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Defense Systems of the Nine Types

by Peter O'Hanrahan

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People are wonderful; people are difficult. The enneagram helps us make sense of both of these statements. Learning about the nine personality types opens up our ability to tolerate, appreciate, and love people who are different from us. There's a lot to like about each type; human diversity really is wonderful. On the other hand the people in our lives can seem so difficult, frustrating and stuck in their patterns. Surely we become difficult and stuck ourselves. What makes the difference? The answer, or a big part of the answer, is in the defense systems of the nine types. It's the defenses that lock us into our fixations and habits. They separate us from others, they separate us from our true selves, and they separate us from unity or Spirit.

Yet we need some defenses in this world, at least short of being enlightened. How can we manage our defenses to become more flexible, more connected to others and more available to our full potential? The good news is that the enneagram provides an instruction manual of sorts. If we know our type, we know what we need to work on. We don't easily disarm our defenses, but a commitment to personal growth makes a huge difference. At first we are not able to change things as we might wish, but we send a signal to the authentic part of ourselves and also to others: we know we are more than our type structure. Our defenses are here, but we are not completely controlled by them.

The defenses are part and parcel of our type structure. Although we are not limited to just one defense mechanism - we can use any of them - one of them is more closely associated with our type. In fact, the defense mechanism appropriates the strength of our type and diverts this capacity to keep us safe, or at least to keep our ego intact.

While we say that the enneagram describes nine personality types, it's actually more correct to say nine character structures. Personality is the outer reflection of character structure. It's more changeable in different situations; character structure remains more constant although it can develop over the course of our lives.

Character structure is a more complex psychological term; it gives rise to personality, but it refers more to how people are organized on the inside. It has to

do with the building blocks of our psyche, the complex patterns and relationships between our many parts that enable us to function as coherent human beings. It includes our sense of identity as we know ourselves, when we say, "This is me, this is not me." Structure has the ring of consistency or permanence, but to call it our psychological "house" might make it seem more concrete than it is. It's rigid in some ways, flexible in others.

What we understand as personality (and character structure) is a relatively new arrival on the scene of human culture. For most of human history people did not have the kind of personal boundaries that are necessary for an individual sense of self, at least not in the way we expect today. Instead they lived in a more blended state with nature, their deities and their village community. Human beings were not separate from the greater forces around them. Even the mythic Greek heroes on their quests were not fully individuated but rather subject to the control and caprice of the gods. The modern mental ego as we know it has taken a long time to separate from merged consciousness. Perhaps this is why Harold Bloom titled his book: "Shakespeare - the Invention of the Human." (OK, some exaggeration here). His point is that Shakespeare was the first to write about a new stage of consciousness - characters with an inner life and a personal arc of development. In Shakespeare's work at the start of the 17th century we find one of the first differentiations of personalities, the type structures we know from the Enneagram.

As more complex personality has evolved, so also have the defenses. And our defenses are a key aspect of what holds us together - for better and worse. As we begin the important work of dismantling our defenses we need to find new ways to hold ourselves. In psychological terms, we need a good "holding environment" with sufficient structure and support that we don't simply fall apart. Do we have enough self-acceptance or will we open the door to self-attack from aggressive and un-integrated parts of our psyche? Do we know how to mobilize internal resources such as positive self-dialogue? In what ways can we count on friends and family for help? What daily practices will be necessary to support a more undefended state? How can we quiet the mind, relax our emotional habit, become grounded in our bodies? All of these questions become urgent as we take up the ambitious work of changing our type structure and defense system.

It seems inevitable that dropping our defenses is a painful and scary process since it brings up everything that we have been avoiding feeling or knowing. It takes time to learn how to live in a more vulnerable state. Yet there is a huge payoff if we can stay the course. We have more access to our true selves and we have the capacity for more love in our relationships. It's vital that we appreciate ourselves for this courageous work all along the way.

The enneagram provides us with a map for each person's developmental journey. Knowing our type structure and our defenses - the idealization, avoidance and defense mechanism - allows us to distinguish between the necessary and positive aspects of our personality and our automatic patterns of reactivity. We need to apply good methods and practices. Fortunately we have the benefit of ideas and techniques developed by modern psychology as well as the

wisdom of spiritual teachings, now available to us in ways that were not to previous generations. It's our job to put it all together.

