

Transactional Analysis

Transactional Analysis (T.A) is a system of understanding people and human communication. It is a system of easily usable concepts that can help us to understand human behaviour and feelings.

One of the main ideas in T.A. is that in each of us there are three “Ego States”, called the PARENT, the ADULT and the CHILD. At any moment we are “in” one of these ego states. (The ego states are always written with capital letters to distinguish them from the every day use of the words adult, child and parent). The ego state we are “in” can be determined by the things we say, our non-verbal behaviour and the feelings we have at the time.

The ADULT is the information processing part of us. It receives data, actively seeks out data, weighs up evidence, makes decisions and generally acts like a sophisticated and advanced computer. The ADULT is rational but it may be mistaken and get its facts wrong e.g. in your ADULT you may make arithmetical mistakes or you may believe that all the evidence leads to the conclusion that the earth is flat. The ADULT starts to develop early in life. As soon as you are born your data processor starts to work and to store up information about the world and to devise models of how the world works. Even before you start to talk your ADULT has done a lot of work on the problems of understanding the world.

Inside us all is the emotional legacy of our childhood. When we were born we were a bundle of needs and feelings unmodified by experience. When we were hungry, cold or lonely we yelled until the situation improved and when we were fed or cuddled we enjoyed it without inhibition. This aspect of us is called our FREE CHILD and is the part of us that can have fun, enjoy contact with another person and express our feelings freely. Someone who never displays the FREE CHILD in adult life might be described as boring, inhibited or no fun to be with.

Someone who displays a great deal of FREE CHILD might be described as undignified, irresponsible, lacking control of their feelings or even psychopathic (gratifying their desires with no thought for others). A person who can show an appropriate amount of FREE CHILD in their make up can feel and express emotions fully and appropriately e.g. when a loved one dies they will grieve intensely and cry a great deal; when they are socialising with friends they can laugh and have fun; when they are with a partner they can give and receive pleasure in an uninhibited way.

The other aspect of the CHILD is the ADAPTED CHILD. The ADAPTED CHILD develops as a child learns to cope with the demands made on them by the other people in the family. Later the child learns to cope with school and friends and the ADAPTED CHILD develops further. The ADAPTED CHILD has to learn to control the needs and strong emotions of the FREE CHILD. It has to learn what the social rules are and what behaviour is approved of and rewarded as well as what behaviour is punished. This process goes on through all the years of childhood and adolescence.

As adults we are left with the feelings and habits of the ADAPTED CHILD. Some of these are positive and help us to function as social beings - our ADAPTED CHILD prevents us from behaving outrageously and helps us to oil the wheels of social life and to obey rules and regulations. However, the ADAPTED CHILD can cause problems such as feeling excessive guilt, anxiety, shyness or expressing emotion inappropriately, such as crying when feeling angry. The ADAPTED CHILD may also be highly manipulative.

As we grew up we recorded all the instructions, commands and criticisms that we heard parents, teachers and other older people say. When these parental "tapes" are replaying we are "in our PARENT". There is usually a familiar ring to the things people say in their PARENT, e.g. "You should be ashamed of yourself" or "Money doesn't grow on trees". The PARENT has two aspects - the NURTURING PARENT and the CONTROLLING PARENT.

The NURTURING PARENT takes care of and protects others. It can be used appropriately when someone needs to be looked after, or inappropriately when trying to solve someone's problem when they are better off solving it for themselves. The inappropriate use of the NURTURING PARENT is sometimes seen as rescuing or smothering.

PARENT, ADULT and CHILD together

A fully developed adult human being should basically have their ADULT in overall control. The ADULT's hand should be on the steering wheel, so that while PARENT and CHILD behaviours are used appropriately, they do not take over the steering wheel. For example, with ADULT in control you may decide that it is safe and appropriate to give someone a cuddle or to take charge of an accident situation. On the other hand if someone bosses others around inappropriately or takes in 55 stray cats, their PARENT is in control, or if someone habitually goes to bed with strangers or cannot control their eating sensibly, then their CHILD is in control.

