

Clinical Considerations for Mental Health Professionals

Chapter Two – The Three Ego States

My intention for including clinical considerations is to reaffirm the positive psychology perspective of mental health, i.e., that human beings are created with the innate potential for happiness and wellbeing. Furthermore, nature has designed us to instinctively move in the direction of health and healing throughout the course of our lives. It is my hope that, as mental health professionals, you will find Enlighten Up Your Day to be a practical and inspiring resource. Every chapter was developed out of my personal work with clients in various settings. As a therapist I strive to empower the client to access their untapped capacity for resiliency and emotional regulation. It is my view that our role as mental health professionals is to teach skills and provide feedback that enables the client to help themselves. Much like climbing a mountain, taking ownership for our mental health is a process that requires training, patience, and courage. Nonetheless, the higher we climb, the better the view.

John Brian Ford, LMFT

I have found that providing the client with an understanding of the ego-as-an-operating-system, rather than the ego as being synonymous with the self, helps to destigmatize conditions associated with mental disequilibrium. Instead of being a “depressed” person, they can reframe their situation as being a person with a depressed ego-system. To this end, the pioneering work of Eric Burne and his students, Thomas Harris and Stephan Karpman, provides a good starting point for understanding the otherwise complex field of ego psychology. As a primer on the subject I often recommend to my clients that they read Harris’ classic book on transactional psychology, I’m Okay, You’re Okay. Once the client is made aware of how the three ego states function, a deeper understanding into the origins of their emotional responses can be achieved.

Regarding the development of the Parent Ego state, not enough can be said about the value of transactional analysis in shedding light on the client’s internalized rules or “should statements.” When these rules operate in the unconscious mind they inevitably generate feelings such as frustration, guilt, and shame. In the absence of a better understanding of the Parent Ego’s role as the depository of our Cardinal Values and our moral and ethical schemas, the client will often find themselves at the mercy of unrealistic and absolute moral formulations. They may also tend to impose their moral perspective on other people by force, argument, or passive-aggressive manipulations. Raising this aspect of the ego-function into awareness goes a long way towards resolving superego conflicts and reducing moral anxiety, i.e., guilt and shame.

I also make sure that the client understands the importance of the Child Ego state as the part of the ego-system that is most responsible for processing feelings. If the Child Ego is seen as being detrimental in some way to mental health the client may seek to suppress and shame this vital aspect of their being. It is because of the Child Ego that we can access feelings such as wonder, joy, love, and excitement.



Another point that I make sure to emphasize to the client is that there is only one ego-system subdivided into three distinct aspects. This is to say, each of the ego-states cannot act on its own like three separate personalities. All three ego-states work in concert and are organized through the Adult Ego function. It is, however, the person-as-a-whole who is in possession of an ego-system. Once this subtle but important distinction is achieved the client will gain in personal autonomy and freedom of choice.

Lastly, a client may take umbrage with the idea that many of our most important rules are subjective in nature. In such instances I point out the difference between societal rules or laws, relationship agreements, and our personal set of morals and ethics. Furthermore, caring about right and wrong is a sign of a healthy personality. It means that we want to do the right thing. It is our personal set of rules that we need most concern ourselves with lest we seek to forcefully impose them on the people around us. The clinical goal then is to encourage the client to take ownership for their unique moral perspective. Doing so helps to reduce frustration and irritation when the client's personal rules are violated.

