



# *Ego State Therapy*

Gordon Emmerson PhD

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# *Introduction*

## *Turning the Lights On: Ego State Therapy*

What is the ego? It is our awareness of the “me” inside. It is the “me” that is sometimes focused and working, sometimes playful and laughing, sometimes in pain, and sometimes illogical in feeling and reaction. We each experience our ego from our own special states, states that have been formed through our experiences.

Think about how you feel, right now, and point a finger to yourself. You are thinking about and pointing to your ego, your selfness, your “me state”. You have more than a single “me state” or “ego state”. You are made up of an ego family of states. At times you may feel like a different person in attitude, logic, and emotion. You are actually a single person who is made up of a number of different states; each has its own feeling of power, weakness, emotion, logic, or other personal traits. On another day or at another time, when you point to yourself, you will probably be pointing to a different ego state. The other state may be angry, logical, light-hearted, or fearful. It may be talkative or pensive. When we say, “Part of me wants to”, we are talking about an ego state. When we say, “I feel at peace with myself on this issue”, we are talking about our ego states agreeing, not having an internal struggle. Our various states help to make our lives rich, productive, and enjoyable.

Because we have many states from which we can choose at a given time, it is possible to learn to change from a state that feels out of control to a state that has a feeling of competence. Because we have states that carry pain, it is possible to find and help the specific states that need resolution. Working with ego states can foster an improved psychological and physical experience of life. Understanding these ego states, learning to recognize them, and to use them in therapy is the purpose of this book. Learning to work directly with the state that needs help provides therapists the shortest distance between the two points, the goal and the solution.

## ***Goals of Ego State Therapy***

The goals of the therapy are:

1. To locate ego states harboring pain, trauma, anger, or frustration and facilitate expression, release, comfort, and empowerment;
2. To facilitate functional communication among ego states (the statement “I hate myself when I am like that” indicates two states lacking in proper communication); and
3. To help clients learn their ego states so that the states may be better used to the clients’ benefit (e.g., allowing the client to, at one time, be open to enjoy emotional experiences and, at another time, be assertive when challenged).

## ***Benefits***

Learning about ego states and how to use them is beneficial in two ways; it increases an understanding of personality, and provides an avenue for affecting rapid and lasting change.

Ego state personality theory allows the therapist and the client to have a clearer view of how the personality is composed, and where most psychological problems originate. It demystifies the “vast unknown subconscious”, revealing it to be accessible ego states. It illuminates the development of our ego state structure and the ability that ego states have to be malleable, to become empowered, and to release fear.

Where do psychological problems come from? Why do clients react the way they do? Both clients and therapists often guess at these answers. Ego State Therapy provides a process that can connect the problematic symptom to the causal stimulus, without the therapist or client having to guess or interpret. It facilitates empowerment, just where it is needed, so unwanted symptoms no longer manifest from unresolved states. The understanding of their ego states that clients gain allows a richer experience of living, with an ability to be assertive, fragile, angry, logical, and caring in preferred times. Internal turmoil, where two parts of the

person cannot agree, can be changed to a cooperative and respectful acceptance of the various ego states and their roles. It is often the case that physical health improves following the resolution of trauma and the improved internal communication between states that Ego State Therapy produces. Improved psychological and physical health, and an improved self-understanding and richness of experience are benefits of ego state theory and therapy.

Chapter 1 of this book defines ego states and ego state theory. It explains ego states and how the theory relates to other therapeutic orientations. A short history of Ego State Therapy is provided. Various ways to access ego states, both hypnotically and non-hypnotically, are presented in Chapter 2. Methods for using Ego State Therapy are covered in Chapter 3, and some specific applications of the therapy are presented in Chapter 4. Typical Ego State Therapy sessions are outlined in Chapter 5, and theoretical implications of ego state theory are discussed in Chapter 6.

## *Chapter 2*

# *Accessing Ego States in Therapy*

How can the therapist learn to access and speak with the different ego states that exist within the individual? Imagine a classroom full of students. The students on the front row are awake and attentive, some more than others. Other students in the room often do not pay attention to what goes on in the room, but the students in the front row see and remember most things. The rest of the students in the room are paying varying degrees of attention. Some are in a sound sleep. Others are whispering in small groups. And some are watching what is going on at the front of the classroom. Occasionally one may act on a need and make a disturbance in the classroom. There may be a student hanging onto a lot of pain and turmoil, an unstable student ready to erupt. There is one rule in the classroom that the students honor. Only one student is able to talk at once.

The students are all different and all have different problems and talents. Some of them talk often, and some that have a lot to say, some talk very seldom. Some are afraid to talk, even thinking they may be asked to leave the room. Some students do not like each other, and often argue. Every classroom is made up of a different set of students. Each classroom has its own personality.

At the front of the room, standing next to the blackboard is the teacher. The teacher is visually blind. Although she has been in several classrooms before, she has never really known where she was. She has thought she was there to tutor a single student. When she talks, it is the students in the front row that usually listen and respond to her. Even though the voices of the different students sound different, the teacher has not paid much attention to that.

