

# Transactional Analysis Theory: the Basics

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## Abstract

**This article is written to acquaint readers with basic transactional analysis theory and to provide a beginning understanding about how these concepts can be used in real life.**

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I first learned about Transactional Analysis from Dr. Eric Berne when I studied with him in Carmel, CA beginning in 1966. Quickly, I learned the value of this simple language as I began to understand my own life script. I became intrigued with my newfound ability to see how I was interacting with the people around me and how they interacted with me. I've been talking the language of TA ever since. For those of you who are not familiar with it, here are the basics.

## Ego States

Each of our personalities is made up of various parts: the Parent, the Adult, and the Child ego states. These ego states can be diagrammed as shown in Figure 1.

The Parent ego state is a set of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that are learned or "borrowed" from our parents or other caretakers. The Parent ego state can be divided into two functions. One part includes the nurturing side and can be soft, loving, and permission giving. This is called the Nurturing Parent ego state. It can also set limits in a healthy way.

The other side of the Parent ego state is called the Critical Parent. (It is also sometimes called the Prejudiced Parent.) This part of our personality contains the prejudged thoughts,

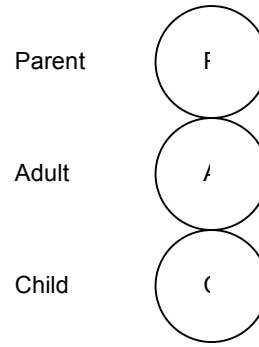


Figure 1  
Ego States

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feelings, and beliefs that we learned from our parents. Some of the messages that we hold in our Parent ego state can be helpful in living while other Parent messages are not. It is useful for us to sort out what information we carry around in our heads so we can keep the part that helps us in our lives and change the part that does not. The Adult ego state is our data-processing center. It is the part of our personality that can process data accurately, that sees, hears, thinks, and can come up with solutions to problems based on the facts and not solely on our pre-judged thoughts or childlike emotions.

The Child ego state is the part of our personality that is the seat of emotions, thoughts, and

feelings and all of the feeling state “memories” that we have of ourselves from childhood. We carry around in our Child ego states all of the experiences we have had, and sometimes these childlike ways of being pop up in our grown-up lives. This can be fun when we are in a situation in which it is safe and right to play and enjoy ourselves. It can be a problem when our Child view of the world causes us to distort the facts in a current situation and prevents our Adult ego state from seeing things accurately.

The Child ego state can also be divided into two parts: the Free Child ego state (also referred to as the Natural Child) and the Adapted Child ego state (which also contains the Rebellious Child ego state).

The Free Child is the seat of spontaneous feeling and behavior. It is the side of us that experiences the world in a direct and immediate way. Our Free Child ego state can be playful, authentic, expressive, and emotional. It, along with the Adult, is the seat of creativity. Having good contact with our own Free Child is an essential ingredient for having an intimate relationship. When we adapt in ways that make us less in touch with our true selves (our Free Child), we decrease the amount of intimacy we are able to have in our lives.

The Adapted Child is the part of our personality that has learned to comply with the parental messages we received growing up. We all adapt in one way or another. Sometimes when we are faced with parental messages that are restricting, instead of complying with them, we rebel against them. This becomes our Rebellious Child ego state. This can be seen as an alternative to complying. It is still, however, a response to the parent messages, and so it is a kind of adaptation all its own.

Let's take a very simple example of a child playing in the sand and look at how the different content develops in the different ego states:

*Nurturing Parent:* Go ahead, play and have fun!

*Critical Parent:* Now, don't you DARE get yourself all messy!

*Adult:* This sand looks really interesting. I can make a castle.

*Free Child:* WOW! Look how tall my castle is!!!!

*Adapted Child:* I better not get my clothes all dirty.

*Rebellious Child:* I don't CARE if I do get dirty! (While dumping a bucket of sand on her head)

Understanding ego states is the basis for understanding transactional analysis theory. In the following section we will look at different ways of identifying what ego state you or someone else is using so you can become adept at recognizing these aspects of personality and behavior. As you watch people move from one ego state to another, you can literally see them change right before your eyes!

### How to Tell What Ego State You Are Using

There are several ways to tell what ego state you are (or someone else is) using. Pay attention to tone of voice, body posture, gestures, choice of words, and emotional state. If the tone of voice is soft and soothing, this is a sign that the speaker is using a Nurturing Parent ego state. If, on the other hand, the tone is harsh and critical or threatening, then the speaker is probably using a Critical Parent ego state. An even and clear tone of voice usually comes from an Adult ego state, while an especially cheerful or emotion-laden tone of voice is likely to be coming from the Free Child. The Adapted Child may sound either whiney or like a good girl (or boy) saying just what is expected of her or him.

