

How We Get Our Basic Human Needs Met

As humans we are social animals. We are conceived in relationship, as foetuses, we develop inside another, we grow up in relationship to our parent(s). Human contact is very important to us. And the best possible human contact, the kind that is most rewarding and satisfying, is shared intimacy when we are with someone who is able to meet us in being real, open, emotionally available and vulnerable. This doesn't just 'happen' however. We learn how to be ourselves in those significant relationships. Babies who do not get loved and held and comforted fail to thrive. We all need contact to survive. We get that contact in different ways at different times.

Eric Berne, founder of Transactional Analysis (TA) has a useful model about the ways that humans get the contact they need to survive. His model identified a number of '**hungers**' in all humans that can be met through different kinds of social interaction that he categorized as ways of '**Time Structuring**'. We use this model in Thrive to help us to understand more about children's behaviour. Berne termed the human hungers:

- **Recognition:** eye contact, smiles, comments, encouragement, attention, being noticed and valued
- **Contact:** non-intrusive touch
- **Stimulation:** sensory: auditory, visual, kinaesthetic, tactile, olfactory, taste (We often put all these three together under 'contact'.)
- **Structure:** predictable routines, order (out of chaos), followed through plans in time and space, recognition of special events and their anniversaries
- **Incident:** novelty, drama, exciting, fresh, unknown challenge and risk
- **Sexual:** acceptance as a potential or actual sexual physical being; acknowledgment for being attractive and attracting; recognition of states of arousal, physical needs
- **Spiritual:** Fish, S (1996) added this hunger for a deep connection, wonder at life, an urge to find meaning, a desire to share a special moment with others, to experience connection with a life force or source greater than oneself.

Berne called every unit of contact a 'stroke.

He maintained that we all need to get a daily quota of 'strokes' - without them we began to lose our capacity to thrive. He suggested that we structure our days to get the strokes we need in some of the following ways.

Withdrawal: time alone, without direct contact with others. May be reading, writing, drawing, painting, being creative, meditating, and listening to music. This can be isolating when it is the dominant or only way of getting strokes.

Rituals: routine social interactions; as if pre-programmed, usually occurring at the same time or in the same place; includes simple greetings; social acknowledgement with neighbours etc. It is low in intensity, generally predictable and not personally revealing.

"Hello, how are you?" "Fine." Cups of tea; waving when passing etc. This can provide basic safety and yet it is not essentially satisfying on its own.

Pastimes: Past-timing proceeds in a familiar way e.g. chats about last night's television programme or football match. It's generally positive contact, talking about something in the past that is safe, predictable and probably shared e.g. the weather; the X Factor; price rises, a national sports event. Can be regular and valued by both parties. It is not personally engaging or revealing and is often a way of sounding each other out.

Activity: Doing things with others; sports, recreation, clubs, card or board games; doing up houses; going travelling; shopping etc -the focus is on the shared activity and companionship or competition. The degree of risk depends on the activity. Many couples and friendships depend on

the companionship of shared activity.

Games: formulaic interactions with other(s) often prompted or underpinned by a level of emotional insecurity, fear or social anxiety. They are familiar ways of interacting with other(s) from well-worn positions, often replaying childhood strategies or situations. They always involve saying one thing and meaning something other underneath, perhaps where the words say one thing and the emotional tone conveys something else. It is easy to get 'hooked' into a game. No one quite speaks the whole truth- e.g. rather than risk being exposed or vulnerable one 'goes along with' or somehow partially hides one's true feelings.

These games or formulaic exchanges generally involve movement around what has been termed the DRAMA TRIANGLE from one of three familiar positions:

Rescuer→Victim→Persecutor→Rescuer etc or vice versa

Whenever people get involved in games they step into one of these roles rather than be truly fully open in the moment. They take up a familiar position often based on a set of beliefs about themselves. Each role involves some discounting of ability either for oneself or the other or both.

