



Transactional Analysis (TA)

What is Transactional Analysis?

Transactional Analysis (TA) is a theory of personality and communication developed by Dr Eric Berne in the 1950s. It helps us understand why we think, feel, and behave the way we do, and how we can improve communication and relationships.

The Three Ego States

At the heart of TA is the idea that we all operate from three “ego states”:

Ego State	Description	Examples
Parent	Learned rules, beliefs, and behaviours from authority figures. Can be Nurturing (caring/supportive) or Critical (controlling/judgmental).	“You should always say thank you.” / “Don’t do that, it’s wrong.”
Adult	Logical, rational, here-and-now thinking. Processes information objectively and makes balanced decisions.	“Let’s look at the facts and decide.”
Child	Feelings, creativity, and learned responses from childhood. Can be Free Child (spontaneous/playful) or Adapted Child (obedient/rebellious).	“This is fun!” / “I don’t want to!”

From this table of ego states alone, it is clear why I always say that the best ego state for achieving clean communication is “Adult to Adult”.

In terms of TA, what are transactions?

A transaction is any exchange (verbal or nonverbal) between two people.

There are three main types:

1. Complementary Transactions

The response matches the expected ego state.

Example:

- Person A (Adult): “What time does the meeting start?”
- Person B (Adult): “3 PM.”

The result is smooth communication, and the conversation flows.



2. Crossed Transactions

The response originates from an unexpected ego state, which can result in conflict or confusion.

Example:

- Person A (Adult): “What time does the meeting start?”
- Person B (Child): “Why are you always bothering me?”

The result is often a communication breakdown, which usually leads to tension.

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Ulterior Transactions

Two levels of communication: what is said versus what is meant (hidden message).
Examples can include Sarcasm, flirting, and manipulation.

Life Positions

Berne described four basic “life positions” that shape how we see ourselves and others:

Position	Meaning	Impact
I’m OK – You’re OK	Healthy, balanced view of self and others.	Collaborative, respectful relationships.
I’m OK – You’re NOT OK	Feel superior, blame others.	It can lead to criticism and conflict.
I’m NOT OK – You’re OK	Low self-worth, defers to others.	It can lead to compliance and even a victim mindset.
I’m NOT OK – You’re NOT OK	Hopeless view of self and others.	Leads to withdrawal, despair.

Goal: Move towards an ‘I’m OK / You’re OK’ approach in interactions.

Practical Applications:

- **Self-Awareness:** Identify which ego state you’re in during conversations.
- **Conflict Resolution:** Shift to the Adult ego state to de-escalate.
- **Leadership:** Use a Nurturing Parent and Adult approach to motivate without being controlling.
- **Personal Growth:** Recognise life positions and work towards “I’m OK – You’re OK.”

Quick Tips

- **Pause and think:** “Which ego state am I in right now?”
- **Respond, don’t react:** Shift into Adult before replying.
- **Aim for complementary transactions:** They keep communication flowing.
- **Notice patterns:** Repeated crossed transactions may signal a deeper issue.