Similarly, there are gestures that signify that someone is using Parent (the warning, wagging finger), Adult (thoughtful expression, nodding head), or Child (jumping up and down). There are also specific words that tend to come from one ego state more than from the others. The Parent is most likely to use expressions such as “Pay attention now” or “You should always do it this way,” while language belonging to the Adult ego state is likely to sound evenhanded (“This information might be useful to you”) or simply factual (“Will you tell me what time it is?”). The Child is most likely to use short expressive words like “WOW!” “Yeah!” or “Let's go!” When you pay attention to these behaviors and to how you feel, you will be able to tell what ego state you or someone else is using.

Let's look at ways in which an understanding of ego states can help you in your current life. Suppose we take a common problem and apply knowledge of ego states to the solution. The feeling of loneliness is a natural experience. Everyone feels lonely from time to time. People ask, "How can I connect with others? How can I make more friends?"

You can use your knowledge of ego states in a social situation to maximize your chances of making new connections. Let your Nurturing Parent take your Child to a party. Reassure yourself by saying things like, "This might be fun. Let's see what interesting people we might be able to meet!" Leave your Critical Parent at home. Smile at people. When others talk to you, use your Nurturing Parent to make supportive comments and to offer strokes. Use your Adult to ask questions, showing the other person that you are interested in him or her. Allow your Natural Child to be intuitive and to figure people out. Your Child ego state can connect with others not only sharing in the pleasure of jokes that are funny, but sometimes finding humor in ordinary situations as well. You might find others opening up to you. We all need warmth and positive strokes; if you offer some

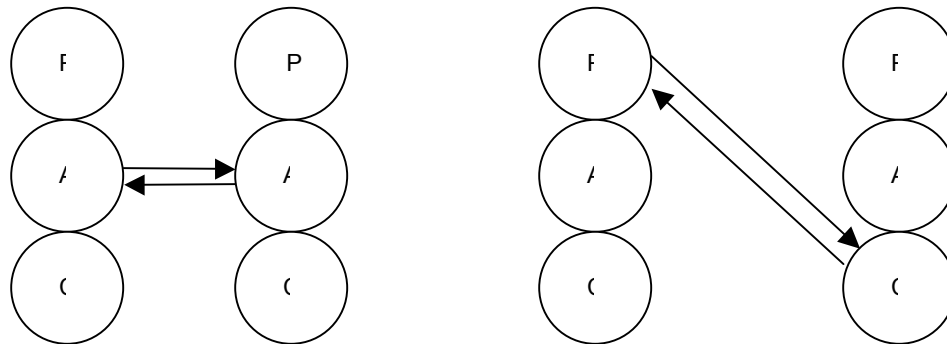
of them to others, it is likely that some will come back your way. These elements of nurturance, support, a show of interest, and playfulness are often how friendships begin.

Change does not necessarily come quickly or easily. Change takes practice. Your transactional analysis therapist can help you with this. But once you start making changes that move your life in a positive direction, you can expect more positive changes to follow.

**Transactions**

Another important transactional analysis concept is that of transactions. Transactions are about how people interact with each other, specifically, which ego state in me is talking to which ego state in you. You may have noticed that sometimes communication continues in a straightforward, easy way that seems to go smoothly. But at other times, things seem to get all jumbled up, confusing, unclear, and unsatisfying. An understanding of transactions can help you keep your communication with others as clear as you would like it to be.

*Straight transactions (or complementary transactions):* We can diagram simple, straight transactions as shown in Figure 2.



Adult: "Will you tell me what time it is?"  
 Adult: "Yes, it is four o'clock."

Parent: "You have to go to bed right now!"  
 Child: "Please ... Can't I just finish this

Figure 2  
 Straight Transactions

The first example is easy to understand. In the second example the two people are not in agreement, however the communication is clear. Both are examples of straight transactions; the arrows are straight or parallel. When people use straight (or complementary) transactions, communication can continue indefinitely. It is when people cross transactions that communication breaks down.

*Crossed transactions:* We can diagram a crossed transaction as shown in Figure 3.

Here we see two different examples in which communication breaks down. In the first, the respondent comes from a Child ego state instead of Adult, thereby crossing the transaction. The speaker has two options. She can either stay in her Adult ego state and try again to hook the Adult in the responder (“I didn’t mean to rush you. I really just wanted to know the time”), or she can get hooked and move into her Parent ego state and respond that way (e.g., saying angrily, “Why do you have to be so sensitive?”). In the second example, the respondent comes from a Critical Parent ego state to cross the transaction, and this communication breaks down. There are many other ways to cross transactions.