Three Parts - Idealization, Avoidance and Defense Mechanism

Our defenses are organized into a cohesive system by three specific functions: the idealization pattern, the avoidance pattern and the defense mechanism. They work together in a three-way arrangement to keep the structure of the personality in place. They are also the cornerstones of each person's fixation and it's hard to think clearly or feel our true feelings when these parts are active. If we want to work on our personality we have to confront them time and time again. Although their purpose is to keep us safe and hold us together, they stand in the way of our personal growth.

The idealization pattern is about who we think we must be in order to have value and self worth. For example, Threes say "I am successful," Sixes say "I am loyal," and Nines say "I am harmonious." It's not that these are bad things to want for ourselves, but rather that we invest our identity and our value as human beings in them. In this way the defense system takes something real and genuine about us, a particular quality or aspiration, and turns it into a tyranny. To the extent that we are attached to our idealization, we're not allowed to simply be ourselves. There is constant pressure to live up to this expectation; everything is judged and measured to some degree against this scale. If we fail in our efforts, it will bring up anxiety and feelings of unworthiness. Our inner critic jumps on our case. There must be something very wrong with us. On the other hand if we succeed in keeping up the idealization we become separated from ourselves; whatever doesn't fit this self-image gets put under the surface of awareness. Now the idealization becomes an illusion. We think we have achieved our goal of being a certain way, but we are unable to see or feel things that don't fit this image. We can see this separation in other people when their actions do not reflect their stated intentions. Sometimes we can even notice it in our own behavior.

Each type's idealization has a specific shadow side. There is a particular feeling state or experience that we want to avoid, something that doesn't fit into our picture of who we are or how we should be. To put this even more strongly, this is something that is very hard to accept - it's scary and threatening at a deep level.

The avoidance pattern operates in symmetry with the idealization - they're opposites and they reinforce each other. The idealization is supposed to protect us from what we want to avoid, but there's a catch. What we avoid doesn't really go away but rather sits inside us out of view, where it exerts a big influence on our behavior. And eventually, it works to exacerbate the very situation we want to avoid.

For example, if Ones need to be "right" all the time there is a danger that they will try to keep their "wrong" feelings and impulses out of sight. Anger is one of these feelings, and we all are familiar with how Type Ones can be angry or resentful without realizing it themselves. Nines want to stay harmonious and avoid conflict, but conflict has a way of building up when it's not dealt with directly. Nines become absent or stubbornly resistant, or sometimes they blow up when the pressure gets to be too much. (Not very harmonious!) Twos feel good

about themselves to the degree that they can say "I am helpful" and avoid their personal needs. But to people around them, the neediness of Twos for attention and approval can be excruciatingly obvious, the more so when they aren't owning it themselves. It's not their needs that are the problem, it's the way they come out indirectly.

If as an Eight I "succeed" in staying strong and avoid my own vulnerability I will become emotionally isolated from others (proving the point that I can only rely on myself). And by ignoring signals from my heart and body I will take on too much, push myself to the point of exhaustion and bring on the very weakness or failure that I have tried to avoid.

The third element of this system is the defense mechanism, which supports the dichotomy between the idealization and the avoidance and keeps everything locked in place. The defense mechanism is the "enforcer." Like some kind of fierce guardian at the temple gates, it jumps into action whenever the type structure is threatened, either by unacceptable feelings and impulses from inside oneself, or by something threatening from other people or the environment. For the most part, the defense mechanism operates automatically and unconsciously. We simply aren't aware of what's going on. It not only operates in response to specific threats to our personality, but it also can be seen as a chronic influence underlying the activities of our daily life. For example: at any given moment, Fives may "isolate" themselves and withdraw from a situation or person if they feel pressured or coerced. Yet we can also see Fives isolating themselves as a general habit. Isolation from people, or isolation from their own emotional life, is a pervasive issue.

We can find all nine of these defense mechanisms described in the literature of modern psychology (plus a few more), but they are not always assigned to a specific personality type. At different times, or in different conditions, we might find any one of them operating inside ourselves. But the Enneagram says that one of them is central for each of us - the defense mechanism uses the strength of our type and diverts it. Threes use identification or role-playing precisely because they are so adaptable and good at promoting an image. Sevens rely on rationalization because they are so quick thinking and agile in their minds.

