

# The Core Concepts of Transactional Analysis

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*This document is the outcome of a special task force formed in 1999 to examine and define the core concepts of transactional analysis. In the words of task force chair, Claude Steiner, the goal was "to gather, in a crisp, brief, yet sophisticated statement, an understanding about what transactional analysis is, as it exists in the hearts and minds of the ITAA membership today." The intent was to make transactional analysis understandable to professionals, students, and lay people unfamiliar with yet interested in learning about transactional analysis. The resulting work was approved by the ITAA Board of Trustees in 2000, and eventually translated from English into Bulgarian, Chinese, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish.*

## TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS IS:

1. an easily understandable yet sophisticated psychological theory about people's thinking, feelings and behavior and,
2. a contemporary and effective system of psychotherapy, education, organizational and socio-cultural analysis and social psychiatry.

**EGO STATES AND TRANSACTIONS** – People's interactions are made up of **transactions**. Any one transactions has two parts: the **stimulus** and the **response**. Individual transactions are usually part of a larger set. Some of these transactional sets or sequences can be direct, productive and healthy or they can be devious, wasteful and unhealthy.

When people interact they do so in one of three different **ego states**. An ego state is a specific way of thinking feeling and behaving and each ego state has its origin in specific regions of the brain. People can behave from their **Parent ego state**, or from their **Child ego state** or from their **Adult ego state**. At any one time our actions come from one of these three ego states.

**THE CHILD** – When we are in the Child ego state we act like the child we once were. We aren't just putting on an act; we think, feel, see, hear and react as a three or five or eight year old child. The ego states are fully experienced states of being, not just roles. When the Child is hateful or loving, impulsive, spontaneous or playful it is called the **Natural Child**. When it is thoughtful, creative or imaginative it is called the **Little Professor**. When it is fearful, guilty or ashamed it is called the **Adapted Child**. The Child has all the feelings; fear, love, anger, joy, sadness, shame and so on. The Child is often blamed for being the source of people's troubles because it is self-centered, emotional, powerful and resists the suppression that comes with growing up.

In transactional analysis (TA) the Child is seen as the source of creativity, recreation and procreation; the only source of renewal in life. The Child can be observed in children for extended periods of time, but also in grownups in situations where people have permission to let the Child out, like at sport events or parties. The Child will appear for short periods of time in other situations, such as board meetings, classrooms or serious discussions where it may not be desired at all. In its most undesirable form it completely dominates a person's life, as in the cases of persons who are severely emotionally disturbed whose confused, depressed, crazy or addicted Child will drive them to virtual self-destruction with out-of-control behavior. The Child may also appear for long periods of time in the form of depression or grief, as in the case of people who have incurred a great loss.

**THE PARENT** – The Parent is like a tape recorder. It is a collection of pre-recorded, pre-judged, prejudiced codes for living. When a person is in the Parent ego state she thinks, feels and

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behaves like one of her parents or someone who took their place. The Parent decides, without reasoning, how to react to situations, what is good or bad, and how people should live. The Parent judges for or against and can be controlling or supportive. When the Parent is critical it is called the **Critical Parent**. When it is supportive it is called the **Nurturing Parent**.

One ego state can dominate a person to the **exclusion** of the other two. An example of this is the excluding Nurturing or Critical Parent, which happens when a person is unable to use their Child or Adult. This person is at a great disadvantage because in order to be a well-functioning human being, the ego states must be available when needed.

With an excluding Parent as the only functioning ego state a person has to live without the benefit of his Child or Adult and is therefore cut off from two thirds of his human potential.

The Parent uses old "tapes" to solve problems, and is therefore usually twenty five years behind the times (though it may be 250 or as much as 2,500 years behind the times.) and is useful when there is no information available to the Adult, or no time to use the Adult to think. The Child, on the other hand, will create novel solutions based on intuition but these solutions may not be as reliable as the fact-based Adult decisions.

**THE ADULT** – When in the Adult ego state the person functions as a human computer. It operates on data it collects and stores or uses to make decisions according to a logic-based program.

