

2.7 EQ – emotions of difficult conversations

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Something that can use up our energy, cause stress and affect our wellbeing is worrying about challenging, important or difficult conversations, or feeling that our conversations with some colleagues are not effective, or even counterproductive and we're not getting what we want from them.

In this presentation, we will look at why some conversations or relationships can feel stressful and use a well-known theory to help us make sense of this and plan more effective communication.

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Thinking about our conversations as a simple transaction, where information is submitted and received, can help us to understand why some conversations are more challenging than others and to start to make sense of where the stressful elements and communication barriers might be coming from.

This very simplified model depicts a transaction:

The character on the left has a message they wish to communicate to the character on the right.

At point 1, the message is internal – an idea of what, why, when and how they want to communicate

At point 2, the message is transmitted externally, either verbally, non verbally or through another medium like writing. The communication passes across space and time to the recipient.

At point 3, the recipient receives the message, interprets it, and at point 4 they create a meaning which results in thought, feeling or action.

Usually, then the transaction will reverse as the characters converse back and forth.

Although this is a very simple model, it is easy to see all the possible factors that could enable the message to either be corrupted or enhanced.

The person on the left's intention, communication method, style and tone will all be affected by current and past factors like their level of stress, their perceptions or beliefs about the situation or person, the skills they have in understanding the issue they are communicating about, the academic discipline from which they view the matter, their personality and personal values and so on (as well as the language in which they are communicating which might not be their own).

How the message is submitted and received is also fraught with barriers – physical noise in a crowded room. Or the timing: if it is sent or received too late, its impact can be diminished. Tone of voice, the delivery method – can all corrupt or enhance the message. The language used will affect success.

Finally, the perception, meaning and subsequent conversion to a thought, feeling or action from the listener will, in turn, be affected by their own set of beliefs, distractions, stresses and so on.

The more of these things that can corrupt the message, the more difficult the communication can be and then the more stressful it can feel.

Very simply, just stopping, noticing and understanding these factors for a given conversation or relationship can hugely reduce our levels of stress and anxiety, but it can also help us to better plan our communication and aim to have more successful transactions.

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The model we are going to use to help us to better understand and plan is called Transactional Analysis. It addresses several, although not all, of the factors listed on the previous slide.

It is a useful model for describing our thoughts, feelings and actions in our transactions with others.

It's based on the work of the Psychologist Eric Berne, which was made popular by his book 'The Games People Play'. We will only provide a very simplified version of his ideas here but do look in greater depth if you find them useful. You will find links to his work and wider reading in the resources section.

The theory is based on the idea that at any one time we are in one of three ego states.

The three ego states are parent, adult and child. Our style of communication and behaviours will be determined by the ego state we are in and will, in turn, elicit a particular reaction from those we are communicating with, and vice versa (how others converse with us will affect our emotional reactions).

To help to recognise the ego states, we will look at them in a little more detail....

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Starting with the parent.

The attitudes, behaviours, thoughts and feelings of the Parent ego state come from what we have been taught by parents or parental figures – anyone who provides authority or structure – carers, teachers and so on.

Berne states that the parent represents a massive collection of recordings in the brain of **external** events experienced or perceived in the very early years of life. Since the majority of the external events experienced by a child are actions of the parent, the ego state is appropriately called Parent.

The parent ego states involve communicating as a parental figure would have: saying what they would have said, feeling what they would have felt, behaving how they would have behaved.

The parental ego state is expressed either as a 'nurturing parent' – soothing, comforting and supporting – potentially even being smothering or patronising OR a controlling parent – providing structure and authority and potentially being very critical and reprimanding. When we are in either of the parent ego states, we use language that conveys that we know more or know better and that others need our help and advice. Typical sayings we might hear from someone in a parent ego state are: 'let me do that for you', 'let me take care of you', 'You should be doing it this way', 'You ought not to do that' OR, 'I'll have to do this as no one else will'.

When someone in a parental ego state converses with you, it could be reassuring, or it could cause frustration. It is likely to elicit an emotional response from your child ego state:

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According to Berne, the child represents the recordings in the brain of *internal* events associated with external events the child perceives. The Child ego state stores the *emotions* or *feelings* we experienced as a child. Like the Parent ego state, these recordings are gathered in the very early years of life.

There are three versions of the child ego state resulting in our attitudes, behaviours, thoughts and feelings being that of either an adapted child: compliant, polite and subordinate OR a rebellious child: defiant, frustrated or argumentative. The other way in which our child ego state is expressed is as natural or free child: creative, spontaneous, disregarding rules, sometimes seeming unfocused or unserious.