Knowing the three elements of the defense system gives us a big advantage in working with ourselves and other people. It helps us observe and remember. We can intervene with ourselves when we notice them coming up, and we have a better understanding of how to respond to others. It's usually not the other person's personality type that's the problem. What really gets in the way of connection, cooperation or intimacy, is their (and our) defense system. These unconscious patterns are what create so much of the conflict and frustration in relationships.

What is necessary is that we accept and move towards the painful and scary experience that we usually try to avoid, whether this is anger, personal needs, failure, ordinariness, emptiness, rejection, suffering, vulnerability, or

conflict. At first this means a big confrontation with our idealization or self-image. We're not entirely who we thought we were. Maybe we are lacking in value, not good enough, etc. But over time, with lots of self acceptance and support, we can reclaim the genuine quality within the idealization. Our self worth becomes more stable, our inner essence become more available to us, on a practical level we become more skillful in relationships, making decisions and living a healthier life.

Of course the defense mechanism will try to stop us from doing this. It's the nature of this mechanism that it operates without our making a conscious decision. It's automatic and habitual, and hard to spot in the moment. We often don't know until later that we have been taken over by it, when we reflect on our behavior or hear feedback. What we can do is practice noticing: when does that familiar reaction arise, what does it feel like inside, what can we sense in our body, our breathing? And what can we do about it? What methods, practices and support can we bring to bear?

Here is a brief description of the nine defense systems. They may be hard to understand in a couple of sentences, but it's useful to have an overview. The first phrase involves the defense mechanism, as in "Ones use reaction formation" followed by the avoidance pattern and the idealization. Of course saying that we "use" a defense mechanism implies conscious intent, which is rarely the case. It's much more of an automatic pattern and it's very hard for us to see it in ourselves.

1) Ones use **reaction formation** to avoid **anger** (i.e. direct anger) and stay in control of their feelings and instincts in order to maintain a self-image of being **right**. Reaction formation is feeling one thing and then expressing the opposite or at least something unrelated, such as feeling resentful but acting nice, feeling a need to rest but working harder. The relentless demand of the inner critic to be good and do good at all times replaces personal needs and shuts down feelings.

2) Twos use **repression** of personal needs and feelings to avoid being **needy** and to maintain a self-image of being **helpful**. Repression is putting one's "unacceptable" feelings and impulses out of awareness by converting them into a more acceptable kind of emotional energy. Self-esteem depends on winning the approval of others. This can take the form of being overly nice, flattering people, and a superficial friendliness. Or it can show up as an attitude of entitlement. Their genuine need for connection takes the form of "you need me."

3) Threes use **identification** to avoid **failure** and maintain a self-image of being **successful**. Identification is stepping into a role so completely that Threes lose contact with who they are inside. The pressure to keep up a winning image prevents access to personal feelings and needs. Attention goes to the external environment: the tasks to be done and the expectations of other people. Threes find it very difficult to drop the role, or drop the image, since they get so much positive reinforcement in a society that values achievement and success.

4) Fours use **introjection** to avoid **ordinariness** and maintain a self-image of being **authentic**. Positive introjection is an attempt to overcome the feeling of deficiency by seeking value from an idealized experience, work, or relationship and internalizing this through the emotional center. This also leads to negative introjection: Fours tend to blame themselves for whatever goes wrong in personal relationships. Their experience of loss or abandonment can take form inside as a self-rejecting voice (a negative introject), which leads to pervasive feelings of unworthiness.

5) Fives use **isolation** to avoid the experience of inner **emptiness** and maintain a self-image of being **knowledgeable**. Isolation can be physical withdrawal from others, but it also means withdrawing on the inside from one's emotions and staying up in the head. Acquiring knowledge becomes a way to create safety and self worth, but an over-emphasis on the intellect prevents Fives from connecting with the life force in their bodies and the support available in relationship with others.

6) Sixes use **projection** to avoid **rejection** and to maintain a self-image of being **loyal**. Projection is a way of attributing to others what one can't accept in oneself, both positive and negative. Positive feelings are projected onto a romantic relationship or an external authority figure in order to assure safety and justify loyalty. Negative feelings are projected onto others to justify internal feelings of fear and distrust. Sixes support their projections by finding and amplifying the information which fits their premise.

