

Transactional Analysis - Eric Berne

Transactional Analysis is one of the most accessible theories of modern psychology. Transactional Analysis was founded by Eric Berne, and the famous 'parent-adult-child' theory is still being utilized and developed today.

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The Psychology Of Relationships

Transactional Analysis is one of the most accessible theories of modern psychology. Transactional Analysis was founded by Eric Berne, and the famous 'parent adult child' theory is still being developed today. Transactional Analysis has wide applications in clinical, therapeutic, organizational and personal development, encompassing communications, management, personality, relationships and behavior. Whether you're in business, a parent, a social worker or interested in personal development, Eric Berne's Transactional Analysis theories, and those of his followers, will enrich your dealings with people, and your understanding of yourself. This section covers the background to Transactional Analysis, and Transactional Analysis underpinning theory. See also the [modern Transactional Analysis theory article](#).

ORIGINS

Throughout history, and from all standpoints: philosophy, medical science, religion; people have believed that each man and woman has a multiple nature.

In the early 20th century, Sigmund Freud first established that the human psyche is multi-faceted, and that each of us has warring factions in our subconscious. Since then, new theories continue to be put forward, all concentrating on the essential conviction that each one of us has parts of our personality which surface and affect our behavior according to different circumstances.

In 1951 Dr Wilder Penfield began a series of scientific experiments. Penfield proved, using conscious human subjects, by touching a part of the brain (the temporal cortex) with a weak electrical probe, that the brain could be caused to 'play back' certain past experiences, and the feelings associated with them. The patients 'replayed' these events and their feelings despite not normally being able to recall them using their conventional memories.

Penfield's experiments went on over several years, and resulted in wide acceptance of the following conclusions:

- The human brain acts like a tape recorder, and whilst we may 'forget' experiences, the brain still has them recorded.
- Along with events the brain also records the associated feelings, and both feelings and events stay locked together.
- It is possible for a person to exist in two states simultaneously (because patients replaying hidden events and feelings could talk about them objectively at the same time).
- Hidden experiences when replayed are vivid, and affect how we feel at the time of replaying.
- There is a certain connection between mind and body, i.e. the link between the biological and the psychological, eg a psychological fear of spiders and a biological feeling of nausea.

Early Theory

In the 1950's Eric Berne began to develop his theories of Transactional Analysis. He said that verbal communication, particularly face to face, is at the center of human social relationships and psychoanalysis.

His starting-point was that when two people encounter each other, one of them will speak to the other. This he called the Transaction Stimulus. The reaction from the other person he called the Transaction Response.

The person sending the Stimulus is called the Agent. The person who responds is called the Respondent.

Transactional Analysis became the method of examining the transaction wherein: 'I do something to you, and you do something back'.

Berne also said that each person is made up of three alter ego states:

1. Parent

This is our ingrained voice of authority, absorbed conditioning, learning and attitudes from when we were young. We were conditioned by our real parents, teachers, older people, next door neighbours, aunts and uncles, Father Christmas and Jack Frost. Our Parent is made up of a huge number of hidden and overt recorded playbacks. Typically embodied by phrases and attitudes starting with 'how to', 'under no circumstances', 'always' and 'never forget', 'don't lie, cheat, steal', etc. Our parent is formed by external events and influences upon us as we grow through early childhood. We can change it, but this is easier said than done.

2. Child

Our internal reaction and feelings to external events form the 'Child'. This is the seeing, hearing, feeling, and emotional body of data within each of us. When anger or despair dominates reason, the Child is in control. Like our Parent we can change it, but it is no easier.

3. Adult

Our 'Adult' is our ability to think and determine action for ourselves, based on received data. The adult in us begins to form at around ten months old, and is the means by which we keep our Parent and Child under control. If we are to change our Parent or Child we must do so through our adult.

In other words:

- Parent is our 'Taught' concept of life
- Child is our 'Felt' concept of life
- Adult is our 'Thought' concept of life

When we communicate we are doing so from one of our own alter ego states, our Parent, Adult or Child. Our feelings at the time determine which one we use, and at any time something can trigger a shift from one state to another. When we respond, we are also doing this from one of the three states, and it is in the analysis of these stimuli and responses that the essence of Transactional Analysis lies. See the [poem by Philip Larkin](#) about how parental conditioning affects children and their behavior into adulthood. And for an uplifting antidote see the lovely [Thich Nhat Hanh quote](#). These are all excellent illustrations of the effect and implications of parental conditioning in the context of Transactional Analysis.

At the core of Berne's theory is the rule that effective transactions (i.e. successful communications) must be complementary. They must go back from the receiving ego state to the sending ego state.

For example, if the stimulus is Parent to Child, the response must be Child to Parent, or the transaction is 'crossed', and there will be a problem between sender and receiver.

If a crossed transaction occurs, there is an ineffective communication. Worse still either or both parties will be upset. In order for the relationship to continue smoothly the agent or the respondent must rescue the situation with a complementary transaction.

In serious break-downs, there is no chance of immediately resuming a discussion about the original subject matter. Attention is focused on the relationship. The discussion can only continue constructively when and if the relationship is mended.

Here are some simple clues as to the ego state sending the signal. You will be able to see these clearly in others, and in yourself:

Parent

Physical - angry or impatient body-language and expressions, finger-pointing, patronising gestures,
Verbal - always, never, for once and for all, judgmental words, critical words, patronising language, posturing language.

N.B. beware of cultural differences in body-language or emphases that appear 'Parental'.

Child

Physical - emotionally sad expressions, despair, temper tantrums, whining voice, rolling eyes, shrugging shoulders, teasing, delight, laughter, speaking behind hand, raising hand to speak, squirming and giggling.

Verbal - baby talk, I wish, I dunno, I want, I'm gonna, I don't care, oh no, not again, things never go right for me, worst day of my life, bigger, biggest, best, many superlatives, words to impress.

Adult

Physical - attentive, interested, straight-forward, tilted head, non-threatening and non-threatened.

Verbal - why, what, how, who, where and when, how much, in what way, comparative expressions, reasoned statements, true, false, probably, possibly, I think, I realize, I see, I believe, in my opinion.

And remember, when you are trying to identify ego states: words are only part of the story.

To analyze a transaction you need to see and feel what is being said as well.

- Only 7% of meaning is in the words spoken.
- 38% of meaning is paralinguistic (the way that the words are said).
- 55% is in facial expression. (source: Albert Mehrabian - [more info](#))

There is no general rule as to the effectiveness of any ego state in any given situation (some people get results by being dictatorial (Parent to Child), or by having temper tantrums, (Child to Parent), but for a balanced approach to life, Adult to Adult is generally recommended.

Transactional Analysis is effectively a language within a language; a language of true meaning, feeling and motive. It can help you in every situation, firstly through being able to understand more clearly what is going on, and secondly, by virtue of this knowledge, we give ourselves choices of what ego states to adopt, which signals to send, and where to send them. This enables us to make the most of all our communications and therefore create, develop and maintain better relationships.

Modern Transactional Analysis Theory

Transactional Analysis is a theory which operates as each of the following:

- A theory of personality
- A model of communication
- A study of repetitive patterns of behavior

Transactional Analysis developed significantly beyond these Berne's early theories, by Berne himself until his death in 1970, and since then by his followers and many current writers and experts.