The Victim often feels overwhelmed, put down, helpless, hopeless, and powerless. S/he discounts her ability to deal with the situation or cope with the strong feelings. "I'm not OK, others are OK." This repeats childhood states of helplessness and does not take into full account adult capacities. It is sometimes replaying a wish to be saved or taken care of in ways that have not been fully met in childhood. It can represent an ongoing childhood wish that 'someone' will notice how hard life is for the person and take over. However if someone does attempt to, often the Victim feels patronised or undermined or not fully recognised. This can turn the person towards persecuting or indeed to rescuing others to prove her / himself worthy or competent or powerful.

The Rescuer sees him/herself as coping, helpful and more capable than the Other. The other person is seen as not OK so that help or assistance is offered from a one-up position. "I'm OK, you're not OK." This can become a life position rather than the truth of the current situation. It leads to the Rescuer being overwhelmed, or becoming exhausted through 'over-reaching' their actual reserves or resources which in turn can build resentment and move the person into Persecuting. Alternately the exhaustion can take the person to collapse in which case they might take up a position of Victim: feeling 'hard done by', 'used', 'misunderstood' or 'taken for granted'.

It is important here to differentiate between the natural generous and compassionate offering of help that can arise in a situation of need where the person is choosing to offer support that is within their resources. This is NOT being a Rescuer in terms of a game. The Rescuer position in a game is a patterned behaviour, a way the person has come to define themselves.

The Persecutor: sees a need to defend him/herself to maintain any kind of status, safety or control in an emotionally threatening situation. S/he may become attacking, verbally or physically or s/he may withdraw, go silent, refuse to engage or be threatening or humiliating or blaming or accusing or critical. The underlying feeling is of "I am not OK and you are not OK so I'll do whatever is necessary to survive physically, emotionally or psychologically – and I'll feel justified in so doing." "If I am mean or cruel or punishing, it's your fault."

At the end of a 'round' or game, everyone tends to feel bad ('I've been here before.' 'How did this happen again?') and there is no resolution. Most of us take up one position more regularly than another and we also know the well-beaten track to the other places round the triangle.

Discounting our ability to solve situations

Everyone in the game is involved in some kind of discount: both Persecutor and Rescuer discount others; the Victim discounts him / herself. The Persecutor discounts others' dignity and value, the Rescuer discounts others' ability to think or act for him / herself.

Remember this applies to regular, familiar relational patterns of power-dynamics NOT individual acts of genuine compassion and caring. All three positions or roles are inauthentic; they are not true responses in the moment but rather life positions evolved from childhood experiences.

How to get out of a Game

The only way out of a game is to catch what is going on, sense, breathe, and come back into the moment and to take responsibility for where one is and what one is doing.

Then there is a chance of transforming the positions around the Drama Triangle into being **Potent, Responsible and Vulnerable** - places that can be resolved through intimacy.

Intimacy: genuine open contact with another person involving the genuine expression of feelings, no secret messages or hidden inferences. This demands a willingness to be vulnerable, truthful, direct and clear whether with loving actions and words or hateful or angry feelings. Each person accepts his or her responsibility. This contact can be positive or negative- it is real; both people are available. It allows for genuine disagreement and real resolution that might include a respectful recognition and acceptance of difference by both parties.

When working with vulnerable or challenging children or young people we need to anticipate that they will be very familiar with games. They will have acquired many defensive manoeuvres in order to manage emotionally difficult situations. They may be very good at throwing out 'hooks' to invite you into a game.

Your own self-awareness is therefore very important- knowing the hooks that are likely to catch you will be important if you are to maintain your position as the psychobiological regulator for the child or young person!

Remember it is **AS** important to reconnect and repair the relationship after something has gone wrong, as it is to keep everything going well. Repairing any emotional ruptures is a very necessary, healing act.

1 Source: Stewart, Ian and Joines, Vann (1987:87) 'TA Today' pub Lifespace, Nottingham & Chapel Hill

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