

I'm OK--You're OK by Thomas A. Harris, M.D., Harper, ISBN 978-0-06-072427-6

This book is a companion to the transactional analysis book Games People Play. It is written by a psychiatrist who used the concepts in group and individual therapy sessions for many years. The author of GPP wrote this about him:

I am grateful to Dr. Harris for doing a job that needed doing. In this book he has clarified the principles of Transactional Analysis with cogent, easily understood examples and has related them to broader considerations, including ethics, in a thoughtful and skillful way. (IOYO, inside cover)

My goal in reviewing it is to connect the information it gives with the other books I have read (Games Students Play, Games People Play, Between Parent and Child) – to fill out more details about the three ego states, to understand how to look at game playing, and to make stronger connections to the strategies in BPC. I will skip the parts I think don't apply to this goal.

In GPP we were introduced to the concepts of three ego states: Parent, Adult, and Child. Everyone has these states inside them and it was pointed out that there are physical manifestations that give us clues as to which ego state is in control of a person at the time. I wanted to know more about the definitions of the states and those physical clues.

...Berne observed that as you watched and listened to people you can see them change before your eyes. It is a total kind of change. There are simultaneous changes in facial expression, vocabulary, gestures, posture, and body functions, which may cause the face to flush, the heart to pound, or the breathing to become rapid.

We can observe these changes in everyone: the little boy who bursts into tears when he can't make a toy work, the teenage girl whose woeful face floods with excitement when the phone finally rings, the man who grows pale and trembles when he gets the news of a business failure, the father whose face "turns to stone" when his son disagrees with him. The individual who changes in these ways is still the same person in terms of bone structure, skin, and clothes. So what changes inside him? He changes *from* what *to* what?

...

Continual observation has supported the assumption that these three states exist in all people. It is as if in each person there is the same little person he was when he was three years old. There are also within him his own parents. These are recordings in the brain of actual experiences of internal and external events, the most significant of which happened in the first five years of life. There is a third state, different from these two. The first two are called Parent and Child, and the third, Adult.

These states of being are not roles but psychological realities. ... The state is produced by the playback of recorded data of events in the past, involving real people, real times, real places, real decisions, and real feelings.

(IOYO, pgs 18-20)

The Parent is defined by the experiences the child (roughly from birth to age five) has with his parents or parent substitutes. "The mother and father become internalized in the Parent, as recordings of what the child observed them say and do." (IOYO, pg 21) "It is a permanent recording. A person cannot erase it. It is available for replay throughout life." (IOYO, pg 23)

These "recordings" cover facial expressions, words, attitudes, "how-to" statements, restrictions, and more. It is a "comprehensive, vast store of data. ... These rules are the origins of compulsions and quirks and eccentricities that appear in later behavior." (IOYO, pg 26)

The Child is defined by the simultaneous recording of "internal events, the responses of the little person to what he sees and hears." (IOYO, pg 27) Most of these recordings are about feelings, since at a young age, the child does not have the words to put to the experiences.

An interesting aspect of the Child recordings is that the "predominant by-product of the frustrating, civilizing process is negative feelings." (IOYO, pg 28) The book points out that every child feels this, and it is not dependent on how his parents treated him.

These two "recordings" can come into play in anyone, at any age, to influence his behavior and reactions to events in his life. But we are not haplessly influenced by them because of the third ego state, the Adult. When a child can start controlling his body, manipulating objects, experimenting with his surroundings, the Adult ego state begins to form.

Adult data accumulates as a result of the child's ability to find out for himself what is different about life from the "taught concept" of life in his Parent and the "felt concept" of life in his Child. The Adult develops a "thought concept" of life based on data gathering and data processing. (IOYO, pg 31)

The Adult ego state serves as a computer, a data processor and probability estimator, and it updates the information from the Parent and Child recordings. It also keeps emotional expressions appropriate for the social situation. It can be impaired, which could allow the Parent or Child state to take over. The book spends considerable time discussing the ways the balance of Parent-Adult-Child could be changed and the possible personality or behavioral traits that can occur.

The Adult gives us the opportunity and freedom to change our behavior. It can, emotionlessly, evaluate the reactions of the Parent and Child and decide if those reactions are truly appropriate or if they need updating. It uses evidence and reality to make those evaluations and allows us to make decisions without necessarily having all the facts.

If the Adult is impaired, then the Parent or Child dominates, and this is when game playing occurs. “This is one of the essential characteristics of games. They always turn out painfully, but it is a pain that the player has learned to handle.” (IOYO, pg 63)

We can use physical and verbal clues to help us determine which ego state is in charge.