When in the Adult ego state the person uses logical thinking to solve problems making sure that Child or Parent emotions do not contaminate the process. People may conclude from this that emotions are not good. But it only means that in order to be rational and logical we need to be able to separate ourselves from our emotions. It doesn't mean that to be rational and logical is the best way to be at all times. In fact, just as an excluding Parent makes for an incomplete human being, so does an excluding Adult have the same deadening effect on people. People will also object: "I am an adult and I have emotions!" and they are right. Being a mature human being or grownup is not the same as being in the Adult ego state. Little children can be in their Adult and well adjusted grown-ups use their Parent and Child all the time.

The Adult computes all the facts fed into it. If the facts are up-to-date, then the Adult's answers will be timely and more effective than the Parent's solution. If the facts are incorrect, the Adult computer will produce incorrect answers. A very important function of the Adult is to predict outcomes and to provide a fact-based critique of the effectiveness of people's behavior in the pursuit of their chosen goals. This fact-based, critical function is different from the value-based function of the Critical Parent.

Sometimes the Adult uses information which has its source in the Child or in the Parent and which may be incorrect. This is known as **contamination**. When a contamination comes from the Parent it is called a prejudice. For instance when someone assumes that women prefer to follow a man's lead instead of making their own decisions this is data which comes to the Adult from the Parent, and is a contamination because it is accepted as a fact without checking it against reality.

The same unchecked acceptance of information can occur with information fed by the Child in which case it is called delusion. A delusion is usually based on a Child fear or hope that is accepted as reality by the Adult. For instance when a person is convinced that he is being poisoned by the government this is probably based on his Child's fears which the Adult accepts, rather than on fact. An extremely important process in transactional analysis is decontamination of the Adult.

**VOICES IN THE HEAD** – As you will recall, the Parent ego state is like a tape recorder full of pre-judged, prejudiced, pre-programmed statements. These "taped" statements can get activated while we are in our Adult or Child and then we can actually hear them as **"voices in our heads."** The Parental tapes can feel good or bad depending on which Parent makes them. In other personality theories, the harmful Critical Parent voices are known as the harsh super-ego,

negative self-talk, cognitive traps, low self-esteem, punitive protector or catastrophic expectations.

The Critical Parent can make put-down statements like: "You're bad, stupid, ugly, crazy and sick; in short you're doomed, not OK." The Nurturing Parent loves the Child unconditionally and says things like: "I love you," "You're a winner," "You're smart," "You're a princess" or "You're beautiful."

The Critical Parent sometimes controls the Child by preventing it from feeling good about itself. If the Child wants to be loved the Critical Parent says, "You don't deserve it." If the Child wants to give love the Critical Parent may say, "It isn't wanted." If the Child is angry at an unrewarding job, the Critical Parent may say, "This is the best you can do because you are lazy." If the Child comes up with a new idea that goes against old points of view, the Critical Parent may respond: "You must be crazy to think like that." The Critical Parent can make people feel not OK and force them to do things they don't want to do. To counteract this kind of a Critical Parent people can learn to develop their Nurturing Parent, Adult or Natural Child.

By means of an **egogram** we can show the relative strength of a person's ego states at any one time. This is very useful in diagramming the way people change over time, especially how they reduce their Critical Parent and increase their Nurturing Parent Adult or Child.

**TRANSACTIONS: COMPLEMENTARY, CROSSED, AND COVERT** – Transactions occur when any person relates to any other person. Each transaction is made up a stimulus and a response and transactions can proceed from the Parent, Adult or Child of one person to the Parent, Adult or Child of another person.

**Complimentary and Crossed Transactions.** A complimentary transaction involves one ego state in each person. In a crossed transaction the transactional response is addressed to an ego state different from the one which started the stimulus.

Communication can continue between two people as long as transactions are complimentary: Crossed transactions are important because they disrupt communication. This is useful to know because it helps transactional analysts understand how and why communication is disrupted. The rule is: "whenever a disruption of communication occurs, a crossed transaction caused it." One very important kind of crossed transaction is the **discount** transaction. Here a person, in his response, completely disregards the contents of a transactional stimulus. Discounts are not always obvious but are always disruptive to the person receiving them and if repeated can severely disturb the recipient.

