

Adult Communication

Relating to Others, Adult to Adult: Keeping Your Composure Up and Your Defenses Down

Respect begets respect, right?

Have you ever felt powerless over your reaction to someone, got defensive, and behaved like a child for no other reason than you were somehow triggered by the other person's tone of voice or posture? (We all have.)

And were you aggravated with yourself because you let the other person get under your skin or behaved childishly? (Yep.)

And did you wonder if the problem was mostly your problem? (Me too.)

If you're like me, you had a hunch that if you hadn't gotten defensive, if you had let the evocative aspects of the question roll right past you, the conversation would have gone much better, simpler, quicker.

Ever heard of *Transactional Analysis*? Transactional Analysis is a framework for studying the interactions and verbal scenarios that play out between people. (One person sits in a room. Eventually, another person walks into that room. One of these two people will eventually speak to one another and thus begins the transaction of communication.) Eric Berne is the father of Transactional Analysis and famous for his book, "Games People Play," which I just finished reading.

What this is about is parent mode, adult mode, and child mode. Although Transactional Analysis is a heady, psychology-focused terminology, the concept of *Parent-Child-Adult* relating itself is an extremely simple, easy concept to get.

So, this isn't something you need therapy to put into action. This isn't something that you have to think much about or 'work on' before putting into action. You can put this technique into action immediately. Lucky you!

SCENARIO #1

You're at the coffee shop, over at the fixings counter where the milk, cream, soy milk, sugar, stirrers, etc. are. The whole thing is a mess, spilled milk on the counter and sticky, used straws, napkins, and open sugar packets scattered about. And the often-used milk container is empty. The lady next to you picks up the empty milk container, holds it up, and says to the guy behind the counter, "Hey, your counter is a total mess and there's no milk in here!" (This is a complex situation because the perceived levels of "authority" can get really interesting.)

So, here, the customer is speaking in Parent mode (scolding) to the guy behind the counter. In response, the worker has the option to respond in Parent, Child or Adult mode:

"Uh oh, oh no, [nervously] I'm really sorry, ma'am. I'm going to come around and clean that mess up right away!" (*Child mode*)

In Child mode he's not going to respond to the most important issue (the milk) but take a confused, scatter-shot and emotional path.

Child mode is likely to feel bad and be the least productive

"Here you go," handing her a gallon of milk from behind the counter, "You can fill it up!" (*Parent mode*)

This Parent mode reaction isn't entirely unproductive, but it's awfully sassy and sparks may fly (especially in a workplace setting)

Or, "Thanks for the heads up! I can take care of that milk now and the mess in a bit — would you mind handing me that container?" (*Adult mode*)

This productive, calm Adult reaction takes maturity and keeping one's wits about you.

This is the kind of response strangers are likely to comment on ("Wow, you sure handled that beeyotch well!")

If the woman had spoken to him from Adult mode, we can't necessarily assume that he, too, would have responded back in Adult mode. It's possible that, had the woman said, "Excuse me sir, I'm afraid the milk is empty and I'm wondering if you'd please refill it for me?" that he would have barked, "Can't you see I'm busy?" (Parent mode.) We can never assume that our respect will be met with respect and maturity!

SCENARIO #2

Let's say you're picking up your spouse (or girlfriend/boyfriend) from the airport, and you're LATE. Fun, right? You're sorry that you're late, and you don't have a good reason for it. Even if you were late because you were delivering a baby or there was an earthquake, your spouse still says, "How could you be late? Didn't you check the flight times?" Your spouse might not be angry, but rather, disappointed in that seemingly accusing, sad, sad way that's hard not to play into.

So, this is, again, an example of *Parent mode*, but emotionally, it's sprinkled with *Child mode* too. Your options:

"Please don't hate me, I'm such a dummy, I just can't get timing right. I always do this!" (*Child mode*)

This kind of response is really self-centered and turns the focus on you, you, you.

While this kind of response isn't really defensive and may not lead to a fight, it's problematic because it doesn't foster good communication at all

It's a form of not listening

"At least you're getting a ride — would you rather have paid a taxi?" (*Parent mode*)

This is super-defensive and very well could lead to an argument or a really, really quiet ride home

This kind of response doesn't recognize the emotional meaning behind the partner's comment and its deflective communication

"I really wish I had been on time, I'm sorry I wasn't. Believe me. I got mixed up on the time — totally my fault. But it's great to see you."

This works because it's responsible, recognizes the disappointment, it's honest, and it ends on a positive note — you realize that your spouse may be taking your lateness personally (the sprinkling of Child clues you in to this).

I hope two scenarios are enough for you to get an idea, and that you can imagine all the many, many others that take place in your life fairly regularly. Really, any communication is an opportunity to behave from Child, Parent or Adult mode.

Acting from Adult mode will set you free.

And, what's exciting about this tool is that it's not a single-purpose tool (like a lemon squeezer), it's a deluxe, multi-purpose tool (like a knife!) This tool tackles more than just one emotional-behavioral problem; it tackles a few at once. This is no time-waster!

Most of us who grew up with parents who were too child-like to raise us with healthy self-esteem, struggle with taking things personally, getting defensive, isolating, being dishonest with ourselves about our feelings, and just feeling bad and unworthy in general. With this tool—that is, starting to choose to act in Adult mode—we get opportunities to be honest about our feelings, we're forced to put our defenses aside, entertain the notion that we're not being criticized, we're challenged to de-personalize what others say (which prevents isolation)...and the list of benefits goes on and on! So I hope you'll see this as a new, deluxe multi-purpose tool that'll do a whole lot of good for you. (At the very least it'll make difficult conversations simpler and shorter.)

And in this, you're moving from a state of reaction to action. If you were to make just one change to free yourself from your emotional prison, it would be to become a person who acts! It would be to become a person who takes action, who's in control of your actions, accountable for your actions, and who stops going through life reacting to people, news, and events out of old, old habit. It's a big deal.

Talking and relating like an adult will feel more and more comfortable as you put this behavior into use; you'll begin to observe yourself, learn who you are, and feel more like that person in more and more of your interactions.

Good luck with it! (Let me know how it goes!)