Transactional Analysis has been explored and enhanced in many different ways by these people, including: Ian Stewart and Vann Joines (their book 'TA Today' is widely regarded as a definitive modern interpretation); John Dusay, Aaron and Jacqui Schiff, Robert and Mary Goulding, Pat Crossman, Taibi Kahler, Abe Wagner, Ken Mellor and Eric Sigmund, Richard Erskine and Marityn Zalzman, Muriel James, Pam Levin, Anita Mountain and Julie Hay (specialists in organizational applications), Susannah Temple, Claude Steiner, Franklin Ernst, S Woollams and M Brown, Fanita English, P Clarkson, M M Holloway, Stephen Karpman and others.

Significantly, the original three Parent Adult Child components were sub-divided to form a new seven element model, principally during the 1980's by Wagner, Joines and Mountain. This established Controlling and Nurturing aspects of the Parent mode, each with positive and negative aspects, and the Adapted and Free aspects of the Child mode, again each with positive and negative aspects, which essentially gives us the model to which most TA practitioners refer today:

Parent

Parent is now commonly represented as a circle with four quadrants:

Nurturing - Nurturing (positive) and Spoiling (negative).

Controlling - Structuring (positive) and Critical (negative).

Adult - Adult remains as a single entity, representing an 'accounting' function or mode, which can draw on the resources of both Parent and Child.

Child - Child is now commonly represented as circle with four quadrants:

Adapted - Co-operative (positive) and Compliant/Resistant (negative).

Free - Spontaneous (positive) and Immature (negative).

Where previously Transactional Analysis suggested that effective communications were complementary (response echoing the path of the stimulus), and better still complementary adult to adult, the modern interpretation suggests that effective communications and relationships are based on complementary transactions to and from positive quadrants, and also, still, adult to adult. Stimuli and responses can come from any (or some) of these seven ego states, to any or some of the respondent's seven ego states.

Modern usage

Transactional Analysis is a theory developed by Dr. Eric Berne in the 1950s. Originally trained in psychoanalysis, Berne wanted a theory which could be understood and available to everyone and began to develop what came to be called Transactional Analysis (TA). Transactional Analysis is a social psychology and a method to improve communication. The theory outlines how we have developed and treat ourselves, how we relate and communicate with others, and offers suggestions and interventions which will enable us to change and grow. Transactional Analysis is underpinned by the philosophy that:

- people can change
- we all have a right to be in the world and be accepted

Initially criticized by some as a simplistic model, Transactional Analysis is now gathering worldwide attention. It originally suffered much from the popularized writings in the 1960s. Also, summarized explanations, such as this, which can only touch on some of the concepts in Transactional Analysis, led their readers to believe that there was very little to it. Many did not appreciate the duration and complexity of the training.

Today there is greater understanding of Transactional Analysis. More and more people are taking the four to five year part-time training courses to qualify, and increasingly universities are accrediting these courses for masters' degrees. Those taking training include psychiatrists, organizational and management consultants, teachers, social workers, designers, engineers and the clergy.

Today Transactional Analysis is used in psychotherapy, organizations, educational and religious settings. Books have been written for all ages, from children through to adults, by people all over the world. Transactional Analysis is truly an international theory relating to a diverse range of cultures. Theoretical concepts within the Transactional Analysis world are constantly being challenged and developed making it a rich dynamic process. Berne died in July 1970 at the age of 60. However, Transactional Analysis has not stood still and continues to develop and change, paralleling the processes we encourage in ourselves and others.

The key concepts in Transactional Analysis are outlined below in the form of introductory information.

Contracting

Transactional Analysis is a contractual approach. A contract is "an explicit bilateral commitment to a well-defined course of action" Berne E. (1966). Which means that all parties need to agree:

- Why they want to do something
- With whom
- What they are going to do
- By when
- Any fees, payment or exchanges there will be

For example, we want the outside of our house painted, we need to find a person who will paint it and who will give us a quote for doing it. If we agree the quote, and we like him or her enough, we will no doubt employ them. We will agree a date and time, perhaps check they are insured, and choose the color of the paint and off they go.

Sometimes contracts will be multi-handed with all parties to the contract having their own expectations. If these expectations are all congruent then fine, if not then discussing everyone's expectations will lead to greater understanding and therefore to a clear contract.

Contracts need to be outlined in positive words i.e. what is wanted, rather than what is not wanted. Our minds tend to focus on the negative and so this encourages failure. For example, how many times do we look round when someone says to us "Don't look now but....." , the same is true when we set up contracts which start "I don't want to do anymore".

We have contracts about employment, how much will we be paid and when, what holidays we are due, what deductions there will be etc. In order to ensure placements are effective then different, but similar, details are required. Naturally, these details will vary dependent on the setting in which we work.

All parties need to state what are they are prepared to do. Are they able and willing to undertake what is being asked, is this appropriate? Does it fit within any statements of purpose and function? Is it legal? Do they have the competence to deliver this? Do they want to? What does each party want of the others?

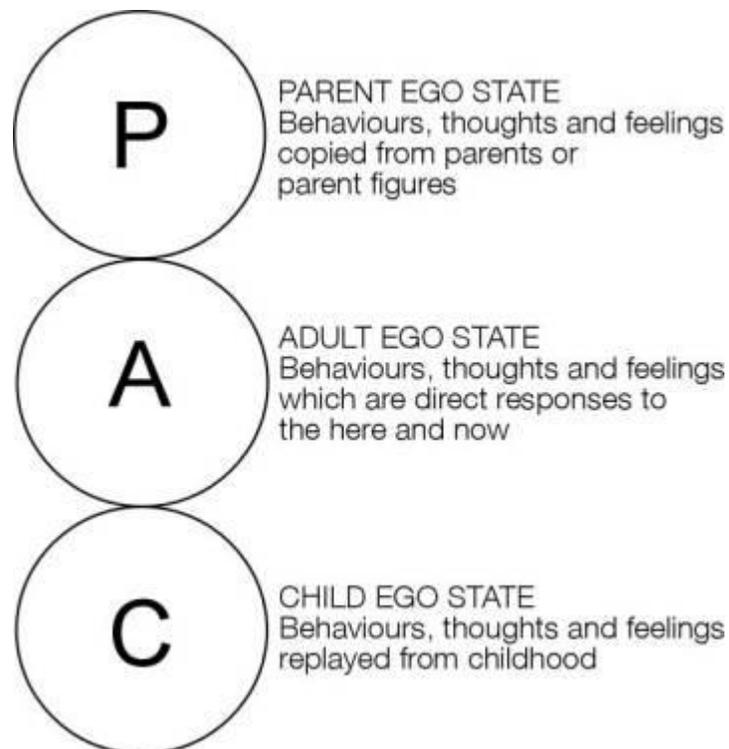
In summary, contracts need to be: measurable, manageable and motivational. Measurable means that the goals need to be tangible. That each party involved in the contract will be able to say in advance how they will know when the goal has been achieved. The goal will be specific and behavioral and clearly defined. The contract will also need to be manageable and feasible for all those concerned.

'Contracting' in Transactional Analysis, and indeed many other aspects of TA, provide a helpful way to understand [the Psychological Contract](#) in employment and similar organizational relationships.

