

Summary of *Neurosis and Human Growth* by Karen Horney, M.D.

Overview

- There is a natural drive to full potentiality (truthful to self, active/productive, relating with mutuality).
- Circumstances create basic anxiety → coping → toward/against/away from → idealized image → idealized self → alienation from real self.
- We can outgrow destructive forces and it's our prime moral privilege to do so.
- The neurotic strategy is compulsive vs. spontaneous—insatiable and indiscriminate; it disregards the self and leads to disproportionate reactions to frustration (rage, anxiety, misery, inertia).
- Imagination continually maintains illusions and we lose our capacity for *being* (here & now)
- We develop neurotic claims toward the external world that are unrealistic, egocentric, expected without adequate effort, and/or vindictive.
- Internally we're tyrannized by *shoulds*, which lead to efforts to control so that anxiety is quickly covered over instead of learning from it.
- When we can't measure up to the idealized image our neurotic pride gets engaged (rage, fear, anxiety, humiliation), leading to a need to save face.
- The central inner conflict is between healthy and neurotic, constructive and destructive forces.
- We can relinquish our claims only when we overcome the whole search for glory and all it entails:
 - Be self-observant, shake the underpinnings of the search for glory, see ourselves as we really are, love ourselves as imperfect beings.
 - Let the natural/neurotic tendencies express themselves, but *choose* whether or not to act.
 - Be alert for signs of, "This is the new me," because that's just more magical thinking

Foreword

Dr. Horney calls into question some basic assumptions—about pride, love, the importance of achievement, mastery, the standards we live by, the expectations we have of each other. She conceives of the real self, the fundamental core of aliveness that, though universally present in each of us, finds its unique expression in each individual's development of his/her potential for self-realization.

Kierkegaard's insight that one can lose one's soul and somehow not miss its absence is echoed in Horney's views on alienation. D.T. Suzuki and the teachings of Zen Buddhism reinforced her awareness of the layers of illusory perceptions, thoughts, and feelings we must become aware of if we're to truly know ourselves. She argues that many so-called "moral issues" are compulsive demands dictated by an individual's character structure.

Introduction—A Morality of Evolution

Under inner stress we may become alienated from our real selves, but there are inherent constructive forces urging us to realize our given potentialities. We cannot develop these unless we are truthful to ourselves; unless we are active and productive; unless we relate ourselves to others in the spirit of mutuality. We cannot grow if we indulge in self-idolatry and consistently attribute our own shortcomings to the deficiencies of others. We can grow, in the true sense, only if we assume responsibility for ourselves.

We arrive thus at a *morality of evolution*. We do not need an inner strait jacket with which to shackle our spontaneity, nor the whip of inner dictates to drive us to perfection. A better possibility of dealing with

destructive forces in ourselves is that of actually *outgrowing* them. Self-knowledge, then, is not an aim in itself, but a means of liberating the forces of spontaneous growth. In this sense, to work at ourselves becomes not only the prime moral obligation, but the prime moral *privilege*. And as we lose the neurotic obsession with self, as we become free to grow ourselves, we also free ourselves to love and to feel concern for other people.

The Search for Glory

The *Real Self* is a central inner force, common to all human beings and yet unique to each, which is the deep source of growth—free, healthy development in accordance with the potentials of one’s generic and individual nature:

- clarity and depth of own feelings, thoughts, wishes, interests;
- ability to tap own resources;
- strength of own will power;
- special capacities or gifts;
- faculty to express self;
- ability to relate to others with spontaneous feelings.

As a result of unfavorable conditions, however, we do not develop a sense of belonging, of “we;” but rather a profound insecurity and *basic anxiety*—which prevents relating to others spontaneously and forces us to find ways to allay the basic anxiety. The resulting attitudes:

- to *move toward*,
- *against, or*
- *away from others*.

In a healthy human relationship these attitudes are not mutually exclusive; but for someone on precarious ground they become extreme and rigid (e.g., affection becomes clinging, compliance becomes appeasement).

We develop needs, sensitivities, inhibitions, and the beginnings of moral values that support the predominant attitude. For example, predominantly complying children tend to subordinate themselves to others and to lean on them, but also try to be unselfish and good; aggressive children start to place value on strength and on the capacity to endure and to fight.

An urgent need develops to *lift ourselves above others* along with a beginning alienation from self. Our need to evolve artificial, strategic ways to cope with others forces us to override our genuine feelings wishes, and thoughts. It does not matter what we feel, only that we are safe. Gradually and unconsciously we create an *idealized image* of ourselves, which entails self-glorification and gives us the much-needed feeling of significance and superiority over others:

- Compliance becomes goodness, love, saintliness.
- Aggressiveness becomes strength, leadership, heroism, omnipotence.
- Aloofness becomes wisdom, self-sufficiency, independence.