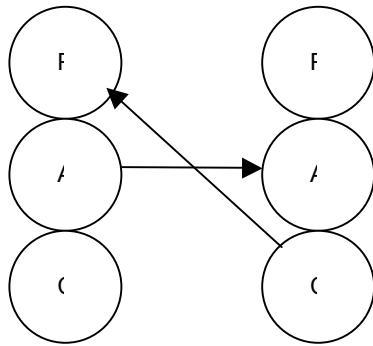
When we learn to recognize and differentiate between straight and crossed transactions we increase our ability to communicate clearly with others. Conversations made up of straight transactions are more emotionally satisfying and productive than conversations that have frequent crossed transactions.

Becoming an expert at recognizing ego states and straight and crossed transactions takes time. In the beginning you will need to pay close attention to what is going on both inside yourself and with others. With practice, identifying various ego states and different kinds of transactions becomes second nature. Learning these new skills can be interesting and helpful. It can also be fun!

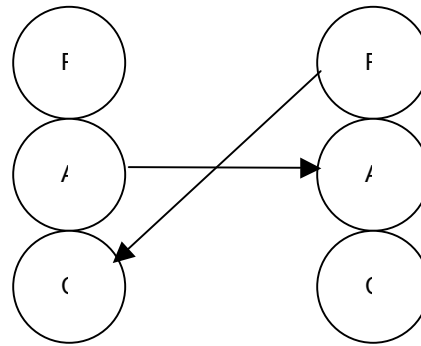
**Strokes**

Eric Berne defined a stroke as a “unit of human recognition”. A stroke can be a look, a nod, a smile, a spoken word, a touch. Any time one human being does something to recognize another human being, that is a stroke. Babies need strokes to survive.

Strokes can be positive or negative. Most of us like positive strokes better than negative ones. It feels better to hear “I love you” than to



Adult: “Can you tell me what time it is?”  
Adapted Child: “Why are you always rushing me?”



Adult: “Can you tell me what time it is?”  
Critical Parent: “You’re always late, anyway, whv would you even care?”

Figure 3  
Crossed Transactions

hear “I hate you.” But when children are not able to get positive strokes, they will make their best effort to get the negative ones, since negative strokes are better than no strokes at all. This is the reason that some people grow up being more comfortable with negative stroking patterns. The kind of stroking patterns we develop tend to support our basic, existential life position, a stance in life that reflects how we feel about ourselves in relation to others.

Strokes can also be unconditional or conditional. Unconditional strokes are those that come to us just for being. They are a very rich kind of strokes. Babies who get lots of positive, unconditional strokes really thrive. And adults who have a good base of positive unconditional stroking thrive as well.

Conditional strokes are given for what we do, for what we accomplish, or for a particular trait that we happen to possess. Thus, they are based on some condition. Conditional strokes can fill important needs. If I sing well, or get a good grade, or do a good deed, and someone recognizes me for that, they are giving me a positive conditional stroke. If people tell me that I am pretty or that they like my dress, they are giving me a positive conditional stroke. These strokes can feel very good and they fill us up in different ways than do positive unconditional strokes.

But there are ways that conditional strokes can be limiting, too. If we relate to others or they relate to us in ways that show us that we are only OK in their eyes when we behave in certain ways, this cuts down on the spontaneity in the relationship. In the long run, this can limit pleasure, intimacy, and creativity.

Pay attention to the kind of strokes you most like to get and learn ways to ask for them. Yes, it is OK to ask for strokes, and asking does not diminish the value of the stroke you get! Usually the more you give, the more you get!

The most harmful kind of stroke is the unconditional negative stroke. These strokes convey to us that we are not OK. And there is no condition that this is based on. The unconditional negative stroke says that the core of who we are is just not OK. This kind of message and stroking pattern early in life can seriously impact a person's view of himself or

herself; it can be damaging to the person's self-esteem and even impact his or her will or desire to live.

When negative strokes are conditional, they are a bit less harmful than the unconditional negative ones. At least the person can believe that there is something good about himself or herself, since the negative strokes are limited to certain specific characteristics or behaviors. “I hate when you yell like that” is more limited in its negative impact than “I hate you!”

It is interesting to look at how different stroking patterns affect how people feel in relationships. Following are two examples of relationships with very different stroking patterns. The first is an example of a relationship with negative and conditional stroking patterns; the second an example of a relationship in which positive and unconditional strokes abound.