Ego states

First-order structural model

Berne devised the concept of ego states to help explain how we are made up, and how we relate to others. These are drawn as three stacked circles and they are one of the building blocks of Transactional Analysis. They categorize the ways we think, feel and behave and are called Parent, Adult, and Child. Each ego state is given a capital letter to denote the difference between actual parents, adults and children.



Parent ego state

This is a set of feelings, thinking and behavior that we have copied from our parents and significant others.

As we grow up we take in ideas, beliefs, feelings and behaviors from our parents and caretakers. If we live in an extended family then there are more people to learn and take in from. When we do this, it is called introjecting and it is just as if we take in the whole of the care giver. For example, we may notice that we are saying things just as our father, mother, grandmother may have done, even though, consciously, we don't want to. We do this as we have lived with this person so long that we automatically reproduce certain things that were said to us, or treat others as we might have been treated.

Adult ego state

The Adult ego state is about direct responses to the here and now. We deal with things that are going on today in ways that are not unhealthily influenced by our past.

The Adult ego state is about being spontaneous and aware with the capacity for intimacy. When in our Adult we are able to see people as they are, rather than what we project onto them. We ask for information rather than stay scared and rather than make assumptions. Taking the best from the past and using it appropriately in the present is an integration of the positive aspects of both our Parent and Child ego states. So this can be called the Integrating Adult. Integrating means that we are constantly updating ourselves through our every day experiences and using this to inform us. In this structural model, the Integrating Adult ego state circle is placed in the middle to show how it needs to orchestrate between the Parent and the Child ego states. For example, the internal Parent ego state may beat up on the internal Child, saying "You are no good, look at what you did wrong again, you are useless". The Child may then respond with "I am no good, look how useless I am, I never get anything right". Many people hardly hear this kind of internal dialogue as it goes on so much they might just believe life is this way. An effective Integrating Adult ego state can intervene between the Parent and Child ego states. This might be done by stating that this kind of parenting is not helpful and asking if it is prepared to learn another way. Alternatively, the Integrating Adult ego state can just stop any negative dialogue and decide to develop another positive Parent ego state perhaps taken in from other people they have met over the years.

Child ego state

The Child ego state is a set of behaviors, thoughts and feelings which are replayed from our own childhood.

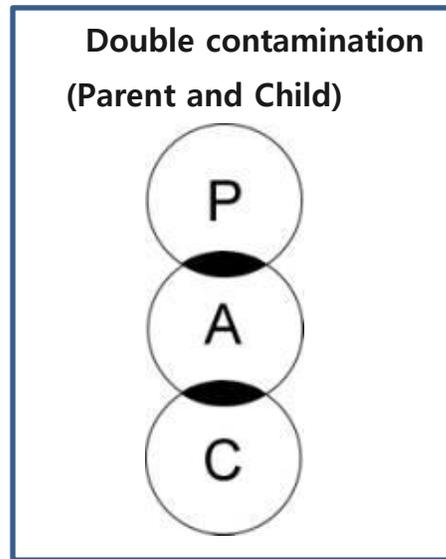
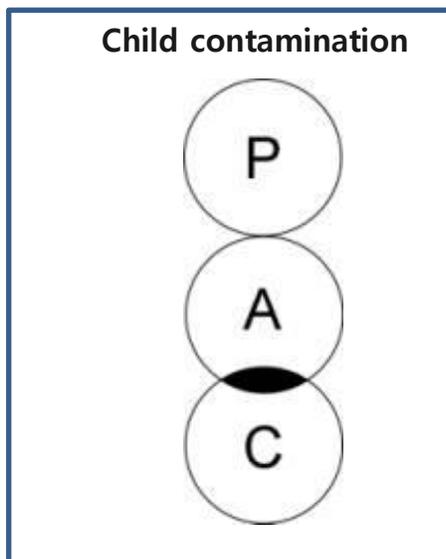
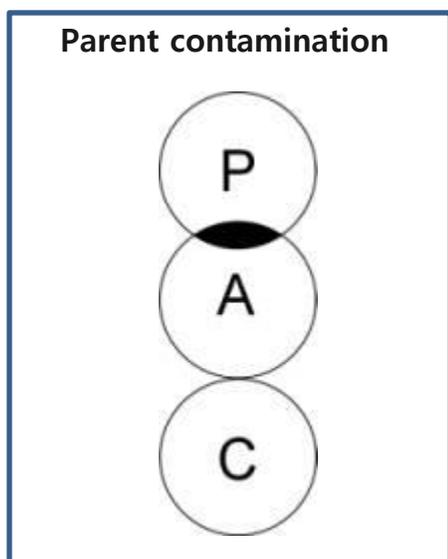
Perhaps the boss calls us into his or her office, we may immediately get a churning in our stomach and wonder what we have done wrong. If this were explored we might remember the time the head teacher called us in to tell us off. Of course, not everything in the Child ego state is negative. We might go into someone's house and smell a lovely smell and remember our grandmother's house when we were little, and all the same warm feelings we had at six years of age may come flooding back. Both the Parent and Child ego states are constantly being updated. For example, we may meet someone who gives us the permission we needed as a child, and did not get, to be fun and joyous. We may well use that person in our imagination when we are stressed to counteract our old ways of thinking that we must work longer and longer hours to keep up with everything. We might ask ourselves "I wonder what X would say now". Then on hearing the new permissions to relax and take some time out, do just that and then return to the work renewed and ready for the challenge. Subsequently, rather than beating up on ourselves for what we did or did not do, what tends to happen is we automatically start to give ourselves new permissions and take care of ourselves.

Alternatively, we might have had a traumatic experience yesterday which goes into the Child ego state as an archaic memory that hampers our growth. Positive experiences will also go into the Child ego state as archaic memories. The positive experiences can then be drawn on to remind us that positive things do happen.

The process of analyzing personality in terms of ego states is called structural analysis. It is important to remember that ego states do not have an existence of their own; they are concepts to enable understanding. Therefore it is important to say "I want some fun" rather than "My Child wants some fun". We may be in our Child ego state when we say this, but saying "I" reminds us to take responsibility for our actions.

Contamination of Adult state

The word contamination for many conjures up the idea of disease. For instance, we tend to use the word for when bacteria has gone into milk. Well, this is similar to the case with the contaminated Integrating Adult ego state. This occurs when we talk as if something is a fact or a reality when really this is a belief. Racism is an example of this. The Integrating Adult ego state is contaminated in this case by the Parent ego state. If we are white we might have lived with parents or significant others who said such things as "Black people take our jobs". Growing up it is likely, that having no real experience to go by, we believed this. We might also have been told that Black people are aggressive. In our Child ego state may well lodge some scared feelings about Black people and in this ego state we may start to believe "All Black people are scary". This would mean that there would be a double contamination of the Integrating Adult ego state. However, we would think that such statements were facts rather than beliefs and when this happens we say that this is Integrating Adult ego syntonic. That is, they fit with the Integrating Adult ego state and only those people outside of our situation and sometimes outside of our peer group or culture can see that, objectively, such beliefs are just that and therefore they can be changed.



Transactional analysis - descriptive model (revised 2011)

Below is a modern interpretation of the Transactional Analysis descriptive model - called the Transactional Analysis OK Modes Model.

The OK Modes Model is a relatively recent (2010/11) development of the concept, and is a more sophisticated and usable representation of the traditional PAC Transactional Analysis model.

