

On the role of ANXIETY in Psychoanalytic Theory

- ✓ Anxiety is a term used to describe the physical and psychological feeling of discomfort associated with the emotions of apprehension, fearfulness and an uneasy cognitive sense of impending doom. It is an uncomfortable state that we cannot tolerate for long; and, thus, it motivates us to do something to escape from it. It is associated with the arousal of the *sympathetic division* of the *autonomic nervous system* and therefore one commonly experiences many symptoms such as:
 - Heart palpitations
 - Shortness of breath
 - Clammy hands
 - Goosebumps
 - Chest pain or discomfort
 - Feeling of choking
 - Fear of losing control or dying
 - Derealization (feeling of unreality) or depersonalization (feeling detached from oneself)
 - Trembling, shaking or “jelly legs”

- ✓ *REALITY ANXIETY* is anxiety experienced in the presence of real danger. Reality anxiety is a normal human reaction to a threat to one’s physical well being, e.g., being threatened by a robber or mugger; being confronted by an enraged guard dog; or, finding yourself suddenly in a life or death situation such as slipping on the edge of a narrow high mountain precipice (on the high trail to Angel’s Landing in Zion National Park, for example).

- ✓ *NEUROTIC ANXIETY*, by contrast, is anxiety experienced as the ego struggles to control *ID* impulses. It is the feeling of fearfulness associated with the phenomenological sensation that you are about to lose self-control and allow the *ID* free reign to satisfy its urges, either sexual or aggressive.

- ✓ *MORAL ANXIETY* is apprehension experienced when thoughts, impulses, or actions conflict with *superego* standards as represented in the *ego-ideal*. In effect it is the *conscience* kicking in and reminding us that we are contemplating behavior, or actually engaging in behavior, which is contrary to what our internalized standards say it ought to be.

- ✓ Recalling that *anxiety* is an aroused emotional state that cannot be tolerated for long, the *ego* employs a variety of *DEFENSE MECHANISMS* to defend itself against *anxiety*. All persons use them occasionally and they only become maladaptive when employed too frequently or in extreme or pathological ways.