Of course, the classroom represents the family of ego states of a single person. The students on the front row are the surface ego states, those that most often become executive, those that maintain a good memory of the daily activities. The rest of the students represent the underlying ego states. The teacher is the therapist.

If the teacher talks to the class thinking that she is speaking to a single student, then the member of the class who really needs the help of the teacher may not even be listening. The student in the back of the room who carries pain may continue to feel neglected and unheard. Students who argue with each other, and those who do not like each other continue to make the classroom an uncomfortable place for all students. The students with specific talents may not be able to use them when the right time arises.

The question is, how can the blind teacher learn to recognize the students, draw them out, attend to their needs, help the group work together, and discover which students have special talents? How can the therapist learn to access and speak with the different ego states of the individual?

There are both non-hypnotic and hypnotic methods to access ego states. The non-hypnotic methods give access only to the surface states. In the classroom example, they give access only to the students on the front row. Recognizing the surface states (students on the front row) and talking with them individually gives more power in therapy than treating them as a single state.

Hypnotic access of ego states allows the therapist to work with both surface and underlying states. Often the client's problems stem from underlying states, and it is only through hypnotic access that direct and efficient problem resolution can be achieved. Just as an angry child in the back of the classroom can affect the mood of the class, an underlying ego state can require direct attention and resolution for the client to feel peace.

It is important to note that every therapist already accesses ego states, whether or not it is consciously recognized. Any time we are conscious, an ego state is executive. When the client sits down and begins talking, it is one of that client's ego states that is talking. The problem is that the state that is talking may not be the best

state for therapeutic intervention. Talking with a rational, head state may allow the therapist to easily find an ally that is against the obsessive compulsive checking, an ally that wants the anger management client to be rational, or that wants the smoker to stop smoking. Ego State Therapy is about learning to access ego states, to talk directly with the state or states where intervention is most useful.

## **2.1 *Non-Hypnotic Access***

Non-hypnotic access of ego states is appropriate for therapists who are not trained in hypnosis, or who are not ready to work with hypnosis. It may also be useful for working with clients who are not able to consider a hypnotic intervention. Two methods of non-hypnotic access are presented in sections 2.1.1 and 2.1.2. The therapist who is familiar with ego states will often be able to recognize when the client changes states, even without using an access method. The informed therapist will be able to work cognitively with ego states, gaining an awareness of when a different state becomes executive, and gaining an awareness of individual ego state needs.

### **2.1.1 *Empty Chair Technique***

One of the easiest ways to access ego states is the *empty chair technique*. Some therapists who are unaware of ego state theory use this technique, or a version of it. Gestalt therapists often use a two chair variety of this technique, so two ego states can communicate, or so an ego state can communicate with an introject (see sections 1.2 and 1.8.2).

Consider the example of Matthew from the beginning of Chapter 1. He sees Emma playing with a child, and he feels and believes, "This is the woman for me. I love her and want to spend the rest of my life with her." Later in the same day she criticizes him about his job as a plumber. He feels defensive and feels and thinks, "What did I ever see in this woman? How can I get out of this relationship?" At least two of Matthew's ego states are disagreeing. He is experiencing internal turmoil, internal ego state argument.

## *Chapter 3*

# *Using Ego States in Therapy*

This chapter defines some of the uses of Ego State Therapy and outlines how therapists can apply the therapy. Examples are given to help clarify therapeutic techniques.

Ego State Therapy allows the therapist and the client near complete access to the different parts of the personality. This greatly increases the ease and speed of positive change. In order to help a client who is having difficulty with anger, it is much more powerful to speak directly with the state that expresses anger. Speaking with an intellectual ego state about anger, or about a time when the person was angry is akin to speaking to one student in a class about the behavior of another student. Just as it would be much more productive to speak with the student who is having trouble in order to change the behavior, it is much more productive to speak directly with the ego state that is associated with unwanted symptoms in order to change those symptoms.

Some therapists have learned to access the ego state that needs help without being aware of Ego State Therapy. The angry ego state will often become executive by asking the client to explain in detail what happens when anger is expressed inappropriately, or by asking the client to describe an occurrence in detail and affect. At this time good therapeutic change can take place.

If an ego state carries trauma, pain, anger, frustration, or hurt this toxic baggage can prevent the individual from being able to live fully and functionally. This baggage can be manifested in the form of physical symptoms, disease, headaches, or other hysteric symptoms. It can be manifested psychologically in the form of neuroses, and the fear of facing this unprocessed baggage can prevent the person from having access to some loving and useful states. Allowing those fragile, loving states to become executive can be too scary.