The concept and diagram are particularly helpful tools for understanding what happens in human communications - essentially one-to-one - and what makes these communications constructive or destructive; effective or ineffective.

The Transactional Analysis OK Modes Model has been developed by leading TA practitioners and thinkers Mountain Associates (of Desford, UK) and I am grateful for the help of Mountain Associates' Anita Mountain and Chris Davidson in featuring their model in this article.

Transactional Analysis OK Modes Model

The OK Modes Model of Transactional Analysis shows how we communicate and/or behave with others.

The model consists of ten 'Modes' with a central 'Mindful Process'.

The word Mode is used to differentiate the categories of behavior from the structural ego state model mentioned previously.

In this context the term Mode dates back to 1975, notably in an article in the Transactional Analysis Journal by Nancy Porter (now Nancy Porter-Steele).

The Mountain Associates OK Modes Model provides a visual way of representing how we behave and interact with other people. The diagram below illustrates the concept.

The OK Modes Model is easier to understand when you see the [OK Corral model](#) after the OK Modes Model explanation below.

Miniature 'OK Corral' grids are incorporated into the diagram to emphasize that:

- Ineffective Modes reflect and invite a 'Not OK' response, and
- The four effective Modes reflect and invite an 'I'm OK, You're OK' response.

Of the ten different communication behavior Modes:

- Four are effective - (prompted by the process of Mindfulness, i.e., taking account of current reality and acting accordingly)
- Six are ineffective.

Central element

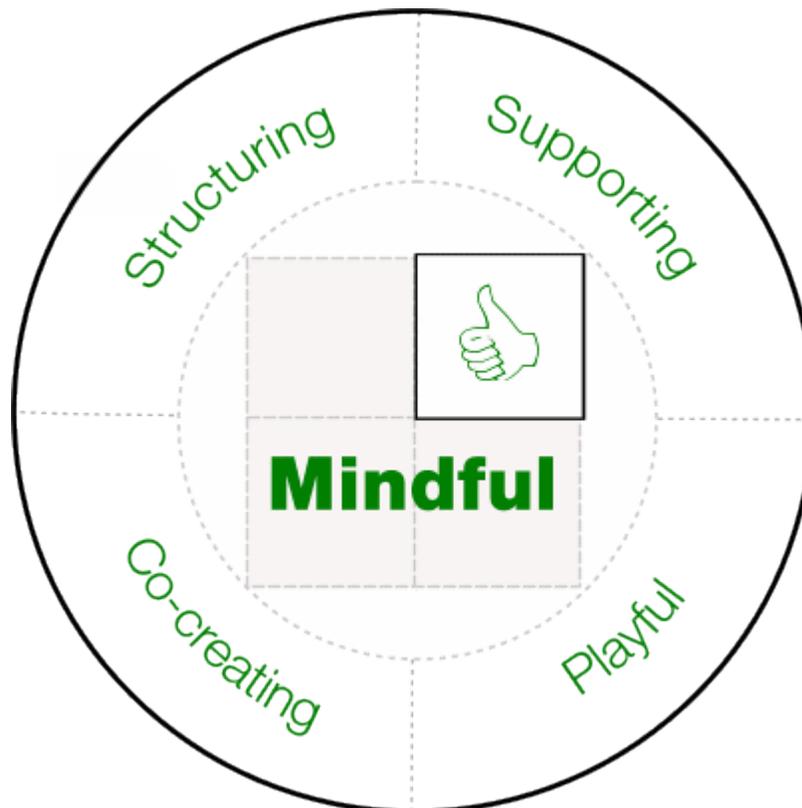
The central circle element, upon which the full model is built, is in itself a representation of **effective communication**. When we are in the one of the four effective Modes shown around the circle we are responsive to the present situation.

Generally when something is said from an effective Mode the response from the other person is also likely to be from an effective Mode. Equally, where a communication comes from an ineffective Mode, the invitation is for the other person to respond from one of the ineffective Modes.

Note that of course in reality there are not simply four effective ways of behaving - these descriptors are intended as a broad impression or guide rather than definitive. Also some behaviors fall between (on a 'continuums') two or more of the Modes.

The central grid represents the [OK Corral model](#), in which here the communication is 'I'm OK, You are OK' - i.e., put simply, from your 'okay' frame of mind to to the other person's 'okay' frame of mind.

This central element of the OK Modes Model shows the four effective Modes. The center 'Mindful' grid indicates that communication is 'OK to OK' in terms of the [OK Corral](#), i.e., the person communicating is doing so from a position of feeling OK, and this communication is to the 'OK' position or feeling of the other person.



OK Modes Model - diagram

Here below is the Transactional Analysis OK Modes Model diagram fully presented, containing the central element with its four effective Modes, and the six ineffective Modes represented by 'Not-OK' miniature OK Corral grids (in red), relative to their effective counterparts (in green) within the central circle.

The four effective Modes are called:

1. Structuring
2. Supporting
3. Co-Creating
4. Playful

The six ineffective Modes are called:

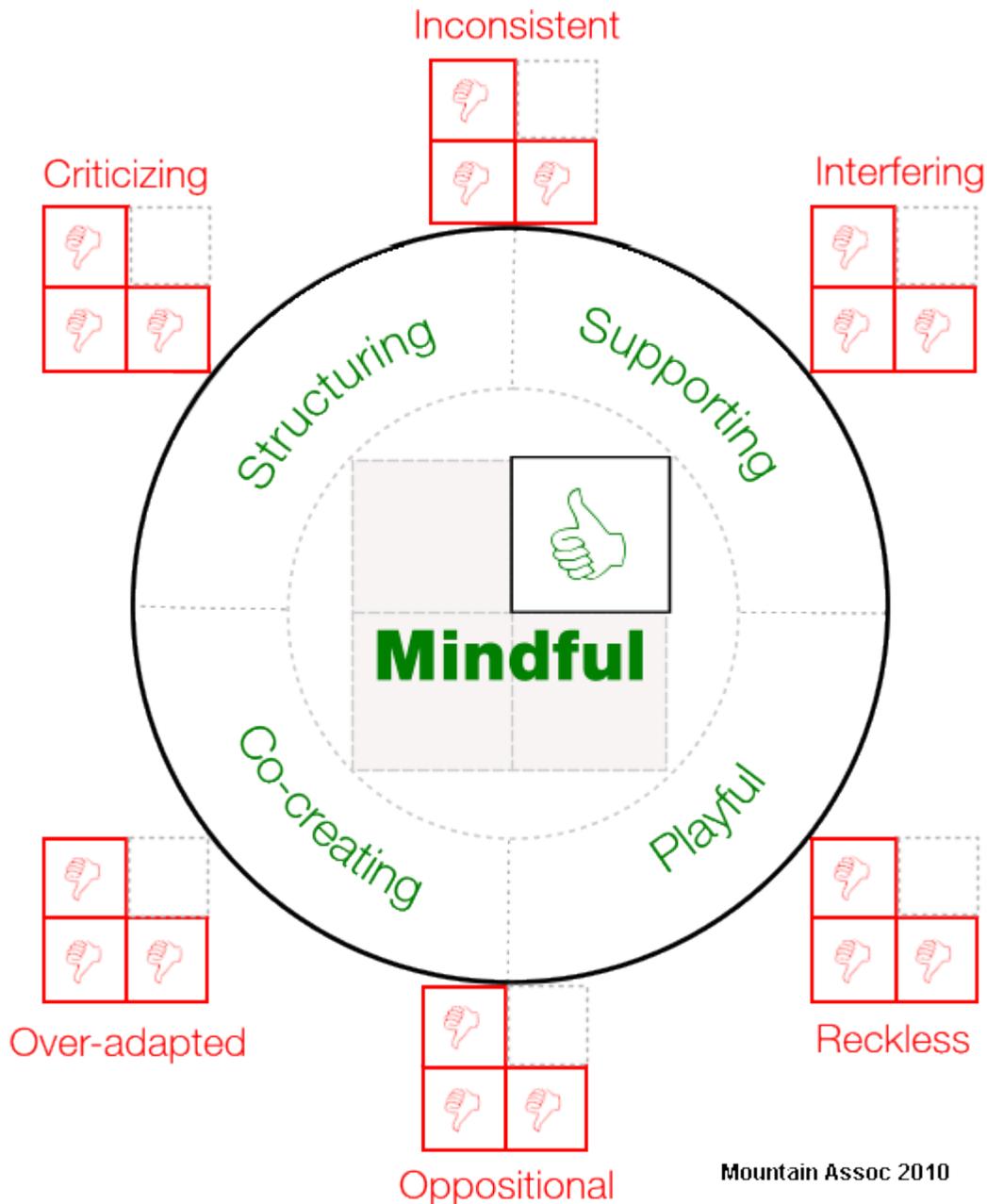
1. Inconsistent
2. Interfering
3. Reckless
4. Oppositional
5. Over-adapted
6. Criticizing