Eventually we come to identify so completely with our idealized image that we *become* the image—the *idealized self*—a change in the core of our being, in our feeling about ourselves. The Idealized Self begins to represent what we “really” are, or could or should be. It becomes the standard by which we measure ourselves. *The energies driving toward self-realization are shifted to the aim of actualizing the idealized self.* Self-idealization grows into a *search for glory*:

- **The drive toward perfection**—through a complicated system of shoulds and taboos.
- **Neurotic ambition**—the drive toward external success, little related to the *content* of what one is doing—what counts is the excelling itself. In general this is either in the category of **power** (direct power, power behind the throne; influence, manipulating) or the category of **prestige** (reputation, acclaim; popularity, admiration; special attention).
- **The drive toward vindictive triumph**—with its chief aim to put others to shame or defeat through one's very success; attain power by rising to prominence; inflict suffering—mostly of a humiliating kind; or (where the drive to excel is relegated to fantasy) to frustrate, outwit or defeat others—revenge for humiliations suffered in childhood.

We lose our sense for the concrete, for the here and now. It becomes difficult to distinguish between genuine feelings, beliefs, strivings, and their artificial equivalents (unconscious pretenses) in ourselves and in others. The emphasis shifts from being to appearing. The most pertinent symbol is the devil's pact—the offer of unlimited powers which can be obtained only on the condition of selling one's soul or going to hell (an inner hell of self-contempt and self-torment).

Neurotic Claims

As long as our personal aggrandizement is too indispensable to be touched, we present a claim to the outside world: we are *entitled* to special attention, consideration, deference on the part of others. It is no longer up to us to do something about our problems; it is up to others to not disturb us.

For example, we become exasperated because a plane doesn't leave at a convenient time. The wish or need, in itself quite reasonable, turns into a claim (we feel *entitled* to its satisfaction). Neurotics are not only unaware of this difference but are averse to seeing it (e.g., becoming furiously indignant when getting a ticket for double parking). People who need to be always right feel entitled never to be criticized, doubted, or questioned. Those who are power ridden feel entitled to bind obedience. Those for whom life has become a game feel entitled to fool everybody but never be fooled themselves. Those who are afraid to face their conflicts feel entitled to "get by" or "get around" their problems. No matter how morose or irritable, we feel entitled to understanding. For the detached person, "not to be bothered" usually implies being exempt from criticism, expectations, or efforts—this person feels entitled to be left alone no matter what is at stake.

This claim of being the exception pertains also in regard to natural laws, psychic or physical—we fail to see that if we want to achieve something we must put in work, if we want to be independent we must take responsibility for ourselves; or, as long as we're arrogant we will be vulnerable, as long as we don't believe that others love us we'll be suspicious of love. The recognition of any necessity to apply ourselves would pull us down into the world of actuality where we are subject to the same natural laws as anybody else. We feel it is unfair to be afflicted with our particular difficulties. We resentfully envy anybody better endowed or more fortunate. We imitate or adore others.

Common characteristics of these neurotic claims:

- They are *unrealistic* in two regards: (1) we have little if any consideration for the possibility of fulfillment of our claims (for example, being exempt from illness, old age, death); (2) we expect others to respond to our claims whether in a position to do so or not (for example, if I'm *entitled* to have my invitations accepted, I take *offense* when they are declined).

- Neurotic claims are *egocentric*: This is often so apparent that it strikes observers as naïve, but neurotics are consumed with self because driven by psychic needs, torn by conflicts, and compelled to adhere to their own peculiar solutions.
- We expect things to come to us *without adequate effort* (for example, continuing to eat while considering it unfair that others are more slender), or we lay claim to a promotion without having done anything special to merit it and/or without asking for it or even being clear that we want it. This shows up in the claims of clients to be immediately relieved of their difficulties—out of their refusal to assume responsibility, they might be paralyzed to act and need for someone else to take responsibility.
- Neurotic claims can be *vindictive* in nature (the person may feel wronged and insist on retribution, claims can be made with reference to past frustration or suffering, and they can be made in a militant manner).

Even if aware of having certain claims, we tend to be unaware they are unwarranted or irrational. Any doubt of their validity would mean a first step toward undermining them. All claims, by definition, substitute for our active work at our problems, and hence paralyze us with regard to our growth. The more vindictive the claim, the stronger the degree of inertia. The unconscious argument runs as follows: Others are responsible for the trouble I'm in—so I'm entitled to repair. It is up to “them” or to fate.

Since claims are crucial for the maintenance of a neurosis, it's important to *assert* them. And the ways in which we try to make others accede to our claims are also intimately connected to our coping strategies. For example, we can put others under obligation and try to cash in by appealing to their sense of fairness or guilt-feelings, we can emphasize our suffering and appeal to others' pity and guilt-feelings, we can try through hard-hitting accusations to enforce compliance, and so forth.

Considering all the energy invested in justifying these claims and in asserting them, we must expect *intense reactions to their frustration*. There are undercurrents of fear, but the prevailing response is anger (frustrations are experienced as unfair and unjust) or even rage—the person feels not only angry but the right to be angry, and this feeling is vigorously defended. This angry reaction may take one of three courses:

- It may be suppressed and appear in *psychosomatic symptoms*.
- It may be *freely expressed or at least fully felt*, one will then build up a case against the offender that looks logic-tight.
- We may plunge into *misery and self-pity*—“How can they do this to me?”