**Covert Transactions.** Covert transactions occur when people say one thing and mean another. Covert transactions are the basis of games and are especially interesting because they are deceptive. They have a **social (overt)** and a **psychological (covert)** level.

It is important to know the difference between the social and covert levels because in order to understand and predict what people are going to do, the covert level will give provide more information than the overt level.

One important reason we say one thing and mean another is that we are generally ashamed of our Child's or Parent's desires and feelings. Nevertheless, we act on these desires and express those feelings while we pretend to be doing otherwise. For instance, we may use smiling sarcasm instead of a direct expression of our anger, or when scared we may counter-attack instead of admitting our fears.

When we want attention or love we often feign indifference, and we have trouble giving or accepting them. In fact, because our lives are so immersed in half-truth and deception it can happen that we no longer know what it is our Child really wants. We also don't expect people to be completely honest so that we never really know whether we can trust what they say. Transactional analysts encourage people to be honest with one another, and with themselves, about their wants and feelings, rather than "crooked" and covert. In this manner people can find out what they want, how to ask for it and, if possible, how to get it.

**STROKES** – **Stroking** is the recognition that one person gives to another. **Strokes** are essential to a person's life. Without them, Berne said, the "spinal cord will shrivel up." It has been shown that a very young child needs actual physical strokes in order to remain alive. Adults can get by on fewer physical strokes as they learn to exchange verbal strokes; positive strokes like praise or expressions of appreciation, or negative strokes like negative judgements or put downs. Therefore, the exchange of strokes is one of the most important thing that people do in their daily lives.

**GAMES** – The essential aspect of games is that they are crooked or covert exchanges of strokes. A game is a recurring series of covert transactions with a beginning, middle and end, and a **payoff**. The payoff is a hidden advantage which motivates the players to participate.

Transactional Analysis became a nation-wide fad in the 1960's due to the best selling success of Eric Berne's book, *Games People Play*. In this book he assigned engaging names ("Now I've got you," "Kick me," "I only trying to help.") for different games. For instance when Jane plays "Why Don' You, Yes But" she asks advice from another but rejects every suggestion so that everyone ends up exasperated. It is the type of conversation, which occurs over and over again, especially in therapy groups. It is devious and covert: on the social level, it appears to be a conversation between a person in the Adult ego state asking a question from one or more people who are also in their Adult ego states. What makes it a game is that none of the suggestions are really accepted. The reason for that is that, at the psychological and much more meaningful level, what is really going on is that Jane may need advice but needs strokes even more. Because these strokes are being given in a roundabout way they are not as satisfying as direct strokes would be. This is why the game ends on a note of depressed frustration.

**PAYOFFS** – There are a number of payoffs of this game; every game pays off at three different levels: 1. The **biological pay-off** of a game is strokes. Even though games end badly, all the players get a considerable number of strokes-both positive and negative-out of playing them. 2. The **social pay-off** of a game is **time-structuring**. People are able to filled time which otherwise might have been dull and depressing with an exciting activity. 3. The **existential pay-off** of a game is the way in which the game confirms the existential position of each player.

**THE EXISTENTIAL POSITION** – In the process of developing an identity people define for themselves, early in life, what the meaning of their life or existence is. Some people decide they are OK and are going to have a good life; but many others decide they are not OK and will fail in some way. That expectation based on a **decision** of how life will be is their existential position. People can feel OK or not OK about themselves and others so that there are four main existential positions: "**I'm OK, you're OK**," "I'm OK you're not OK," "I'm not OK you're OK" and finally, "I'm not OK you're not OK."

For instance in the game of "Why Don't You; Yes But" Jane's existential position is that "nothing ever works out" so that every time the game is played it reinforces that position and justifies further depression.