Modes shown in relative/correlating positions

| Effective Modes | Ineffective Modes |
|-----------------|-------------------|
| Structuring | Criticizing |
| | Inconsistent |
| Supporting | Interfering |
| Co-creating | Over-adapted |
| | Oppositional |
| Playful | Reckless |

Modes are shown in green (effective) and red (ineffective) to help explain and use the model as a tool. Particularly this enables us to imagine the flow of a communication exchange in a conversation, and so to understand what happened. Effective communication comes from the green Modes, (like traffic lights, green equate to go-ahead).

Ineffective communication comes from the red Modes (like traffic lights, red means stop). When we come from (communicate from) the green Modes we invite a positive response, and when we communicate from a red Mode, we invite a response from one of the red Modes.



The model is linked to the [OK Corral](#), since another way of describing this model is that an 'OK to OK' (I'm OK, you are OK) communication invites an OK to OK response, whereas a Not-OK communication invites a Not-OK response.

The adjectives used in the diagram here are not definitive. For example the term 'Interfering' could instead be described as 'fussing'.

In some cases the Modes represent a 'continuum' - for instance a communication from a manager could be somewhere between structuring and supporting.

Effective and Ineffective modes

'Effective'

By effective, we mean that:

- A communication is likely to achieve the intended response or result. Information is received, necessary action(s) follow and good relationships are maintained or developed
- Communication will (if necessary and desired) be able to continue - either now or later
- Each party to the communication, whether they agree with each other (or not) or like each other (or not) maintains an I'm OK, You're OK position.

'Ineffective'

By ineffective, we mean that any/all of the following apply:

- the intended communication is not understood the person receiving the communication is themselves invited into a "not OK" position or invited to make someone else "not OK"
- Communication may be broken in some way and so does not continue, or it escalates to even more discomfort or misunderstanding for those involved. In extreme cases the rift may be permanent
- What needs to be done is less likely to be done - or may be done incorrectly.

Effective modes

To help you understand the TA OK Modes Model and to avoid having to keep scrolling back up the page, the diagram is repeated alongside the explanation below. It's the same diagram.

Note that the ineffective Modes are quite logical and easy to understand when seen as negative or unhelpful extremes of the correlating effective Modes. For example, being overly Supportive quite naturally equates to Interfering; Being overly Playful quite naturally equates to Recklessness.

Mindful Process - Not a Mode, this is a requirement or condition enabling effective Modes to be accessed/used. When we are operating mindfully, we communicate 'OK to OK' messages. We operate appropriately in the here-and-now and have access to the positive aspects of the care and structure we have received in the past and the experiences we had in childhood. As this Mindful process is here-and-now, we are able to choose which of the effective Modes of behavior to draw

from, dependent on the situation. When we are stable in this Mindful process we respond appropriately rather than 'flipping' or switching (generally unconsciously) into an Ineffective Mode. Each of the effective Modes, dependent on the Mindful Process, communicates "I'm OK and You're OK".

Structuring Mode - This is the boundary setting Mode, offering constructive criticism. In this Mode we are caring whilst firm.

Supporting Mode - When in this Mode we are affirming and considerate.

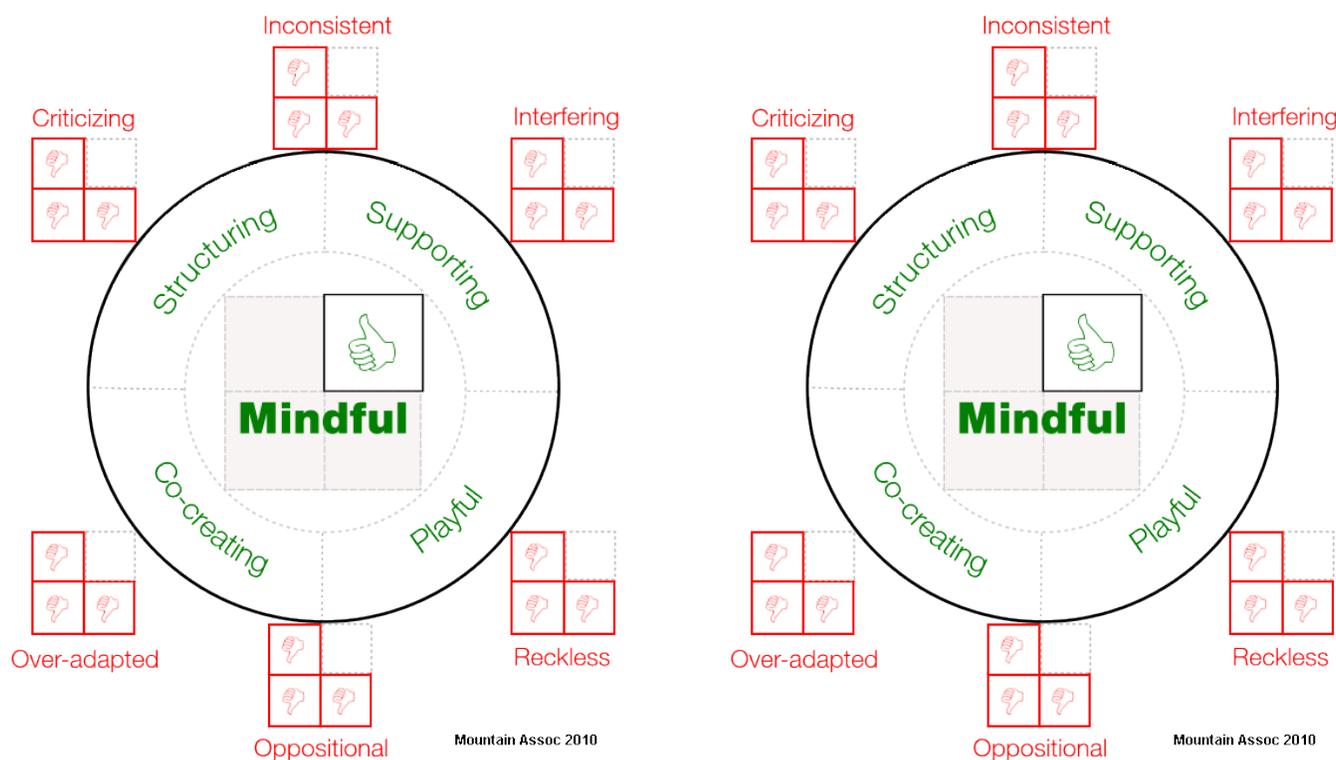
Co-creating Mode - From this Mode we develop ways to help us live and work with others.