Lisa and Ben had been married for about ten years. Ben had never been able to fully accept Lisa for who she is. Ben wanted a partner who could join him in his many athletic endeavors. The only time Lisa received positive strokes from Ben was when she joined him in jogging or mountain biking. But because he was a much better athlete than she, these activities were not much fun for her. Lisa enjoyed putting on elaborate dinner parties and playing the piano. But Ben discounted Lisa's strengths looking through his lens of athletics. He would comment on her accomplishments saying, “Yeah, but all you ever want to do is eat and sit around.” Lisa received positive conditional strokes from Ben only when she complied with his wishes. She longed for the unconditional positive strokes (“I love you, honey”) and the conditional positive strokes (“What a great cook you are!”), but those rarely came. She found it difficult as well to stroke Ben in positive ways. It is easy to understand why Lisa and Ben felt some relief, in addition to their anger and grief, when they decided to end their relationship.

Margaret and Claire had been together for more than 20 years. They had much in common having met in graduate school when they were both working on PhDs in sociology. Margaret and Claire loved everything about each other. They loved how smart the other was, they

appreciated each other's gentle loving ways, and they shared the same values. Where there were differences, they saw those as strengths that were complementary to each other. Margaret was extremely outgoing while Claire was quite shy. Instead of fighting about these differences, they saw them as "balancing things out" in their relationship. Margaret and Claire exchanged many positive strokes in their relationship, both the conditional ("She is so smart") and the unconditional kind ("I love her with all my heart"). They used straight transactions when they argued, fighting fairly and getting problems resolved.

### **Life Scripts and Early Decisions**

A life script is an unconscious life plan based on decisions made in early childhood about ourselves, others, and our lives. These decisions made sense when we were young and often helped us adapt in the world of our childhood. They do not always make sense when we are adults, but until we discover what our early decisions were, we often repeat the patterns that prove those early decisions to be true.

For example, I met Kathleen when she was 27, a bright, beautiful, creative young woman who was ruining her life with alcohol and debt. She had been a successful ballerina in her teenage years, and I wondered about her seeming lack of success now. "Life sucks" she told me through her tears. "People say I'm smart and pretty and have so much going for me, but I feel like a total failure." How did this come to be, I wondered? As we explored her past we discovered that the success she experienced as a young girl hardly felt like success at all. When she was the thinnest girl in the ballet company, her teacher wanted her to be thinner. When she could do a double pirouette, her teacher wanted her to do a triple. There were many examples of her not being "perfect enough" over a period of many years. Kathleen decided, "I'm never good enough. I'll never be successful enough. I give up." And when she quit dancing, she stuck to her decision of "I give up" and never reached for any more success in her life. It was years later that I met her, drinking and despairing of ever being able to feel good about herself and badly in debt. This is an example of how a life

script takes hold and how it can influence our lives until we are able to see our own early decisions clearly and understand how they made sense at the time they were made.

We all receive many messages from our parents and other caretakers as we are growing up. While parents are usually our main caretakers, many people are raised and tremendously influenced by grandparents, older siblings, hired nannies, and others. These messages come from all the ego states of our caregivers, and they come to us in many different forms. Messages are conveyed through touching and holding or hitting and neglect. They can be sent verbally, either gently with interest or gruffly with disgust. And we hear and interpret these messages and make decisions about ourselves and our lives based on what we experience.

As children, we try to make sense of our world (and our first world is really the world of our family), and we try to figure out how to best fit in with the people around us. We are all born with an innate need to be connected to other human beings. Without our ability to bond with our caretakers and their desire to bond with us as infants, we would not survive. We each have an inborn set of personality characteristics that make some of us more sensitive and some of us more bold. Some of us tend to be more fearful, meek, or shy, while others are braver and bounce back more quickly. These inborn variables have a lot to do with how we are able to respond to the people and events of our childhood.

The early decision (or sets of early decisions) is the most important part of our life script. We received certain messages (both directly and indirectly) from our parents and other caretakers about how we should be to obtain strokes from them. As we get older we receive even more messages from a wider circle of people who are important in our lives, including grandparents, siblings, and teachers. It is what we do with these messages that is so important. We make decisions about ourselves and our lives that allow us to adapt as best we can to the particular situation in which we find ourselves.

Children who are well loved and clearly wanted will be able to make positive script

decisions on which to base the rest of their lives. Those decisions might be, at the earliest stages, a sense that “I’m good” and “I’m lovable” and later, based on mother’s or father’s acknowledgment of a job well done, “I’m smart” or “I’m competent.” These are the kinds of early life decisions that are the building blocks of a healthy and satisfying life script.

