

## **What is Ego State Therapy?** (Gordon Emmerson, Ph.D, Australia)

Ego State Therapy is a powerful and brief therapy based on the premise that personality is composed of separate parts, rather than being a homogeneous whole. These parts (which everyone has) are called ego states. The therapist learns to work directly with the state that can best benefit from change, rather than merely working with an intellectual, talkative state.

We are each made up of a number of different ego states; each has its own feeling of power or weakness, emotion, logic, skills, and other personal traits. 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 ego states help to make our lives rich, productive, and enjoyable. An ego state harboring pain can cause unrest and unwanted emotional reactions. When two ego states are in conflict we can feel torn on an issue or a decision.

## **Where does Ego State Therapy come from?**

Paul Federn (Vienna, 1871- New York, 1950) was a psychoanalyst who attended the Wednesday evening meetings that were organized by Sigmund Freud. Alfred Adler and Carl Jung also attended these meetings. While Freud saw the personality as composed of three parts, the id, ego and superego, Federn saw the personality being composed of numerous ego states. He called these parts "ego states" because he observed that we take our ego with us when we change states. No matter what state we are in, we think "this is me", or put another way, we have ego identification with each state we bring to the surface. Therefore we are always in an ego state. Federn shared his concepts of ego states with Edoardo Weiss (Trieste, 1889 – Chicago, 1970) who likewise shared his understanding of ego states with John Watkins (Idaho, 1913 – 2012, Colorado). It was Watkins, and his wife Helen (Bavaria, 1921 – Missoula Mt. 2002), who developed Federn's concept of the personality into a therapy. Together they practiced, researched, and presented ego state therapy through articles, books such as (Ego States:

Theory and Therapy, 1997), and workshops. We owe much to Federn, Weiss, and the Watkins.

### **What are our Ego States and where do they come from?**

We are not born with our different parts or ego states. We make them as we live. Our ego states are formed when we do something over and over again. This 'over and over again' learning creates a physical neural pathway in the brain that has its own level of emotion, abilities, and experience of living. As stated by the Watkins in their book, "Another characteristic of an ego state is that it was probably developed to enhance the individual's ability to adapt and cope with a specific problem or situation" (Watkins & Watkins, p. 29, 1997).

If, as a child, I bring my mother a cup of tea and she gives me a hug and thanks me, then the next time I want some nurturance I may do something nice for my mother or for someone else. If this continues to work for me, and I continue to do nurturing things for people, and I continue to get positive feedback, I will develop a nurturing ego state. At future times in life, when I want to feel a connection with someone this nurturing part may come out and my feelings and actions will be nurturing. Some people may be good at bringing that part of me out. If, as a child, I am feeling a need for attention and I tell a joke or do something funny, and if I get a positive response (that's really good), and if I continue to get a positive response over months and years for being funny, I may develop a joking, comedian, ego state. If, on the other hand, when I tell those first jokes, if I get a, "Be quiet Gordon" response, I will probably not develop a joking ego state. We each have our own special parts according to the experiences we have lived. The ways our family and friends react to us help us develop the particular ego states we have.

By repeating actions over and over again the brain will grow and connect in such a way that will create a physical neural pathway that is an ego state. We will switch into an ego state when a need for that state occurs, or when an injured part is reminded of the injury it may

come out in an attempt to gain some resolution. That is why a bad feeling can come over us all at once.

Our brains are composed of cells, called neurons. We are born with millions of neurons. We can lose them through injury and aging. Thankfully, we have a lot, and the ones we have can be trained, and retrained. Our brains can grow. We can grow new neurons and we can grow new connections between our neurons.

An interesting thing is that our brains grow according to stimulation. When mice were raised in an active environment their brains grew bigger than mice grown in a passive environment. Like muscles, brains grow bigger with use.

When kittens wore special goggles that allowed them to see only horizontal shapes for their first 4 or 5 months of life, they became mostly blind to vertical shapes when the goggles were removed. So our brains actually grow according to the amount of stimulation we get, and according to the type of stimulation we get. The goggles made the kittens practice seeing only horizontal shapes. When we do a nurturing behaviour over and over again, that is like the kittens special goggles. Our brains develop according to that repeated behaviour.

That is how we develop ego states. By doing the same type of activity over and over we grow connections that create a specific neural pathway that is an ego state. An ego state is a physical part of our brain. Our brains are trained to have the ego states we have. An ego state is a grouping of neural fibres that have been trained in such a way to provide us with specific skills and emotions. Our ego states are our resources that we can call upon according to our needs. They are called ego states because whichever state we are in, we think of it is 'me', we have ego identity there.

Each of us has our own distinctive set of ego states that we have trained. No one else will have ego states that exactly match our own,

but they may have some ego states that are very similar to some of ours.

### **What are the goals of Ego State Therapy?**

- To locate ego states harboring pain, trauma, anger, or frustration and facilitate expression, release, comfort, and empowerment (It is unresolved states that come out and make us feel out of control. They are our internal tender spots
- 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 appreciation), and
- 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 to feel expressed when challenged).

### **What are the four Ego State conditions?**

Each of our ego state may be in one of four conditions, normal, vaded, retro, or conflicted. We want all our states to be normal functioning and ego state therapy helps states to move to this condition. This means the state is operating well both with our other ego states internally and is operating well externally with other people. The state is not causing us trouble.

The three other conditions of ego states are described as follows:

**A vaded state** is a state that has experienced a trauma or rejection in the past and has not processed it. A vaded state is the tender spot in our psyche. If we are reactive, it is the vaded state that is coming out. A vaded state can cause us to react emotionally to a life situation in a way we don't want. Vaded states feel out of control when they are out, and they are the root of escape behaviours, such as addictions and OCD. Vaded states need to gain resolution so we no longer have a need to escape from their negative feelings, and so they no longer give us a feeling of being out of control.

**Retro states** are states that originally learned a behaviour that used to work for us, but does not work for us now. Reacting in an unwanted angry manner usually is the result of a Retro state coming out. This state may have learned in childhood that anger is a means of protection or a way to get what is wanted. These states need to learn to come out only when their behaviour is appropriate, or to learn to alter their behaviour to a degree that it becomes appropriate.

**Conflicted states** are states that feel at war with each other internally. They may hate each other (I hate myself when I am like that) or they may be in severe conflict over actions. One state may want to work and another may want to rest. These states need to learn the value of each other and to be able to communicate and compromise. It is appropriate for states to have different opinions to consider, for example, when buying a new car. One state may be aware of the budget and another state may be connected to fun and appreciation. It is not appropriate for the conflict between states to be a problem for the person so the person feels not a peace internally.

A '**Normal**' ego state will not be vaded, retro, or conflicted. Ego State Therapy can help states become Normal, freeing the person to have a higher level of control and inner peace.