Karen Horney: Moving Toward, Against & Away

Interpersonal coping strategies and the search for security

Psychoanalyst *Karen Horney* (1885–1952) proposed that when children grow up without enough warmth, reliability or respect, they can develop *basic anxiety*: a feeling of being isolated and helpless in a world that seems unsafe (Horney, 1937). To find security, people come to rely on three broad ways of relating to others (Horney, 1945). Everyone uses all three at times. Difficulties arise when one becomes rigid and is used regardless of the situation.

THREE WAYS OF SEEKING SECURITY WITH OTHERS

● *me* ○ *other people*

THE STARTING POINT

Basic anxiety

"I feel alone and unsafe. How do I protect myself?"

THE COMPLIANT STRATEGY

Moving toward people

seeking safety through closeness



PROTECTIVE BELIEF

If I can keep others happy and close, I may feel safer.

WHEN FLEXIBLE	Warmth, cooperation and care for others.
WHEN RIGID	People-pleasing, difficulty saying no, losing one's own needs.

THE AGGRESSIVE STRATEGY

Moving against people

seeking safety through strength



PROTECTIVE BELIEF

If I am strong and in control, I may be less vulnerable to being hurt.

WHEN FLEXIBLE	Assertiveness, drive and standing up for oneself.
WHEN RIGID	Needing to win, distrust, difficulty showing vulnerability.

THE DETACHED STRATEGY

Moving away from people

seeking safety through distance



PROTECTIVE BELIEF

If I keep my distance and depend on myself, I may feel safer.

WHEN FLEXIBLE	Independence, reflection and healthy boundaries.
WHEN RIGID	Emotional distance, isolation, avoiding closeness.

01 Flexible or fixed

the difference that matters

FLEXIBLE

Choosing what fits the moment

Healthy relating draws on all three: moving toward others for connection, against for self-protection and away for space, depending on what the situation calls for.



FIXED

One strategy, used everywhere

Horney described a strategy becoming compulsive: used regardless of the situation, while the others are pushed aside. It may then bring less security, not more.



02 Caught between strategies

what Horney called inner conflict

Horney (1945) observed that people can feel pulled between strategies that cannot all be satisfied at once, such as wanting closeness while also fearing dependence. Much distress, she suggested, comes from this tension rather than from any single strategy.

FOR EXAMPLE

"I want my partner to reassure me, and the moment they get close, I feel the urge to pull away."

WHAT THE RESEARCH SUGGESTS

Horney's ideas come from clinical observation, and her theory has had limited direct testing. Studies using a questionnaire based on her three strategies have found that each relates to different patterns of personality difficulty (Coolidge et al., 2001, 2004). The strategies are best understood as patterns to notice, not as diagnoses or fixed types.

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My Ways of Seeking Security

Noticing my patterns with curiosity, not judgement

03 Where do I tend to go?

circle how often, from never to always

SITUATION	TOWARD	AGAINST	AWAY
With a partner or close family	○○○○○	○○○○○	○○○○○
With friends	○○○○○	○○○○○	○○○○○
At work or study	○○○○○	○○○○○	○○○○○
When I feel criticised	○○○○○	○○○○○	○○○○○
When I feel stressed or unsafe	○○○○○	○○○○○	○○○○○

04 What am I protecting myself from?

a recent moment

When I felt... _____

I tended to move... ○ toward ○ against ○ away _____

because I feared... _____

What I really needed was... _____

05 Growing the strategies I use less

keep the strength, practise the missing move

IF I OFTEN MOVE TOWARD

Practise healthy assertion

Small steps towards voicing my own needs, for example saying “I’d prefer…”.

IF I OFTEN MOVE AGAINST

Practise letting others in

Small steps towards trust, for example asking for help with something.

IF I OFTEN MOVE AWAY

Practise gentle closeness

Small steps towards connection, for example sharing one feeling.

06 One small experiment

just for this week

What I’ll try, and with whom

What happened, and how it felt

07 Reflection

what am I noticing?

How my strategies once helped me

To remember, or to bring to a session

if you’re working with someone

A note on care. Looking at old patterns can stir up difficult feelings. If it ever feels like too much, reach out to someone you trust, your GP or a psychologist.

SOURCES Coolidge, F. L., Moor, C. J., Yamazaki, T. G., Stewart, S. E., & Segal, D. L. (2001). On the relationship between Karen Horney’s tripartite neurotic type theory and personality disorder features. *Personality and Individual Differences, 30*(8), 1387–1400. · Coolidge, F. L., Segal, D. L., Benight, C. C., & Danielian, J. (2004). The predictive power of Horney’s psychoanalytic approach: An empirical study. *American Journal of Psychoanalysis, 64*(4), 363–374. · Horney, K. (1937). *The neurotic personality of our time.* W. W. Norton. · Horney, K. (1945). *Our inner conflicts: A constructive theory of neurosis.* W. W. Norton.

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