7) Sevens use **rationalization** to avoid **suffering** and to maintain a self-image of being **OK**. Rationalization is a way of staying in the head, explaining away or justifying things in order to distance from painful feelings and refuse to take responsibility for their behavior. Everything can be re-framed towards the positive. Their ability to think of new options and possibilities allows Sevens to leave the present moment with its limitations and live in a seemingly unlimited future.

8) Eights use **denial** to avoid **vulnerability** and to maintain a self-image of being **strong**. Denial means to power up in the body center and forcefully re-direct energy and attention through willfulness and control. Vulnerable feelings are automatically put away and not experienced. Emotional energy is reduced, while instinctual energy is increased. Receptivity necessarily involves some vulnerability, so Eights seek to impact the world and other people rather than be receptive to them.

9) Nines use **narcotization** to avoid **conflict** and to maintain a self-image of being **comfortable** or **harmonious**. Narcotization is using food and drink, entertainment, or simply repetitive patterns of thinking and doing to "put oneself to sleep". Even productive activities can keep Nines narcotized if they become too

habitual. Avoiding conflict with others keeps Nines from being fully present in relationships. Avoiding internal conflict leads to inertia and self-forgetting.

It's useful to see how the defense mechanisms are all based in the lead center of the personality type, either mental, emotional, or body. For example, both repression (Two) and denial (Eight) can lead to similar results in that both types become out of touch with deeper feelings and needs. But there is an important difference in how they get there. Repression is a function of the emotional center. When Twos repress their unacceptable feelings and instincts, they convert them into other forms of emotional energy. They may over-empathize with other people's feelings or they discharge their emotions through "hysterical" (meaning disconnected) tone and affect. Emotional energy is conserved (and re-directed) while contact with the body is diminished. Eights, in contrast, bear down on their feelings of vulnerability or sadness with their angry forcefulness and "obsessive" control. Denial uses the energy of the body center to override and close down unacceptable emotions. Emotional energy is diminished.

In another example: Sixes project their unacknowledged feelings and impulses onto other people. This is primarily a function of the mind, looking for evidence for their position, holding an idea or mental construct about someone else while avoiding their own emotions and instincts. They see things that are really there but blow them out of proportion. By contrast, the introjection of the Fours relies on using the emotional center and the empathy function to internalize positive feelings from an idealized experience or relationship. This amplifies their emotional energy, which can overwhelm the mind and reduce their ability to think and sort things out properly.

Three Centers and Character Structure

The inner triangle of the Enneagram maps the three centers of intelligence and the functions of thinking, feeling, and doing. It also maps the three main solutions to the dilemma of childhood - how we construct a personality with a coherent strategy for survival and success in the world. (Not that we consciously construct our personality in childhood!) You can connect to the world and other people through your body; you can establish your identity and value through relationships; or you can use your mind to figure things out and create safety and options. Of course we do all three, but one of these is highlighted depending on our "lead center" of intelligence.

From this perspective Types Three, Six and Nine represent the three basic character structures using the energy of the different centers. The rest of us are variations on these themes, very different in external style and behavior, but related in terms of internal structure to our neighbors within these three center groups.

Both character structure and defenses within the groups (or triads) share a basic style. We can see this in the primary emotions which reflect our biological heritage as mammals and human beings. Body types are called "anger types" because anger is a main source of fuel for the type structure. Feeling types are also called "image types" with a layer of grief inside which results from the loss of self. (Some colleagues describe this as shame, envy or panic from the loss of connection). And mental types are also known as "fear types" because this emotion is central to their experience in life, whether it's directly felt or not. Resolving fear or avoiding fear becomes the major motivator.

No type has a monopoly on these basic human emotions, yet one of them is more important to us. It supports our mental fixation, the habit of mind, and it forms a defensive barrier or a kind of layer which prevents us from knowing ourselves, our true feelings and needs. The work of personal development demands that we penetrate these layers of emotion and get underneath them to discover what's going on inside. Otherwise we simply bounce off them in all too familiar reactions.