Playful Mode - This is the creative, fun loving, curious and energetic Mode. We can confront people playfully as a way of dealing with a difficult situation. This can diffuse a potential problem and get the message across.

When working with others we can choose where we come from (communicate from).

Effective communication happens when we are in a Mindful Process.

If someone else invites us, because of how he/she communicates to us, to go into an ineffective (red) Mode, importantly, **we don't have to go there**, we can instead 'cross the transaction' and come from (respond from) one of the green Modes.



Ineffective modes

The ineffective (red) Modes all emanate from outdated experiences, which are not relevant or appropriate in the present.

Criticizing Mode - communicates a "You're not OK" message. When in this Mode you will believe that others cannot do things as well as you can, or perhaps only certain chosen people can. If you lead from this position you are unlikely to develop a loyal supportive team or culture.

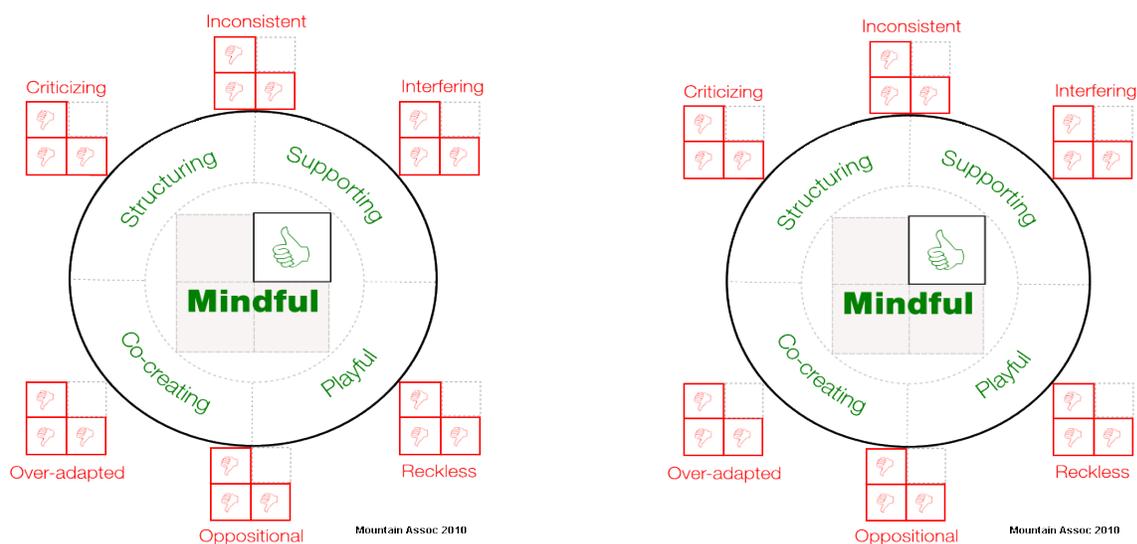
Inconsistent Mode - As a leader we might be inconsistent in our style - changing our behavior in unpredictable and apparently random ways. This is not helpful for followers (or leaders).

Interfering Mode - communicates a "You're not OK" message. When in this Mode the person will often do things for others which they are capable of doing for themselves. People who find it difficult to delegate might be in this Mode.

Over-adapted Mode - This expresses an "I'm not OK" or "I'm not OK and You're Not OK" message. When in this Mode we over-adapt to others and tend to experience such emotions as depression or unrealistic fear and anxiety. When in this Mode we are unlikely to make good team members and will be highly stressed if we have to manage others.

Oppositional Mode - Even when opposing others, we are not actually free to think for ourselves as we are reacting to them in the belief that we need to 'resist' them. It is important to be clear that this is not simply about being in disagreement, but a style of going against whatever others put forward.

Reckless Mode - In this Mode we run wild with no boundaries. Here we express a "You're not OK" message. At work we tend not to take responsibility for our actions and are unlikely to progress as we need a great deal of management in order to focus our energy and keep boundaries.



The OK Modes Model of Transactional Analysis was developed by Mountain Associates or Desford, UK, and first published in this format in 2011.

Diagnosis

It is helpful to be able to assess or diagnose which ego state in the structural model, or which mode in the descriptive model, somebody is in. In this way we can respond appropriately as well as ensure which mode we are addressing.

However, when we work with other staff or are relating with young people, we are responding on the behavioral level. It is not always possible, or appropriate, to be undertaking more in-depth types of diagnosis. I have outlined them here though so that an understanding of the complexity of the process can be achieved.

Behavioral diagnosis

Words, tone, tempo of speech, expressions, postures, gestures, breathing, and muscle tone provide clues for diagnosing ego states.

Parent mode words typically contain value judgments, Adult words are clear and definable, and Free Child mode words are direct and spontaneous. For example, a person in Adapted Child mode may cry silently, whereas when in Free Child mode we are likely to make a lots of noise. "You" or "one" usually comes from Parent. This can switch even mid-sentence. If we are leaning forward it is likely we are in the posture of the Parent mode, whereas if we are in Adult mode we tend to be erect. These are indicators not guarantees. Assessment needs to be supported by other methods of diagnosis.

Social diagnosis

Observation of the kinds of transactions a person is having with others. For example, if eliciting a response from someone's caretaking Parent it is likely that the stimulus is coming from Child, though not necessarily the Adapted Child mode. Our own responses to someone will often be a way of assessing which ego state or mode they are coming from.

Historical diagnosis

The person's past also provides important information. If, as a child we had feelings similar to those we are experiencing now, it is likely we are in Child ego state. If our mother or father behaved or talked in the same way that we are behaving or talking now then we are probably in a Parent ego state.

Phenomenological diagnosis

This occurs when we re-experience the past instead of just remembering it. This means that diagnosis is undertaken by self-examination. This is sometimes accurate and sometimes very inaccurate as the Child ego state may be afraid to allow our Adult to know what is going on.

Strokes

In Transactional Analysis we call compliments and general ways of giving recognition strokes. This name came from research which indicated that babies require touching in order to survive and grow. It apparently makes no difference whether the touching induces pain or pleasure - it is still important. On the whole we prefer to receive negative strokes than no strokes at all, at least that way we know we exist and others know we exist.

We all have particular strokes we will accept and those we will reject. For example, if we have always been told we are clever, and our brother is creative, then we are likely to accept strokes for being clever, but not for being creative. From this frame of reference only one person in the family can be the creative one and so on.