Typical sayings we might hear from someone in a child ego state are: 'don't tell me what to do', 'it's not fair', if feeling rebellious. The compliant child might say 'I'm so sorry, I'm always getting things wrong', or 'thank goodness you are able to help me, I couldn't do it without you'. The natural or free child might say 'let's ignore the rules' or 'let's try something new and more exciting'.

When someone in a child ego state converses with you, it is likely to elicit an emotional response from your parent ego state: to respond with support or authority.

The parent and child ego states are emotional ones – they are taught or learnt, and our reactions are triggered by emotions we have felt or learnt in our early years. Everyone's parent and Child ego states are different. For some, their Child ego state is sulky and withdrawn; for others, it might be defensive and angry.

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The final ego state is adult. This state is also learnt in early childhood as we start to gather data and evaluate a situation – the adult ego state can objectively validate or reject the parent or child perspectives. In other words, the adult likes a data-processing computer, which makes decisions after comparing the parent or child thoughts and feelings against observed and objective data. It will question the emotional responses – for example, this feels unfair, but what is the evidence for that? Or, it feels like I need to give help here, but is that true? – can others look after themselves?

When in the adult ego state, we are free of emotional triggers, we seek objective truth, and when expressing a belief or opinion, we state it as such, rather than claiming it to be true.

For example, instead of saying 'I'm sorry I always get things wrong' (a child ego state) they might say instead 'I'm sorry I got that wrong, I know I am not always wrong, but it sometimes feels like that'. Or, instead of telling someone they should do something in a particular way, they might say 'here is how I have done it successfully in the past, how would you do it?'

When in an adult ego state, we believe that others are equally equipped and that we only offer a perspective - we seek perspectives from others and look to find objective data for what is real rather than a perception.

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All three ego states have benefits and drawbacks. In an emergency, we may need someone to take charge as a controlling parent. On an away day, when we are creative, we welcome a natural child ego state. Conversely, excessive use of the emotion-free adult ego state can feel dull and boring to others.

We cycle in and out of the three ego states continually during a typical day: elated in a child ego state if the sun is out or we are meeting a good friend, transported into controlling parent if someone cuts across us in the traffic and we think they should be better drivers, frustrated as a rebellious child if we are told what to do by a colleague, or step into an adult ego state when looking for facts and logical solutions if a colleague comes to you with a problem.

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The reason for using this theory in the context of emotions and difficult conversations is that our understanding of ego state can help us to recognise why conversations might be unproductive, and also to understand why some conversations or relationships provoke an emotional reaction for us.

Sometimes known as the PAC model: if two people are communicating back and forth – they will be in one of the three states

Very simply, when we communicate between adult ego states, we will have the greatest chance of having productive and effective transactions. We are removing emotion and dealing with facts. We also believe the other person to be equal and resourceful and treating them as such. If we plan a difficult conversation and use adult ego state expressions and behaviours, which are free of beliefs or perspectives, we are most likely to elicit an adult ego-state from the respondent and be able to move forward respectfully.

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If a conversation begins from a parent ego state perspective, we run the risk of enticing back a child ego state response. If we tell someone to do something, we might get a rebellious child in return. If someone tells US to do something, we feel frustrated that we have not been consulted, and may be the rebellious child ourselves.

Likewise, if we start our transaction from a child ego state: for example a compliant child – seemingly helpless or needing support, we will hook in a parent reaction from the respondent – they will react by helping us or telling us what to do.

These crossed transactions are easy to slip in to and can go back and forth indefinitely. But these types of transactions are not very productive in the long term – they can lead to frustration, reliance, lack of learning or understanding. Relationships won't move forward.

The most important thing to do in these situations is to notice the ego states you are in, and simply be more conscious of the implications of them.

You can then practice pausing and trying to get back into an adult ego state by acknowledging that the conversation is not being productive, or that it is based on beliefs that may not be true. So, you could try re-focusing on facts, asking open questions to learn more about the situation, seeking truths and declaring beliefs to be just one perspective and not necessarily true.

If the person you are conversing with does not respond from an adult ego state you could suggest taking time out and coming back another time with some facts – this gives you both an opportunity to step out of an emotional state and get back into an adult ego state to continue the discussion.

In the presentation on planning difficult conversations, we will see that if you and your colleagues have time to plan your responses, this will most likely lead to an adult conversation and a more productive outcome.

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In this presentation, we have touched only on the basics of Transactional Analysis. There are many more complexities to the different types of transactions. And many aspects and useful insights to gain from understanding them. If you wish to delve deeper into the theory and how to use it, you will find some useful links in the resources section.

If not, at the very least, it is useful to be aware and understand where the frustration with some conversations may be coming from. This understanding can help to reduce the frustration.