undervalue the role of inherent temperament, genetic predisposition, or biologically rooted emotional sensitivities in shaping defensive patterns.

Furthermore, the detailed taxonomy of the Ten Neurotic Needs, which operationalizes the Safety Devices, is sometimes deemed overly complex or redundant. Some theorists suggest that simpler, more parsimonious models of coping mechanisms could achieve similar descriptive power without requiring adherence to Horney's specific terminology. This debate often centers on whether specific neurotic needs, such as the need for exploitation or the need for perfection, are fundamentally distinct Safety Devices or merely variations of broader, existing defense mechanisms like projection or reaction formation.

Finally, critics occasionally challenge the implied therapeutic optimism inherent in Horney's focus on the Real Self. They question whether merely stripping away the neurotic structure (the Idealized Self and its Safety Devices) is sufficient to enable the emergence of the Real Self, particularly in cases of severe character pathology. This challenge suggests that deeper, more archaic psychological interventions might be required to repair fundamental damage predating the development of the socially mediated Safety Devices.

Further Reading

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

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

[Neurosis \(Wikipedia\)](#)

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