Other children receive negative or mixed messages and may decide that there is something wrong with them. Although these decisions may make sense to the child at the time, they will not serve him or her well in the future.

For example, if a father who is angry at his young son over some small mishap yells, “I can’t believe you could be that stupid!” that child might decide “I’m dumb” or “I’ll never do anything right.” And this decision can be the basis for an unhappy (or limiting) life script. Usually the decisions that we make are based not on a single message or event, but on the continual repetition of that message during our growing up years. The repeated messages support our belief in the early decision we have made.

What makes some people able to withstand negative script messages and turn out pretty much OK while other people are so drastically affected by similar messages? There are two things that affect how we react to our childhood situations. One is the constitution and personality with which we are born. A sunny, resilient, outgoing child will be able to withstand negative parenting better than a depressed or withdrawn child. The other is a matter of how much support a child has from others. The child who is yelled at by father will be better able to withstand that assault if mother is there to mitigate the effect of those harsh words (“Don’t you listen to him, you are a really smart boy!”)

As children we are amazingly resilient and seek out the healthy parenting we need. The little boy just described, for instance, might show his grandfather a homework paper and bask in grandfather’s praise, or he might soak up his teacher’s admiration when he raises his hand in class. He thus finds ways to gain experiences that balance the negative messages from his father and allow him to grow up

feeling good about himself when all is said and done.

### **Existential Positions**

Based on the messages received and the decisions made, a young child develops a basic life position. We call these “existential positions” because they influence how we view our own and others existence. There are four basic life positions. These are:

I’m OK, You’re OK

I’m OK, You’re Not OK

I’m Not OK, You’re OK

I’m Not OK, You’re Not OK

Most babies are born in the position of feeling OK about themselves and OK about others. If things go well they will be able to maintain that position throughout their life. This helps form the basis for a healthy life script.

If a child is treated badly or abused, this may result in his or her feeling helpless, powerless, and angry, and he or she may move into a position of believing “I’m OK, You’re Not OK.” Such an individual may build a life on this angry position and continually prove to himself or herself that others are not OK. This position involves a lack of trust in others and makes it difficult for the person to form and maintain intimate friendships or relationships.

If a child is not well cared for and receives script messages that decrease his or her sense of self-worth, that child might move into the position of feeling like he or she is not OK while others are OK. This position also leaves the person with difficulty feeling good about himself or herself both in the work arena and in forming trusting and lasting relationships.

When things really go wrong during childhood, a person might end up in the existential position of “I’m Not OK, You’re Not OK.” This is the life position of despair. The person in this position has great difficulty seeing the good in anyone and has trouble having any hope for the future.

However, even people in this position can change. They can grow to understand the life experiences that led them to have this view and can learn ways to change those early decisions that support these negatives beliefs. Since we are almost all born in the position of “I’m OK,

You're OK," we can get back to that belief even if our life experiences have led us to feel differently. It is worth searching to understand how you have been influenced by the events in your own life so that you can come back to a place of knowing that both you and other people are OK.

### **Transactional Analysis in Your Life**

Understanding transactional analysis can help you understand yourself better. It can also help you see more clearly how you interact with others. One of the things that sets transactional analysis therapy apart from some other therapies is the belief that we are each responsible for our own future, regardless of what happened to us in the past.

If you see things in yourself that you do not like or that do not serve you well, transactional analysis provides some tools to help you change. You can begin to change by deciding, for example, what kind of Parent ego state you would like to have and then practice using and developing that part of yourself. You can decide what ego state you would like to use more of and which one you might want to use less of. Would you like to use your Adult ego state more often? Or perhaps you use your Adult almost all the time and would like to practice using your playful Child ego state. You can practice giving certain kinds of strokes and asking for the kind of strokes you want to receive. By paying attention to different kinds of transactions, you can exert some control in conversations to make sure that communication proceeds

in an honest, uncomplicated, straightforward way.

Many people use transactional analysis in therapy because they want help in changing patterns in their lives that feel bad or are not productive. These are usually script patterns based on early decisions made during childhood. A therapist who uses transactional analysis can help you discover elements of your life script and can help you change your patterns. Those early decisions that you made when you were young made a lot of sense at the time, but they may not really make sense at all anymore. You can change them now and make choices that allow you to live the life you want to live. That is what transactional analysis is all about.

This article is a brief overview designed to give beginning readers a basic understanding of the building blocks of transactional analysis.

Those who are interested in knowing more, and understanding this theory in greater depth, are encouraged to read some of the books described in the annotated bibliography at the end of this journal.

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