It's easier to observe these reactions in others because our conviction of righteousness inhibits self-examination. So it's in our real interest to examine our reactions when we become preoccupied with a wrong done to us, or to ponder the hateful qualities of somebody, or when we feel the impulse to get back at others. We must ask whether our reaction is in any reasonable proportion to the wrong done, and if we find a disproportion we must search for hidden claims.

Having seen the claims in one or two instances does not mean we're rid of all of them. The process is reminiscent of a tapeworm cure in which parts of the worm are eliminated; it will regenerate and keep sapping our strength until the head is removed. This means we can relinquish our claims only to the extent we overcome the whole search for glory and all it entails. However, unlike a tapeworm cure, every step counts in the process of coming back to ourselves.

The Tyranny of the Should

The discussion so far has been focused on how we try to actualize the idealized self with regard to the outside world. Within, we mold ourselves into supreme beings of our own making. The inner dictates comprise all that we *should* be able to do, to be, to feel to know—and *taboos* on how and what we should not be. Demands on the self that are altogether too difficult and too rigid. We might even agree that we expect too much, but this does not reveal the peculiar *characteristics of inner dictates*. The premise on which they operate is that nothing should be, or is, impossible for oneself:

- There is the same *disregard for feasibility* which pervades the entire drive for actualization. Many of these demands are of a kind which no human being could fulfill. Such an intellectual realization, however, usually does not change much, if anything.
- There is a complete *disregard for the conditions under which they could be fulfilled*. An expectation of easy success operates not only in reference to the length of the change process, but equally so in regard to an individual insight gained. Naturally, then, subsequent disappointment and discouragement are unavoidable.
- The inner dictates, exactly like political tyranny in a police state, operate with a supreme *disregard for the person's own psychic condition*—for what we can feel or do as we are at present. One of the frequent shoulds, for instance is that one should never feel hurt.
- They have a *coercive character*—in obeying the shoulds, there is about as much freedom as in a “voluntary” contribution within a dictatorship. In both instances there are quick retributions if we do not measure up to expectations. In the case of the inner dictates this means violent emotional reactions to non-fulfillment—which traverse the whole range of anxiety, despair, self-condemnation and self-destructive impulses. To the outsider they appear totally out of proportion to the provocation.

To the person "in the grip," existing conditions need not be examined. If our need is to be sweetness and light, we will spread a golden haze over our childhood. If we refuse to assume responsibility, then our parents are totally to blame for our difficulties. Or we may go to the opposite extreme and assume an absurd amount of responsibility. One of the reasons for the absence of conscious resentment is a retrospective *should*.

The realization of any present shortcomings is unbearable for anybody harassed by dictatorial shoulds. Whatever the difficulty, it must be removed quickly. Some may spirit away the difficulty in their imagination. Others try to remove it by sheer power of will. With such artificial efforts the difficulty is, at best, a little more under control. It has only been driven underground and will continue to operate in a more disguised form. Many reactions of despondence, irritability, or fear occurring during the change process are less a response to our having discovered a disturbing problem in ourselves than to our feeling impotent to remove it right away.

The very first step, which is to see the whole extent of the particular disturbance, would go against our grain and would be the very opposite of our frantic drive to make the disturbance disappear.

Individual differences of attitude toward this tyranny range between the opposite poles of compliance and rebellion, primarily determined by the greatest appeal life holds: mastery, love, or freedom.

- The *expansive type*, for whom mastery is crucial, should be all things to all people, should know everything, and should never err. This person's arrogance may be so great as to not even consider the possibility of failure and to discard it if it occurs.
- People of the *self-effacing type*, for whom love seems to solve all problems, likewise feel their shoulds constitute a law not to be questioned. But the foremost element in their conscious experience is self-criticism, a feeling of guilt for *not* being the supreme being.
- Those of the *resigned type*, to whom the idea of "freedom" appeals more than anything else, are, of the three, most prone to rebel against their inner tyranny. They are hypersensitive to coercion, but may rebel in a somewhat passive way. Everything they feel they should do turns in their minds to coercion, and in consequence they feel listless. Or they may rebel in a more active way by insisting upon doing only what they please when they please. In its most violent form this reaction may be a rebellion of despair—if they can't be the ultimate of piety, chastity, sincerity, then they will be thoroughly "bad," promiscuous, tell lies, affront others.

Whatever the prevailing attitude, a great deal of the process is externalized and we impose our standards on others—what we *should* be is turned outward to what others *should* be.

We can relinquish our claims only when we overcome the whole search for glory and all it entails. The focus on what is lacking or difficult leads to distorted vision/emotional blindness which results from inner unconscious necessities. All claims substitute for active work on own problems and paralyze growth ("*Others* are responsible for the trouble I'm in"). In order to grow, you must:

- be self-observant, shake the underpinnings of the search for glory, see yourself as you really are, love yourself as an imperfect being;
- let the natural/neurotic tendencies express themselves, but *choose* whether or not to act;
- be alert for signs of, "This is the new me," because that's just more magical thinking.