## **3.1 Processing Trauma**

Everything we do is connected to a cause. When we consistently react in a way that is inappropriate to the situation, it is because an unprocessed trauma is present within the ego family of states. There is no “statute of limitation” on processing trauma. Trauma may be processed years after the original occurrence, and while what happened may always be appreciated as negative, it does not have to continue to interfere with current living. It may be the case, “once cut, always scarred”. A scar is a reminder of a cut that has healed. It is not the case, “once cut, never healed”. An unresolved trauma is a cut that has not healed. Traumas can be found, processed and healed. The knowledge of occurrence will rightly continue, but the disruptions of an unhealed, unprocessed trauma can be replaced with an ability to react physically and emotionally in a manner appropriate to the situation at hand.

### **3.1.1 Abreactions**

An abreaction is a negative emotional or physical response in therapy that is related to an earlier trauma. Abreactions may occur while working through a trauma. In ego state theory, the mere act of experiencing an abreaction is not considered therapeutic, but the act of resolving the trauma, which often entails abreactions, is therapeutic.

Examples of abreactions include a client suddenly beginning to cry deeply, a client showing immense fear, or a client moving physically in a manner not associated with the current situation. A client’s hand might start jerking, or a client might appear to move back into the chair, into a seemingly safer position. Another example would be if a client were to scream, or yell out, normally in apparent fear.

It is important for the therapist to be able to remain helpful and attentive to the client during times of emotional release if ego state work is to be conducted. With ego state work the client can rather quickly move from the trauma of an abreaction to a feeling of being expressed, empowered, and calm. It is gratifying to be a

participant in this change and to understand that the toxic trauma that once fueled the abreaction, and any associated neurotic reactions or panic attacks, has been replaced with feelings of peace and empowerment. This change appears to be permanent. In order for this change to take place the therapist must be able to stay with the client during the abreaction and find out what is needed and supply those needs. This is often done by encouraging expression to any internal abuser, by encouraging the client to express needs and to act upon them (such as loudly telling the abuser to leave), and by getting help for the client from stronger ego states to gain a feeling of peace and calm (see section 3.1.4).

Abreactions are relatively common when doing ego state work. They can be thought of as markers or flags indicating where work needs to be done so the client can feel settled and so the trauma does not continue to lie underneath, waiting to be expressed in a problematic manner. Abreactions often occur when a trauma is revisited so that empowerment over fear can result. If the trauma were not processed, merely revisiting the traumatic event and the related experience of an abreaction would leave the troubled ego state unresolved, and would leave the client feeling closer to the original negative experience. It is therefore very important to resolve a trauma when it is revisited. When a trauma is resolved no further abreactions associated with that trauma will occur. Neurotic reactions, panic attacks, and PTSD symptoms can be thought of as abreactions outside of therapy, since they are reactions related to unresolved trauma, and the resolution of the associated trauma will result in their cessation.

### *3.1.2 Neurotic Reactions*

A situational neurosis is a repeated inappropriate response to a particular type of life situation. A neurotic reaction of this type is directly tied to a lack of resolution being held by an ego state that becomes executive when cued by some situational cue. When cued, this ego state will re-experience the same feelings of the original occurrence. For example, a client of mine became extremely anxious when attempting to speak in front of groups. It did not matter how much he prepared, he would become fearful, shake, and feel like no matter how he tried he could not be good enough.

*What lies in the dark unconscious expanse of our psyche?*

*What causes the words we hear in our mind?*

*What internal dynamic produces depression, panic attacks, and addiction?*

*How can learning what is inside bring back the love and wonder of childhood?*

Mastering Ego State Therapy can foster an improved psychological and physical experience of life. Emmerson's innovative book presents the theory and practice of working with ego states, helping to understand them, recognize and use them. Working directly with the state that needs assistance provides the shortest distance between the goal and the solution. The practical techniques help you to locate ego states in pain, trauma, anger, or frustration and facilitate expression, release, comfort, and empowerment. Subjects covered include:

- The nature of ego states
- Inner strength
- Processing trauma
- Ego state mapping
- Practical applications
- Introjects
- Non-hypnotic and hypnotic access
- Ego state communication
- Theoretical implications

**Gordon Emmerson PhD**, is a senior lecturer in psychology at Victoria University in Melbourne and is assistant editor of the **Australian Journal of Clinical Hypnosis and Hypnotherapy**. He has been Victoria State President of the Australian Society of Clinical Hypnotherapy and has conducted and published clinical research papers on Ego State Therapy and its efficacy.

*“The theories of ego state and the practical methods illustrated in this book will enable the reader to master the therapy with ease and thus to harness his own resources. This book will be a very valuable addition to the subject of Ego State Therapy.”*

**Professor V M Mathew MBBS, DTM&H, DPM, MRCPsych, MPhil  
Consultant Psychiatrist and Clinical Director, West Kent NHS and Social Care Trust**

*“The fundamentals, and practical application of Ego State Therapy techniques have never been so easy to learn as with this book. Exceedingly clear, concise, and comprehensive, Ego State Therapy is a state-of-the-art protocol, which will acquaint academicians and clinicians with the dynamic, diverse, and constantly evolving field of Ego State Therapy.”*

**Woltemade Hartman PhD, Director, Milton H Erickson Institute of South Africa**

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