



Understanding TA Language “Stroke”

What is meant by the term “Stroke”?

Transactional Analysis employs the term 'strokes' to denote any form of social interaction where another's presence is recognized. Therefore, any transaction is also an exchange of strokes. While the general term 'stroking' might imply close, physical contact, in reality, and practice may present in several varied forms.

Eric Berne, the founder of The Transactional Analysis movement in Psychotherapy, maintained that, due to the very nature of our creation and early childhood, strokes were something required by every individual and something leading to feelings of deprivation if not received. An individual's need for strokes is highlighted in his book 'Games People Play', where he writes, 'If you are not stroked, your spinal cord will shrivel up', Berne adopted the word 'stroke' because it referred to the infants need to be physically touched; however, it is also a need present in the individual as a grown-up.

Berne also described certain 'hunger', universally experienced by all, and one of these is recognition hunger, the need to be recognized. Since physical stroking is not always an option for the grown-up, he learns to substitute certain other forms of recognition, such as a compliment or a wave of the hand, for the physical need to be stroked. Berne also acknowledged the individual's need for stimulation, both physical and mental, and referred to this as stimulation hunger. Therefore, a stroke is a transaction that provides the individual with either stimulation or recognition in the simplest of terms.

Different ‘Strokes’ for different folks.

The strokes that we receive can be divided into several categories: verbal, non-verbal, positive, negative, and conditional and unconditional. Verbal strokes can be anything from a quick 'Hello' between neighbors over the garden fence to a full-blown conversation between good friends while non-verbal strokes range from a nod of the head to a handshake or a hug. Generally, most transactions/exchanges of strokes comprise both those of a verbal and those of a non-verbal nature. By definition, positive strokes are strokes that leave the recipient feeling good and provide a positive experience. At the same time, those of a negative nature are exchanges that one may describe as painful in which the recipient is left feeling perhaps hurt or 'not ok'.

'Games People Play' Berne notes that 'any social intercourse whatsoever has a biological advantage over no intercourse at all'. It may be clear why individuals would seek out positive strokes and steer away from negative ones; however, this is not always the case. Given that the desired outcome of a stroke is the satisfaction of our stimulus or recognition hunger, it appears not to matter whether the stimulus or recognition received is positive or negative. Think of a child that misbehaves to receive attention. The attention will more likely than not be of a negative nature, but any attention is better than no attention at all. If positive strokes

are not forthcoming, then one has to invent ways to receive negative ones. If a child has learned that all he can do to provide himself with some form of recognition is behaving badly, he will continue to do so as, though he will not be left feeling good, he will have at least been recognized or stimulated in some way as opposed to being overlooked or stroke deprived.

'Strokes' and their place in Therapy.

If we regard this theory in a clinical capacity, it is important that when working with clients who demonstrate attention seeking behaviors, the therapist recognizes the importance of paying attention to them. Though perhaps not always healthy, these behaviors provide the therapist with an insight into the clients' survival mechanisms, learned from a young age, and thus, even if these are to be worked on to alter certain aspects of a client's behavior, they should be acknowledged and respected.

An important aspect of the work undertaken by a therapist trained in Transactional Analysis is understanding how a person gives and receives positive and negative strokes. Because, as infants, we test out behaviors in an attempt to see which ones provide us with strokes of any nature and equally because as adults, we still have the same desire to be stroked, once we find which behaviors result in the receipt of strokes, we are likely to repeat this behavior. The more we repeat the behavior, the more strokes we receive, thus reinforcing said behavior. Adults will continually mold their behaviors to those that prove the most profitable in providing strokes. It becomes clear now to see why someone would continue to perpetuate behavioral patterns that appear to be damaging. If a person, from a young age, has decided that they will seek out negative strokes as an alternative to feeling stroke deprived, as positive strokes were not forthcoming, they will continually find ways to provide themselves with negative strokes, and as the stroking reinforces the behavior that is stroked, the cycle continues. It is then also possible to use this cycle to create new ways of seeking out strokes and breaking free of self-harming patterns. If we were to begin seeking positive strokes instead of negative strokes, as a grown-up, and we were to receive them with our new behavior, we would be inclined to seek them out again, repeating this new behavior.

Therefore, changing unhealthy stroking patterns is possible and a crucial goal to be undertaken by the client and therapist.

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