There are other important similarities within the three groups. Each personality type has a specific defense mechanism that appropriates the energy of the lead center and uses it for self-protection. For example, the body types all have defense mechanisms that depend upon concentrating and redirecting instinctual energy. Feelings and emotional expression are reduced. Mental perception is also reduced in the areas most charged with upset or anxiety. Yet the activity of the body center continues on as the main engine of the system. It may be distorted in some way, but it's not diminished. Denial for Eights, reaction formation for Ones, and narcotization for Nines are all forms of creating a defensive buffer or "screening out" operation, which depends on repetitive patterns. The natural rhythmicity of the belly center lends itself to these repeating patterns, which is why the body types are called "obsessive" characters.

By contrast, Types Two, Three and Four use their abundant emotional energy to "run" their defense mechanisms. Repression, identification, and introjection are operations of the emotional center. Feelings and empathic connection are redirected in an attempt to earn external approval and create value in the eyes of others. Because their emotional energy often builds up and then spills out into the environment in somewhat ungrounded ways, these types are considered "hysterical" characters.

By contrast, the mental types use the strength of the intellectual center not only to guide their decisions and actions but also to create their own style of defenses. The isolation of Fives, the projection of Sixes, and the rationalization of Sevens use (and misuse) thinking to create distance from scary feelings and instinctual impulses. Energy is literally withdrawn from the two lower centers and concentrated in the mind in order to control one's internal experience and create safety through detachment. This style of reacting to fear is associated with a "paranoid/schizoid" neurotic style.

It's important to say that although the terms - obsessive, hysterical and paranoid - are useful descriptors, we're only talking about neurotic styles, not the whole person. We are much more than our neurosis!

Here is an overview of the patterns of the types grouped by lead center.

Body-based character structure - Types 8, 9, and 1

Priority: Instinctual needs and rhythms in daily life; issues of fairness or rightness; getting practical results.

Benefits: Grounded, common sense approach, taking care of basic needs. Good at "just doing" things and being active in the physical world, being connected to nature. Not much thought required for the simple tasks of life.

Neurotic style: Obsessive process - using repeating patterns of thinking and doing to capture and stabilize attention in daily life.

Basic defense: A concentration of energy in the belly center enables repeating patterns to form layers of "insulation" in the mind and body. This insulation is used to "screen out" unwanted feelings or information from the inside or outside. Personal wants and needs are controlled by super-ego "shoulds." Variations of style: comfortable (9), righteous (1), or dominating (8).

Key phrase: Screening and buffering (principled inattention).

Primary emotional layer: Anger (being against the way things are).

Life challenge: "Waking up" through self awareness instead of falling asleep in habits, excessive materialism, or low-level comfort.

Emotion-based character structure - Types 2, 3, and 4

Priority: Relational needs for contact and approval, establishing personal identity through connecting and being seen.

Benefit: Flexibility and skill in relationship, achieving success by attuning to and meeting social expectations, access to empathy and the vast potential of the human heart.

Neurotic Style: Hysterical process - building up emotional energy and then discharging it unconsciously into the environment.

Basic defense: Emotional intelligence enables the creation of an "image self" in order to gain recognition and approval from others. This helps to overcome internal feelings of deficiency or emptiness. Personal wants and needs are replaced by meeting the expectations of others. Variations of style: helpful (2), successful (3), or authentic (4).

Key phrase: Substitution of value. (Value is not in me, but I can find value in the approval and eyes of others).

Primary emotional layer: Sadness (related to the loss of self).

Life challenge: Balancing self and other, autonomy and dependence.

Mental-based character structure - Types 5, 6, and 7

Priority: Ideas and concepts, rational thinking, creating security by understanding the world and other people.

Benefit: Heightened individual consciousness, mental discrimination and analysis, effective plans and strategies, intellectual work contributes to the community.

Neurotic Style: paranoid/schizoid process - distrust leads to withdrawing from contact in order to figure things out and establish safety.

Basic defense: A concentration of energy in the mental center makes it possible to detach from feelings and the body while living in the mind. A fear of life (and death) is countered by thinking, explaining, and rationalizing. Personal wants and needs are intellectualized or simply not felt. Variations of style: hoarding (5), agreement seeking (6), or re-framing (7).

Key phrase: detachment/upward displacement.

Primary emotional layer: fearfulness (even when not experienced directly).

Life challenge: Integrating mind and body.