

## Chapter 4: A Structure Of The Mind

Many different personality theories have been advanced in an attempt to explain the structure and functioning of human personality and behavior. A fairly simplistic one, which I have found useful when explaining a variety of concepts to my clients, involves three concentric layers of personality (ADD DIAGRAM 1). Essentially, this view of the mind is based on the straightforward notion that emotional distress involves the blocking of our needs, desires, and expectations. The various negative emotions which follow, such as frustration and disappointment, sadness and hurt, anxiety and fear, etc., must then be neutralized or minimized via defenses or coping skills in order to restore a neutral or positive emotional tone.

At the core (the inner circle) of personality are one's needs and motives, including our basic needs such as food, safety, love and belongingness, etc., as well as our less central desires, and our expectations. Sometimes our basic needs clash, as when our needs for both love and emotional safety clash during a difficult relationship. Sometimes our desires are as strong as our basic needs, as when Joey simply cannot leave the house without his favorite blue shirt to go to school. Some of us have much stronger expectations than others, and cannot tolerate frustration of these expectations. And for all of us, many of our expectations are subconscious, based on our perception of how the world SHOULD be, often without recognition of the origin, nor the subtle but powerful impact of these expectations. Most of us share the expectation that our fellow drivers will stop at stop signs, allowing us to travel unimpeded, without fear of being T-boned from the side. But most of us also expect that others will not cut us off in traffic, although most of us do so ourselves, and have been cut off by others, to varying extent, relatively frequently. Should we maintain this idealistic expectation in the face of the fact that perhaps 80% of us drive overaggressively 20% of the time, and 20% of us aggressively ignore others' rights 80% of the time? Should we base our expectations on what people SHOULD do, based on idealistic or morally driven expectations, or should we adjust our expectations to fit reality? Some individuals have relatively few needs, desires, and expectations, with the classic example being the proverbial Buddhist monk, who requires only bread, water, and a place to meditate. At the other extreme is the self-centered teenager, with an infinitely detailed laundry list of desires and expectations that are

espoused as basic needs, the violation of which precipitates temper outbursts. While we all have the same basic needs, the relative size of this central zone of personality is determined by the extent and intensity of our needs and desires, and how rigid and insistent we are that our expectations be met. Accordingly, this core zone can be the size of a pinprick for a well practiced monk, or the size of the planet for a demanding teenager.

The second zone of personality, the middle layer surrounding the core circle containing needs, desires, and expectations, involves one's vulnerable negative feelings. When our needs, desires, and expectations are met, we typically experience positive emotions, and everything is fine. But when they are frustrated or blocked by external events, we are prone to experience a wide variety of vulnerable feelings, such as sadness and disappointment, frustration, anxiety and fear, etc. The extent of such vulnerable feelings is directly proportional to the extent of our needs, desires, and expectations. Thus, need not, feel not; the monk is likely to experience few distressing/vulnerable feelings, or at least is able to neutralize them quickly, whereas the self-centered teenager is churning with a mountainous pile of emotional distress, often transformed into anger and complaints. However, anger and blame are located in the third and outermost layer of personality, the outer zone involving defenses and coping skills, which are all designed to neutralize negative feelings and allow us to feel less vulnerable.

The difference between such defenses and coping skills primarily involves the timing of the reward of such maneuvers (ADD DIAGRAM 2). Defenses have an immediate payoff, but typically have negative future consequences, whereas coping skills are more difficult to execute at the moment, but typically produce more positive later results. Thus if you feel sad or hurt, in response to recent neglect by your spouse, your defensive options include numbing yourself with a sixpack of beer, distracting yourself with a consuming videogame, pretending it's not a problem, blaming and unloading your resulting anger on your partner, etc. Each of these defensive strategies will temporarily neutralize your hurt feelings, and is relatively easy to perform at the moment, though each tends to have predictable negative consequences. Alternatively, you might give some thought to how your own actions may have contributed to your partner's distance, stay in touch with your love for him/her, and calmly discuss the distance between you, as well as how each of you might improve matters. This will be more difficult than the

above defensive maneuvers at the moment, and will leave you feeling more vulnerable at the moment, as you may not be able to confidently predict your partner's mood and response. But this more vulnerable approach is far more likely to result in positive consequences for your relationship. Similarly, it is more difficult to assert yourself, that is, to speak up for your needs while simultaneously respecting the feelings of the other person, than to simply submit and avoid conflict, or aggressively confront an adversary without regard for their feelings. But the consequences of assertiveness are likely to be more productive. Likewise, it is more difficult to tolerate ambiguity and the unknown than it is to erect a flimsy explanation that settles the matter. And it is more difficult to tolerate the confusion, complexity, and ambivalence involved in conflicting emotions (e.g., love, hurt and anger during divorce) than it is to choose the emotion which provides black-and-white simplicity and leaves you feeling least vulnerable at the moment (anger). A balance between immediate and future gratification is necessary if one is to avoid the twin sins of consistently short sighted hedonism (resulting in horrendous consequences), and anorexic self deprivation in search of ever delayed future benefits. Thus, while coping skills are generally preferable to defenses, we need the benefits of each if we are to have a full repertoire of skills for managing the many vulnerable, distressing feelings which result from everyday frustration of our needs, desires, and expectations. We will be returning to these concepts repeatedly in the pages ahead, as we explore ways of minimizing troublesome feelings.

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