Games are always played with responsibility and interest by everyone involved in them. In order to maintain her existential position Jane will find people who will play the game with her. All the players' parts in the game are equally important and they all derive a pay-off from it as well. When they participate in the game they too believe it will end in failure. They want strokes as well but are not surprised when Jane rejects all advice and everyone is depressed or angry as a consequence proving that you can't really help people or that people don't want to be helped and justifying their bad feelings as a consequence.

**THE STROKE ECONOMY** – One of the harmful aspects of the Critical Parent is that it has a set of rules that govern the giving and taking of strokes (Don't give, ask for, accept or give yourself strokes) The effect of these rules, called the **stroke economy**, is that people are prevented from freely stroking each other and taking care of their stroke needs. As a consequence, most human beings live in a state of stroke hunger in which they survive on a

deficient diet of strokes -- in a manner similar to persons who are starved for food -- and spend a great deal of time and effort in trying to satisfy their hunger. **Positive strokes**, sometimes called "**warm fuzzies**," such as holding hands or saying, "I love you," give the person receiving them a feeling of being OK. There are also **negative strokes**, which are painful forms of recognition such as sarcasm, putdowns, a slap, an insult or saying "I hate you." Negative strokes make the person receiving them feel not OK. Still, even though unpleasant, negative strokes are a form of recognition and prevent "the spinal cord from shriveling up." For this reason, people prefer a situation of negative strokes to a situation without strokes at all. This explains why some people seem to intentionally hurt themselves in their relationships with others. It is not because "they enjoy hurting themselves" but because they can't get positive recognition, and choose painful negative strokes to having no strokes.

People can learn to exchange strokes freely, open the hearts and give and ask for strokes without shame or embarrassment. Different strokes appeal to different people and everyone has their special, secret wishes. There are many kinds of positive strokes - there are physical strokes and verbal strokes. Physical strokes can be hugs, kisses, holding, caresses, strong or light, sexy, sensual or just friendly, nurturing or slightly teasing and so on. Verbal strokes can be about a people's looks - their face, body, posture or movements or about a person's personality - their intelligence, loving nature sensitivity or courage. In any case, people need and deserve strokes and if they ask for them they will usually find someone who has just the strokes they want and is willing to give them.

**RITUALS, PASTIMES, GAMES, INTIMACY, WORK** – There are five ways people can structure their time to get strokes: 1. A **ritual** is a pre-set exchange of recognition strokes. 2. A **pastime** is a pre-set conversation around a certain subject. Pastimes are most evident at cocktail parties and family get-togethers. Some common pastimes are: Weather (Hot enough for you?) PTA (pot luck or catered?), Sports (How 'bout them Yankees?) Drugs (Should Marijuana Be Legalized?), or Who's Divorcing Who? (Musical Beds). 3. **Games** are repetitive, devious series of transactions intended to get strokes. Unfortunately, the strokes obtained in games are mostly negative. A game is a failed method of getting wanted strokes. 4. **Intimacy** is a direct and powerful exchange of strokes, which people crave but seldom attain because the Child is frightened away from it by hurtful experiences. Intimacy is not the same as sex, although it often occurs in sex. Sex, however, can also be a ritual, a pastime, a game, or work. 5. **Work** is an activity, which has a product as its result. Good work results in the exchange of strokes as a side effect.

Intimacy and work are the most satisfying ways of obtaining strokes. Unfortunately, lasting intimacy is difficult to achieve because people are often emotionally illiterate and work is often unsatisfying when people work in isolation and don't get praise for their accomplishments. Therefore, people must resort to rituals, games, and pastimes, which are safer, though far less satisfying ways of obtaining strokes. For example, a marriage can be an endless and boring series of rituals, pastimes and games. Frequently this is because both partners live on the basis of stroke-depriving life scripts, which prevent men from being emotional and intimate and women from being able to use their Adult to ask for and get the love they want.

**DEGREES** – Games can be played in a range of **degrees**. For instance, the above example of the game YDYB is the softest (first degree) version of the game because it is relatively harmless. The hard (third degree) version of this game might be played by an alcoholic who "yes, buts" every suggestion of the Rescuer to his dying moment. Third degree games involve tissue damage.

