Coping Roles and the Management of Anxiety

According to Horney the basic anxiety of the child is 'the feeling a child has of being isolated and helpless in a potentially hostile world'. This anxiety occurs when there has been a lack of adequate and accurate doubling and mirroring, which, in turn, produces insecurity in the child. This is experienced as unpleasant, painful and disorganizing, i.e. fragmenting.

A wide range of factors in the environment can produce this insecurity in the child; 'direct or indirect domination, indifference, erratic behaviour, lack of respect for the child's individual needs, lack of real guidance, disparaging attitudes, too much admiration or the lack of it, lack of reliable warmth, having to take sides in parental disagreements, too much or too little responsibility, overprotection, isolation from other children, injustice, discrimination, unkept promises, hostile atmosphere', etc etc.

The child by necessity must find a way to manage their anxiety and regain an equilibrium. Three main trends develop as a way to manage this inner chaos and external threat. If the threat and subsequent anxiety is high the child's response will tend to be more extreme and rigid. These attempts often develop into neurotic trends and fixed personality structures.

1. Moving towards the anxiety-causing source

Characterized by an emphasis on helplessness, seeking to win the other over by being good, nice and obedient. Compliance is the strategy.

In spite of their estrangement from others the child tries to win their affection and to lean on them. If there are dissenting parties in the family the child will attach themselves to the most powerful person or group, thus gaining a sense of belonging and support which reduces the sense of helplessness and isolation.

Entrenchment in this manner of responding will lead to the following:

• Automatic shouldering of blame whether guilty or not.

• Any kind of aggressive behaviour is taboo therefore any behaviour that could be regarded as critical, assertive, demanding, giving orders, making an impression or striving for ambitious goals is prohibited.

• Life is oriented towards others at the expense of the self.

• There is a pervasive experience of being weak and helpless and of others being superior and more intelligent, attractive, educated, etc.

• General dependence on others with self-esteem rising or falling dependent with others approval, disapproval, affection or lack of it.

• Aggressive tendencies are strongly repressed in order to preserve the artificial unity that has been created, a unity that would otherwise be exploded.

• The stronger the aggressive response the stronger the need to deny it to the extent of never wanting anything for oneself, never refusing a request, always liking everyone.

• Domination is only allowed under the guise of 'loving'. Demands upon others become excessive and self-satisfying with the hostility being either somatized or expressed in outbursts of blind fury.

Moving against the anxiety-causing source

Characterised by an acceptance of the hostility in the environment with a determination to fight. They take it for granted that everyone is hostile and refuse to admit that they are. There is an implicit distrust of the feelings and intentions of others.

Entrenchment in this manner of responding will lead to the following:

• The primary need is to have control over others. There may be an outright exercise of power, or indirect manipulation through oversolicitiousness or putting people under obligation.

• This urge to be stronger than the others and to defeat them is partly for one's own protection and partly for revenge. Everything is done to be a good fighter.

• Any relationship or situation is looked at from the standpoint of 'What can I get out of it?' Feelings are dismissed as sloppy sentimentality.

• The aggressive type is often mistaken for someone who is strong and well-adjusted because they can assert their wishes, give orders and defend themselves. Their limited capacity for friendship, love, affection, sympathetic understanding and disinterested enjoyment are often not immediately seen.

Moving away from the anxiety-causing source

The primary purpose is to move out of danger, wanting to neither belong nor to fight. No commonality is experienced with an overriding sense of not being understood. A world of one's own is built up through the use of books, nature, games, dreams and fantasy life.

Entrenchment in this manner of responding will lead to the following:

• A capacity to look at oneself with an objective detachment, i.e. to dissociate. The crucial need being to put distance between themselves and their feelings, and themselves and others.

• All activity is directed towards not getting involved to the extent that self-sufficiency will be maintained by restricting one's needs. Independence is overvalued with the focus being on *not* being influenced, coerced, tied or obligated. Long term obligations if possible are avoided. If distance cannot be maintained then panic sets in as they have no other resources for dealing with life.

• High need for privacy and acute discomfort with the details of one's life being known, instead preferring a shroud of vagueness and secrecy.

• This degree of isolation can usually only be sustained by the identifying as being superior and unique.

In relatively normal adjustment there is no reason why the three coping styles should be mutually exclusive. One should be capable of giving in to others, of fighting, and of keeping to oneself. The three can compliment one another and make for a harmonious whole. An ability to move between the three is indicative of flexibility, which in itself is a state of spontaneity.

The predominance of one coping style does not preclude the others from existing and operating. If one coping style does predominate there is reduced flexibility and the potential for greater rigidity and the development of a more neurotic stance. When there is a reduced role repertoire a person will be driven to comply, to fight or to be

aloof, regardless of whether the move is appropriate to the situation. In this situation all experiences are interpreted in the language of the established pattern with new experiences being rigidly defended against.

The compliant type asks 'Will they like me?', the aggressive type wants to know 'How strong an adversary are they?' or 'Can they be useful to me?', the detached person's first concern is 'Will they interfere with me? Will they want to influence me or will they leave me alone?'

In moving toward people, the person tries to create for themselves a friendly relation to the world. In moving against people, they equip themselves for survival in a competitive society. In moving away from people, they are seeking to attain a certain serenity and integrity.

Notes taken extensively from Karen Horney "Our Inner Conflicts", chapter 1-5.