Parent

Furrowed brow, pursed lips, the pointing index finger, head-wagging, the “horrified look,” foot-tapping, hands on hips, arms folded across chest, wringing hands, tongue-clucking, sighing, patting another on the head. These are typical Parent gestures. However, there may be other Parent gestures peculiar to one’s own Parent. ... Also, there are cultural differences.

...

I am going to put a stop to this *once and for all*; I can’t for the life of me ...; Now always remember...; (“always” and “never” are *almost always* Parent words, which reveal the limitations of an archaic system closed to new data); How many times have I told you? If I were you...

Many evaluative words, whether critical or supportive, *may* identify the Parent inasmuch as they make a judgment about another, based not on Adult evaluation but on *automatic*, archaic responses. ... It is important to keep in mind that these words are *clues*, and are not conclusive. The Adult may decide after serious deliberation that, on the basis of an Adult ethical system, certain things *are* stupid, ridiculous, disgusting, and shocking. Two words, “should” and “ought” frequently are giveaways to the Parent state ... It is the automatic, archaic, *unthinking* use of these words which signal the activation of the Parent. The use of these words, together with body gestures and the context of the transaction, helps us identify the Parent.

Child

Since the Child’s earliest responses to the external world were non-verbal, the most readily apparent Child clues are seen in physical expressions. Any of the following signal the involvement of the Child in a transaction: tears; the quivering lip; pouting; temper tantrums; the high-pitched, whining voice; rolling eyes; shrugging shoulders; downcast eyes; teasing; delight; laughter; hand-raising for permission to speak; nail-biting; nose-thumbing; squirming; and giggling.

...

Many words, in addition to baby talk, identify the Child: I wish, I want, I dunno, I gonna, I don’t care, I guess, when I grow up, bigger, biggest, better, best.

...

Adult

...listening with the Adult is identified by continual movement—of the face, the eyes, the body—with an eyeblink every three to five seconds. Nonmovement signifies non-listening. The Adult face is straightforward...If the head is tilted, the person is listening with an angle in mind. The Adult also allows the curious, excited Child to show its face.

...

...the basic vocabulary of the Adult consists of why, what, where, when, who, and how. Other words are: how much, in what way, comparative, true, false, probably, possible, unknown, objective, I think, I see, it is my opinion, etc. These words all indicate Adult data processing.

(IOYO, pgs 69-71)

In the other books, the authors emphasize that we don't need to be in the Adult ego state all the time. It can be helpful, wise, and beneficial to "let out" the Parent or Child in certain occasions – they have something to contribute to a balanced life. But we do need to have the Adult in charge, at least most of the time. How can we achieve this?

The Adult develops later than the Parent and Child and seems to have a difficult time catching up throughout life. The Parent and Child occupy primary circuits, which tend to come on automatically in response to stimuli. The first way, therefore, is to build the strength of the Adult is to become sensitive to one's own Not OK feelings... Processing this data takes a moment. Counting to ten is a useful way to delay the automatic response in order that the Adult maintain control of the transaction....

...

It is helpful to program into the computer certain Adult questions ... Is it true? Does it apply? Is it appropriate? Where did I get that idea? What is the evidence?

...

Another way to strengthen the Adult is to take the time to make some big decisions about basic values, which will make a lot of smaller decisions unnecessary. These big decisions can always be re-examined, but the time it takes to make them does not have to be spent on every incident in which basic values apply. These big decisions form an ethical basis for the moment-to-moment questions of what to do.

(IOYO, pgs 97-99)

A piece of advice I found useful:

The Adult has a choice: to play, to not play, to modify the game into something less destructive, or to try to explain the insights that help persons give up games.

My Response to I'm OK--You're OK

I see that this book does clarify many details about Transactional Analysis for me. When I read the two Games books, I wondered how I would ever keep all the game descriptions straight, but now I see I don't have to. What I really need to do is determine what ego state a person is in and then adjust my response to be complementary to that. In this book's wording, I need to "hook" the Adult ego state of the person and I can try that with the strategies from BPC.

I also see the need for me to be very aware of my reactions and ego states when I am in a stressful or challenging situation. I can recall times when I felt irrationally stubborn about suggested changes – now I know how to identify what I am feeling and how to analyze it with my Adult.

The author points out, near the end of the book, that Transactional Analysis makes the person become responsible for his own behavior along with being empowered to change that behavior by understanding why he is behaving that way.