**ROLES** – Different people play different **roles** in the games they play. When a person is are willing to play one of the roles of a game he will often find himself playing the other roles in the game. There are a variety of roles but the three basic game roles are **Persecutor, Rescuer, and Victim**. Whole families marriages, work places, schools and friendships are often based on these roles. The three roles can be arranged in a triangle to illustrate what happens:

THE DRAMA TRIANGLE – The **drama triangle** can be illustrated with the Addiction Game. In the Addiction Game, the addict playing the role of the Victim of addiction, humiliation, prejudice, medical neglect and even police brutality seeks and finds a Rescuer. The Rescuer plays the role by trying to generously and selflessly help the addict without making sure that the addict is invested in the process of giving up drug abuse. After a certain amount of frustrating failure the Rescuer gets angry and **switches** into the Persecuting role by accusing, insulting, neglecting or punishing the addict. At this point the addict switches from Victim to Persecutor by counterattacking, insulting, becoming violent and creating midnight emergencies. The erstwhile Rescuer is now the Victim in the game. This process of switching goes on endlessly around the Drama Triangle Merry-go-Round.

To avoid the drama triangle in psychotherapy, transactional analysts insist on establishing a **contract** in which the person specifically states what he/she wants to be cured of. This protects both client and therapist: the therapist knows exactly what the person wants, and the person knows what the therapist is going to work on and when therapy is to be completed. In any case, the best way to avoid the Drama Triangle is to avoid the roles of Rescuer, Persecutor or Victim by staying in the Adult ego state.

SCRIPTS – Transactional analysts believe that most people are basically OK and in difficulty only because their parents (or other grownups and influential young people) have exposed them to powerful injunctions and attributions with long-term harmful effects.

People, early in their lives come to the conclusion that their lives will unfold in a predictable way; short, long, healthy, unhealthy, happy, unhappy depressed or angry, successful or failed, active or passive. When the conclusion is that life will be bad or self damaging this is seen as a **life script**.

The **script matrix** is a diagram used to clarify people's scripts. In it we see two parents and their offspring and we can diagram the transactional messages--**injunctions and attributions**--which caused the young person to abandon their original OK position and replace it with a self-damaging not OK position.

When life is guided by a script there are always periods in which the person appears to be evading his or her unhappy fate. This seemingly normal period of the script, is called the **counterscript**. The counterscript is active when the person's unhappy life plan gives way to a happier period. This is, however, only temporary and invariably collapses, giving way to the original scripting. For an alcoholic, this may be a period of sobriety; for a depressed person with a suicide script it may be a brief period of happiness, which inevitably ends when the script's injunctions take over.

In the Script Matrix of Joseph, a drug addict we see that the script injunction "Don't think, drink instead." goes to Joseph's Child from his father's Child. This powerful message influences Joseph's life dramatically, when he follows his father's injunction with drugs instead of alcohol causing him repeated drug abuse episodes through his young life and adulthood. The counterscript message "You should not drink to excess," motivates him to make repeated but ineffectual efforts to cut down on drug abuse and it goes to Joseph's Parent from his mother and father's Parent.

The Script message: "don't think, drink instead" delivered from Child-to-Child-is more influential than the Parent-to-Parent counterscript message to abuse moderately: that is why the script messages will usually prevail unless the person changes his or her script. When scripts are not changed they are passed down the generations, like "**hot potatoes**," from grownups to children in an uninterrupted chain of maladaptive, toxic behavior patterns.

DECISIONS – In a healthy home environment parents will give unconditional protection to their children regardless of what they may do. When parents make their protection conditional on children's submission to their injunctions and attributions, the children are likely to develop a script. Script decisions are often consciously made in order to go along with parental injunctions, even though they go against the child's best self-interests. At this point the young person trades

autonomy for parental protection to avoid punishment and criticism. The decision involved is a switch from an "I'm OK" position to an "I'm not OK" position. It also often involves a decision about whether other people are OK. When people make such decisions, they may need the help of a therapist to discard the script and begin to pursue an autonomous life course or as Berne put it: "Close down the show and put a new one on the road".