Stroking can be physical, verbal or nonverbal. It is likely that the great variety of stroke needs and styles present in the world results from differences in wealth, cultural mores, and methods of parenting.

Stroke economy

Claude Steiner suggests that, as children, we are all indoctrinated by our parents with five restrictive rules about stroking.

- don't give strokes when we have them to give
- don't ask for strokes when we need them
- don't accept strokes if we want them
- don't reject strokes when we don't want them
- don't give ourselves strokes

Together these five rules are the basis of what Steiner calls the stroke economy. By training children to obey these rules, says Steiner, parents ensure that ".. a situation in which strokes could be available in a limitless supply is transformed into a situation in which the supply is low and the price parents can extract for them is high."

We therefore need to change the restrictive rules to unrestrictive ones:

- give strokes when we have them to give
- ask for strokes when we want them
- accept strokes if we want them
- reject manipulative strokes
- give ourselves positive strokes

Strokes can be positive or negative:

- A) "I like you"
- B) "I don't like you"

Strokes can be unconditional or conditional. An unconditional stroke is a stroke for being whereas a conditional stroke is a stroke for doing. For instance:

"I like you" - unconditional

"I like you when you smile" - conditional

As negative strokes these might be:

"I don't like you" - negative unconditional

"I don't like you when you're sarcastic" - negative conditional

People often have a stroke filter. They only let in strokes which they think they are allowed to let in. For instance they allow themselves to receive strokes for being clever and keep out strokes for being good looking. One way to think about this to consider being out in the rain. The rain is the strokes that are available to us, both positive and negative. There is a hole in the umbrella and some of the strokes go through and we save them in a bucket to enjoy in lean times. Conversely we might use them negatively to reinforce the negative strokes we give to ourselves. Of course, some just bounce off the umbrella and we might not accept the good strokes that are coming our way. Some might come in but fall straight onto the floor.

Life positions

Life positions are basic beliefs about self and others, which are used to justify decisions and behavior. When we are conceived we are hopefully at peace, waiting to emerge into the world once we have grown sufficiently to be able to survive in the outside of the womb. If nothing untoward happens we will emerge contented and relaxed. In this case we are likely to perceive the world from the perspective of I am OK and You are OK. However, perhaps our mother had some traumatic experiences, or the birth was difficult or even life threatening. This experience is likely to have an effect on the way we experience the world, even at the somatic level. In which case we might

emerge sensing that life is scary and might, for example, go into "I am not OK and You are not OK either".

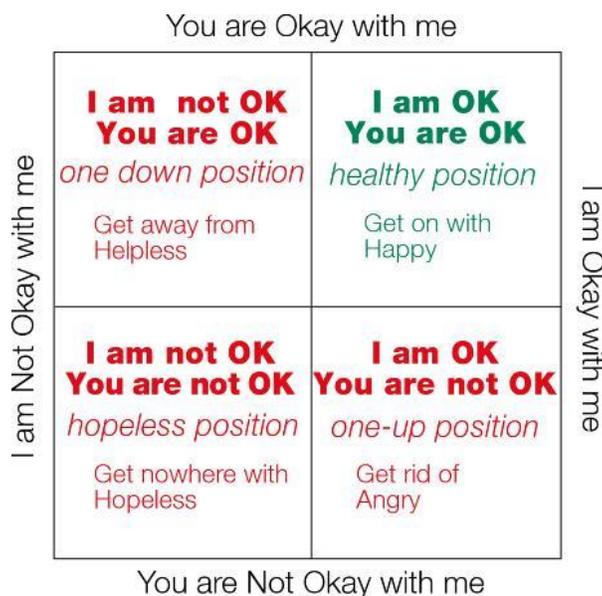
Let's take it that the pregnancy went fine, and the birth was easy enough. What then? Well life experiences might reinforce our initial somatic level life position, or contradict it. If we were treated punitively, talked down to, and not held, we may begin to believe "I am not OK and You are OK". This might be the only sense we can make of our experiences.

Let's take another situation. Perhaps we were picked on and bullied as a child. We learnt that the way to get by was to bully others and that way we felt stronger and in control. Our behavior then comes into the I am OK and You are not OK quadrant. Of course this may cover up our belief that we are really not OK, but nobody sees that. They just see our behavior, and in fact we may have forgotten all about our negative feelings about ourselves as we have tried so hard to deny the pain of believing we are not OK.

These life positions are perceptions of the world. The reality is I just am and you just are, therefore how I view myself and others are just that "views" not fact. However, we tend to act as if they are a fact. Just like when somebody says "I can't do this, I'm useless". Rather than "I don't know how to do this. Will you show me?" The latter is staying with the fact that they do not yet know how to do it, whilst the former links being useless with not being able to do something.

There are a number of ways of diagramming the life positions. Franklin Ernst drew the life positions in quadrants, which he called the OK Corral (1971). We have put these into red and green to show the effective and ineffective quadrants for communication and healthy relationships. By shading in the quadrants according to the amount of time we think we spend in each we can get an idea of the amount of time we spend in each. Ernst used the term 'Corralogram' for this method of self-assessment using the OK Corral matrix.

OK Corral - Ernst, 1971



Berne talked about the life positions as existential positions, one of which we are more likely to go to under stress. This is significantly different to the concept Ernst uses, i.e. that we move around them all during the day. Whilst there is some truth in this we could agree with Berne that there will be one major position we go into under stress, with perhaps another position underneath this one. These positions can change as we develop and grow. The difference between Berne and Ernst is important.

Chris Davidson (1999) writes about the three dimensional model of Okayness. All of the previous diagrams talk as if there were only one other person in the equation, when in reality there are often more. For example, the behavior of young people in gangs may say that they believe they are okay and perhaps other gangs in their neighborhood are okay, but an individual or gang from another neighborhood are not okay. We often do this at work as well. We find other people who we like and then we gossip and put other people down. We are therefore saying that we believe we are okay but those others are awful (underneath this there may be a belief that we are not okay either but we feel better by putting someone else down). In this way the two dimensional model of okayness i.e. that there are only two people involved, becomes three dimensional model where there can be three or more involved.

There is also the way in which we view life itself. If we consider that there is something wrong with us, and that others are not to be trusted and are not OK either, then the world would be a scary place and we are likely to experience life as tough and believe we will only be all right if we keep alert and on the lookout for danger and difficulties.

Blame model

The Transactional Analysis 'Okay Corral' can be linked to 'blame', for which Jim Davis TSTA developed this simple and helpful model. Commonly when emotions are triggered people adopt one of three attitudes relating to blame, which each correlate to a position on the Okay Corral:

- I'm to blame (You are okay and I'm not okay - 'helpless')
- You are to blame (I'm okay and you are not okay - 'angry')
- We are both to blame (I'm not okay and you are not okay - 'hopeless')

None of these is a healthy position.