Everyone finds from time to time that their PARENT or their CHILD has taken the wheel. By learning to recognise it we learn to stay in our ADULT more of the time e.g. if I notice that I am feeling anxious for no good reason and say to myself "I'm in my ADAPTED CHILD" then I am thinking and therefore my ADULT is back in control.

Adapted from "The Games People Play" Eric Berne)

Transactions

A transaction can be described as a transactional stimulus plus a transactional response, this being the basic unit of social discourse.

T.A. defines three types of transaction.

A **Complementary transaction** - in which the ego state addressed is the ego state that responds. Using the ego state functional model, with arrows or 'vectors' to show the direction of each transaction, the vectors will be parallel:

A **Crossed transaction** - in which the transactional vectors are not parallel. The ego-state being addressed is not the ego-states that responds.

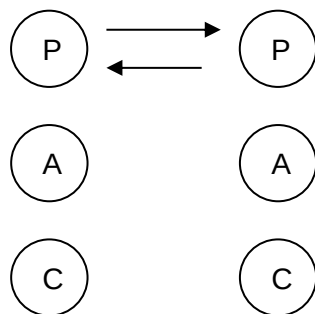
An Ulterior or Duplex transaction

The 3 ego states can be used as a way of analysing transactions (communications) between people. A transaction is a communication from A to B and the response from B to A.

Examples of Complementary Transactions

Where the message is sent from one ego state and the reply is from the expected ego state, the transaction is complementary.

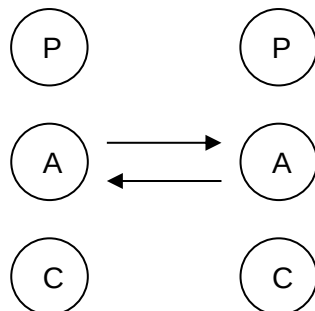
Example 1 Critical Parent to Critical Parent.



Stimulus: "The government is making us all criminals by putting speed cameras everywhere"

Response: "They are, and it's really annoying"

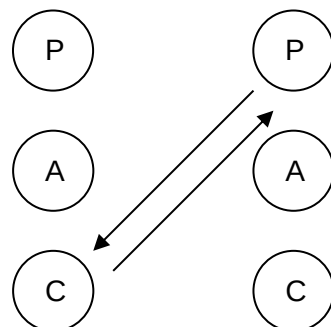
Example 2 Adult to Adult.



Stimulus: "What time is the train due?"

Response: "It's due at one fifteen"

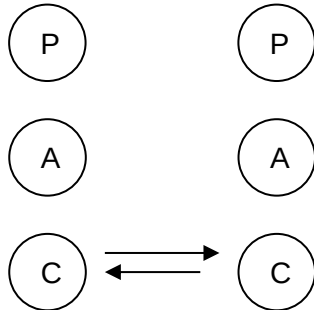
Example 3 Adapted Child to Nurturing Parent.



Stimulus: "Oh, I'm really struggling with all this painting"

Response: "Don't worry, I'll give you a hand right now"

Example 4 Free Child to Free Child.



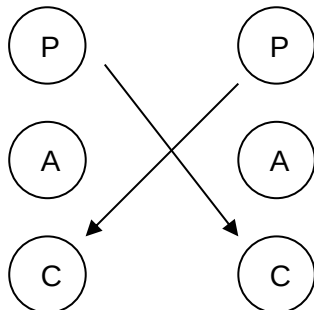
Stimulus: "Oh what the hell, let's have another drink and pudding"

Response: "Yeah, great idea. Make that 2 drinks, a pudding, and some gateaux"

Examples of Crossed Transactions

When a message is sent from one ego state and the sender expects it to be sent back from the expected ego state: but it's sent back from a different one. The transaction is crossed; communication can be non effective.

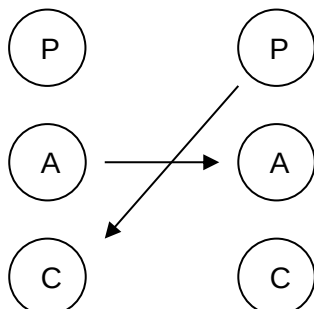
Example 1 Critical Parent expecting reply from Adapted Child but receiving reply from Critical Parent.