As individuals are helped to go back to the early experiences which caused them to make decisions that were necessary for their physical or psychological survival then, but are getting in their way in the present, they can make **redecisions** to behave differently in order to have a more fulfilling life in the present.

It is possible to observe a person's script in brief sequences of behavior called **miniscripts**, which constantly mimic and reinforce the script. The fact is that everything that goes on in people's mental and emotional life is reflected in their behavior. That is how by studying people's transactions, transactional analysts are able to understand the ways and reasons of people's behavior and help them stop playing games, change their scripts and get the most out of life.

**TRAGIC AND BANAL SCRIPTS** – Some scripts are **tragic** and some scripts are **banal**. Tragic scripts are highly dramatic such as drug addiction, suicide or "mental illness." Banal, or garden-variety scripts are less dramatic but more common. They are the melodramas of everyday life. They usually affect large sub-groups of people such as men, women, racial groups or teenagers. People in these sub-groups are scripted to live their lives in certain set ways: in the past women were supposed to be emotional loving home-makers, and have no permission to be logical, strong or independent; men to be logical, strong, bread-winners, with no permission to be childlike, scared, needy nurturing or openly loving. A banal script's life course may be: going from bad to worse, never having fun, always being in debt or taking care of others and neglecting oneself.

Members of certain nationalities or races are supposed to be smart or stupid or honest or devious or good athletes or reckless or cold and so on. Some cultures, script their children to be competitive so that they have trouble cooperating and living with each other. Other cultures emphasize cooperation and cause people who are strong individuals to feel they are no OK. These **cultural scripts** can affect whole populations in a harmful way.

**RACKETS** – One aspect of scripts is the existential payoff of games is the bad feelings which are accumulated and can eventually blow up and lead to an emotional disaster. Each game's existential payoff accumulates to eventually cause a predicted script outcome. Some people collect angry feelings that they will eventually justify a divorce. Others accumulate depressive feelings toward a suicide. The fact that they are creating situations, which produce the negative feelings of their script choice is called their **emotional racket**.

**PERMISSION, PROTECTION, AND POTENCY** – **Permission** is a very important part of a transactional analysis. It's a situation in which the educator or therapist says, "You can do what your parents or other people told you was wrong" or "You don't have to keep doing what you decided to do as a child." For example, if a person who is now very shy was told "Don't ask for anything," one permission would be to ask for what is wanted or needed. "Ask for strokes, you deserve them." When a person takes a permission and goes against parental and social demands and wishes, their Child is apt to get very frightened. That is why **protection** is a very important part of change. Protection is given or offered by the teacher or therapist, preferably with a group's support, to a person who is ready to change his or her script. The therapist and the group offer protection to the person when they say, "Don't worry, everything's going to be all right. We'll back you up and take care of you when you're scared." Permission and protection increase the **therapeutic potency** of a transactional analyst by introducing the Nurturing Parent into the situation. Use of the therapist's Parent and Child (as when having fun during therapy) makes the transactional analyst more effective than the professional who uses only one-third of his personality and relates to clients only with his or her Adult.

CONTRACTS – TA therapists work contractually, that is the make agreements about what specific outcome the client desires. Typical contracts are "getting over depression" or "getting rid of my headaches," or "stop abusing alcohol," or "earning a decent living," or "getting good grades." While a lot can go on in psychotherapy, the long-term therapeutic contract is "always on top" as the guiding goal of a transactional analyst. In addition, transactional analysts will make short-term contracts for homework, or for sobriety or for "no suicide" to help clients achieve their overall contractual goal.

Since people are born OK it stands to reason that with competent help they can return to their original OK position. The capacity to be OK is waiting in every person ready to be released from the prohibitions of the script. Transactional analysts know that by making clear, goal oriented therapeutic contracts, effectively analyzing people's transactions and powerfully giving people permission to change and protecting them from their fears, it is possible for everyone to have a chance to become happy, loving and productive.