Instead the healthy position is, and the mindset should be: "It's no-one's fault, blame isn't the issue - what matters is how we go forward and sort things out." (I'm okay and you are okay - 'happy')

(With acknowledgements to Jim Davis TSTA)

The Script

The script is a life plan, made when we are growing up. It is like having the script of a play in front of us - we read the lines and decide what will happen in each act and how the play will end. The script is developed from our early decisions based upon our life experience. We may not realize that we have set ourselves a plan but we can often find this out if we ask ourselves what our favorite childhood story was, who was our favorite character in the story and who do we identify with. Then consider the beginning, middle and end of the story. How is this story reflected in our life today? Another way of getting to what script is may be to think about what we believe will happen when we are in old age. Do we believe we will be alive at 80 or 90 years old, be healthy, happy, and contented? What do we think will be on the headstone for our grave? What would we like to be on it?

Driver Behavior (2016)

There are a number of different perspectives on 'driver' behavior.

Mountain Associates use a model based upon Dr Taibi Kahler's observations of clients in distress.

Dr Kahler noticed five sets of mutually exclusive behavioral cues.

Subsequently, for this discovery Dr Kahler received the 1977 Eric Berne Memorial Scientific Award.

Drivers in this context are behaviors that we move into when we start to be distressed.

Each driver is associated with a 'personality type'.

Kahler noted that there were two variants for each driver:

- Be Perfect for me
- Be Perfect for you
- Be Strong for me
- Be Strong for you
- Try hard for you
- Please for you

When we notice the driver in ourselves or others we can recognize that we are in the early stages of distress. This will mean that we need to address our psychological needs so that we return to a 'here-and-now' mindful process.

See more about [personality types within Transactional Analysis](#) on the Mountain Associates website.

Separately the book 'Parlez-vous Personality? Process Communication for Coaches', by Gérard Collignon, Pascal Legrand and John Parr, (2010 - Kahler Communications Europe), also offers more explanation about personality types within Transactional Analysis.

Time structuring

The way in which we structure time is likely to reflect the different hungers. We all structure time in a variety of ways:

- Withdrawal
- Rituals
- Pastiming
- Activities
- Games
- Intimacy

Obtaining balance means ensuring that we have sufficient time for play and intimacy and if this does not occur then it would be beneficial to explore what we might be avoiding.

Games

I am sure that every one of us must have been in the situation where we have said, "Why does this always keep happening to me" or "I always keep meeting people who hurt me and then go off and leave me". Sometimes it may be that we like to help people and then it goes wrong as the person we were trying to help says that we didn't do it well enough and that we got it wrong. We might think "Well, I was only trying to help" and feel got at.

When similar situations keep happening over and over again then the term Transactional Analysis uses for this is a game. A game is a familiar pattern of behavior with a predictable outcome. Games are played outside Adult awareness and they are our best attempt to get our needs met - although of course we don't.

Games are learned patterns of behavior, and most people play a small number of favorite games with a range of different people and in varying intensities.

First Degree games are played in social circles generally lead to mild upsets not major traumas.

Second Degree games occur when the stakes may be higher. This usually occurs in more intimate circles, and ends up with an even greater negative payoff.

Third Degree games involve tissue damage and may end up in the jail, hospital or morgue.

Chris Davidson (2002) has argued that world politics can involve fourth degree games - where the outcomes involve whole communities, countries or even the world.

Games vary in the length of time that passes while they are being played. Some can take seconds or minutes while others take weeks months or even years. People play games for these reasons:

- to structure time
- to acquire strokes
- to maintain the substitute feeling and the system of thinking, beliefs and actions that go with it
- to confirm parental injunctions and further the life script
- to maintain the person's life position by "proving" that self/others are not OK
- to provide a high level of stroke exchange while blocking intimacy and maintaining distance
- to make people predictable.

Dealing with games

There are various ways to stop a game, including the use of different options than the one automatically used. We can:

- Cross the transaction by responding from a different ego state than the one the stimulus is designed to hook.
- Pick up the ulterior rather than the social message e.g. when a person says "I can't do this, I'm useless". Rather than saying, "Let me do this for you," instead say, "It sounds like you have a problem. What do you want me to do about it?" (said from the Adult ego state)
- The opening message to the game always entails a discount. There are further discounts at each stage of the game. By detecting discounts we can identify game invitations and defuse them with options. (A discount is when we minimize, maximize or ignore some aspect of a problem which would assist us in resolving it. Such as saying in a whiny voice "This is too difficult for me to do", so we automatically help them).
- Replace the game strokes. Loss of strokes to the Child ego state means a threat to survival. We get a great many strokes from games, even if they are negative. However, if we don't obtain sufficient positive strokes, or give ourselves positive strokes, we will go for quantity rather than quality of strokes and play games to get them. This loss of strokes is also a loss of excitement that the game has generated.

Another way to think about this is to consider the game role we or the other person is likely to take. One way to discover this is to ask the following questions:

1. What keeps happening over and over again
2. How does it start?
3. What happens next?
4. And then what happens?

5. How does it end?

6. How do feel after it ends? (John James, 1973)

We can then consider the reason we might have taken up a particular role, where we might switch to, and then consider how to do things differently. We need to consider what our own responsibility is in this - if the situation is too violent for us to get involved what options do we have? We could call for help, get others to come with us to intervene and so on. We need to choose the appropriate assistance and take the action required.

Further information and training

Transactional Analysis is a fascinating, useful and effective model for managing, developing and helping people in business and in life generally. Transactional Analysis is also a wonderful model for increasing self-awareness and advancing self-development.

For more information about Transactional Analysis training, and its use for personal and organizational development or therapeutic applications, I can confidently recommend Mountain Associates of Desford, Leicestershire, England, telephone +44 (0)1455 824475 or email: TA at mountain associates dot co dot uk. See the [Mountain Associates website](#). Mountain Associates have particular expertise and experience in organizational applications of Transactional Analysis. Refer also to the [Johari Window model](#) for personal and inter-group communications and development.

Books

Recommended transactional analysis books:

- Working Together; Organizational Transactional Analysis and Business Performance - Anita Mountain & Chris Davidson (Gower)
- TA Today - Ian Stewart & Vann Joines
- I'm OK You're OK - Thomas and Amy Harris
- Staying OK - Thomas and Amy Harris
- Games People Play - Eric Berne
- What Do You Say After You Say Hello - Eric Berne
- Scripts People Live - Claude Steiner
- The Total Handbook Of Transactional Analysis - Woollams & Brown
- Transactional Analysis For Trainers - Julie Hay
- The Transactional Manager - Abe Wagner

Please note: The technical content of this article has been authored/provided by different experts in Transactional Analysis, notably Anita Mountain and Chris Davidson of Mountain Associates. Authors/originators are indicated throughout the article. Where you use these materials please reference the authorship accordingly. See the copyright and attribution notice at the foot of this webpage.

With grateful thanks to Chris Davidson and Anita Mountain of Mountain Associates.

Related Materials

[BODY LANGUAGE THEORY, GUIDE, DE-CODER](#)

[CLEAN LANGUAGE - DAVID GROVE QUESTIONING METHOD](#)

[EMPATHYPRESENTATION SKILLS AND TECHNIQUES](#)

[MEHRABIAN'S COMMUNICATION THEORY - VERBAL, NON-VERBAL, BODY LANGUAGE](#)

[NEURO-LINGUISTIC PROGRAMMING \(NLP\)](#)

[TEAM BRIEFING PROCESS](#)

[TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS - ERIC BERNE - RECENT THEORY](#)

[TREE SWING CARTOONS \(NEW VERSIONS\)](#)