Stimulus: "You messed that up, it's full of errors and typos"

Response: "Rubbish, it's not my fault that can't understand or use correct English"

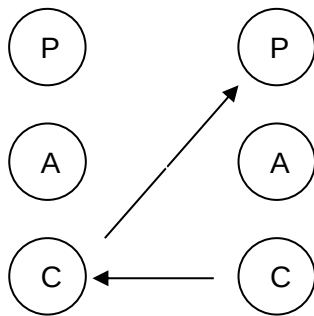
Example 2 Adult expecting reply from Adult but receiving reply from Critical Parent.



Stimulus: “The deadline is tomorrow. We’ll need to stay on for an hour to complete this.”

Response: “What do you mean ‘we’. You always leave things to the last minute”

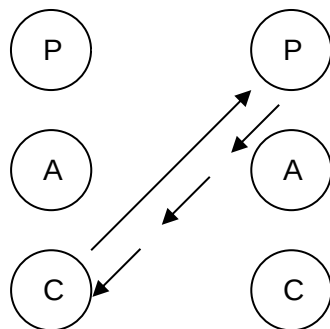
Example 3 Adapted Child expecting reply from Nurturing Parent but receiving reply from Adapted Child.



Stimulus: “Oh, I’m really struggling with all this painting”

Response: “Oh, I know what you mean, it’s really difficult isn’t it”

Example 4 Adapted Child expecting reply from Nurturing Parent but receiving reply from Critical Parent



Stimulus: “Oh, I’m really struggling with all this painting”

Response: “So bl***y what. Get on with it and stop moaning all the time!”

Using TA for effective communication

TA implies that we can have considerable impact on modifying unsatisfactory behaviour by the way we communicate with others. We can use your ADULT ego state to think about what behaviour is appropriate. The ADULT ego state has the capacity to control the other two ego states.

Sometimes, we mirror the ego states. For example if someone wins the lottery, we may join them in expressing boundless joy and excitement.

We often adopt complementary behaviour to the ego states which are presented to us. It's possible to identify which ego state someone is in and which ego state they are expecting a response from. For instance, we may respond in “NURTURING PARENT” mode to someone whose ego state is “ADAPTED CHILD”.

We can listen to people's communication to identify if they are habitually in one ego state and then decide if communication to that ego state would be appropriate or not.

If we receive a reply from the wrong (non expected) ego state then we can try to shift the other person's ego state. Consider the “FREE CHILD” tantrum thrower. We may

think it appropriate to respond in “CRITICAL PARENT” mode, but there is always a danger that complementary behaviour re-inforces the original ego state. An alternative response might be more effective.

The way we respond to other peoples’ ego states can actually influence them to behave differently. As a general rule it is better to aim for the “I’m OK, You’re OK” in Harris’s model, which is ADULT to ADULT behaviour. However, we may need them to shift into other ego states.

Peter Honey in “Improve your People Skills” suggests that we can improve or communication and relationships with people by inviting them into the different ego states. It may not be easy to do this particularly if someone is habitually in one ego state, and we may need to invest time and patience. (We may even need to terminate communication if someone persists in inappropriate ego response).

Honey suggests that we do this by acknowledging their current ego state (by the appropriate message or response) and then invite them into another ego state by the words (and body language) which you use, and then:

Invite them to move into Adult by:

- Asking a question
- Stating a few facts
- Asking for their opinion
- Asking for their preference
- Asking for their view

or:

Invite them to move into Nurturing Parent by:

- Asking for their help
- Asking for their advice
- Asking for their expert opinion
- Communicating your fears/worries

or:

Invite them to move into Natural Child (Free Child) by:

- Being one yourself
- Showing the funny side of the situation
- Going to nurturing parent
- Being enthusiastic
- Showing an unconventional way of looking at things.

Transactional Analysis is a very useful tool. To use it effectively, we must observe peoples’ behaviour, listen carefully to what they are saying, (not forgetting to note the non-verbal communication and the context of what they are saying) in order to identify their ego state, and then select an appropriate response. It takes practice, but it can greatly enhance our interpersonal skills.

