

Life Positions

Life positions are basic beliefs about self and others, which are used to justify decisions and behaviour.

When we are conceived, we are hopefully at peace, waiting to emerge into the world once we have grown sufficiently to be able to survive in the outside of the womb. If nothing untoward happens we will emerge contented and relaxed. In this case we are likely to perceive the world from the perspective of I am OK and You are OK.

However, perhaps our mother had some traumatic experiences, or the birth was difficult or even life threatening. This experience is likely to have an effect on the way we experience the world, even at the somatic level. In which case we might emerge sensing that life is scary and might, for example, go into "I am not OK and You are not OK either".

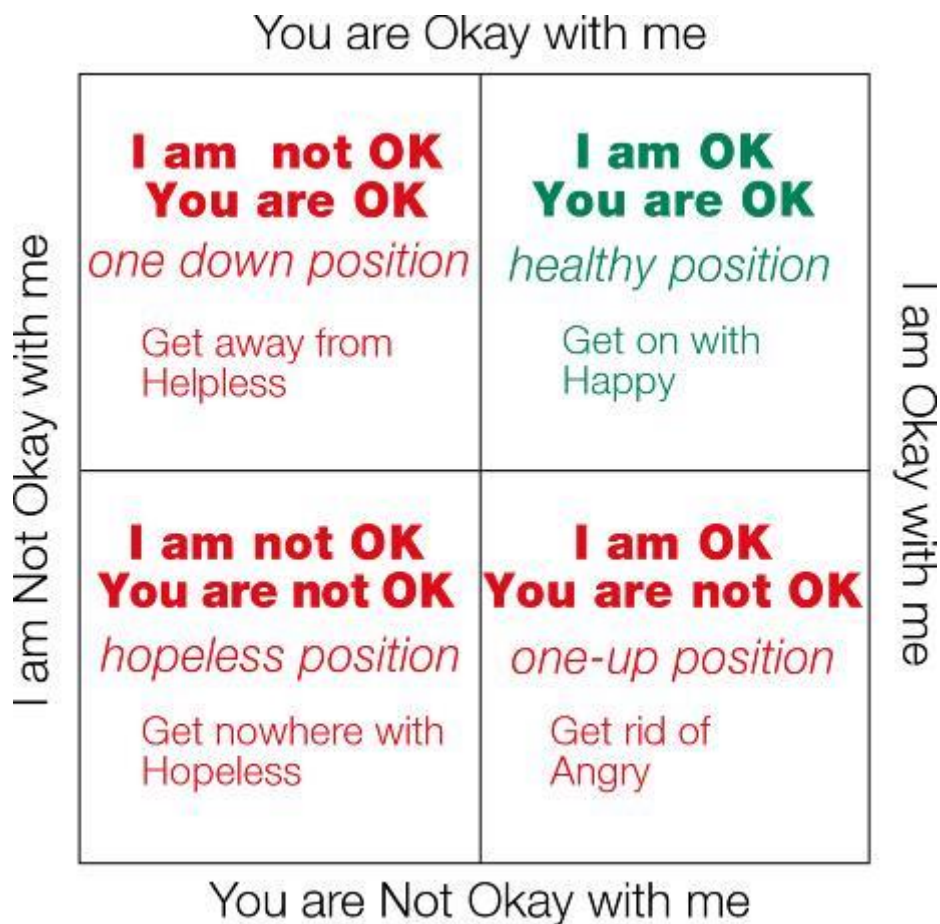
Let's take it that the pregnancy went fine, and the birth was easy enough. What then? Well life experiences might reinforce our initial somatic level life position or contradict it. If we were treated punitively, talked down to, and not held, we may begin to believe "I am not OK and You are OK". This might be the only sense we can make of our experiences.

Let's take another situation. Perhaps we were picked on and bullied as a child. We learnt that the way to get by was to bully others and that way we felt stronger and in control. Our behaviour then comes into the I am OK and You are not OK quadrant. Of course, this may cover up our belief that we are really not OK, but nobody sees that. They just see our behaviour, and in fact we may have forgotten all about our negative feelings about ourselves as we have tried so hard to deny the pain of believing we are not OK.

These life positions are perceptions of the world. The reality is I just am and you just are, therefore how I view myself and others are just that "views" not fact. However, we tend to act as if they are a fact. Just like when somebody says "I can't do this, I'm useless". Rather than "I don't know how to do this. Will you show me?" The latter is staying with the fact that they do not yet know how to do it, whilst the former links being useless with not being able to do something.

There are a number of ways of diagramming the life positions. Franklin Ernst drew the life positions in quadrants, which he called the OK Corral (1971). We have put these into red and green to show the effective and ineffective quadrants for communication and healthy relationships. By shading in the quadrants according to the amount of time we think we spend in each we can get an idea of the amount of time we spend in each. Ernst used the term 'Corralogram' for this method of self-assessment using the OK Corral matrix.

OK Corral - Ernst, 1971



Berne talked about the life positions as existential positions, one of which we are more likely to go to under stress. This is significantly different to the concept Ernst uses, i.e. that we move around them all during the day. Whilst there is some truth in this, we could agree with Berne that there will be one major position we go into under stress, with perhaps another position underneath this one. These positions can change as we develop and grow. The difference between Berne and Ernst is important.

Chris Davidson (1999) writes about the three-dimensional model of Okayness. All of the previous diagrams talk as if there were only one other person in the equation, when in reality there are often more. For example, the behaviour of young people in gangs may say that they believe they are okay and perhaps other gangs in their neighbourhood are okay, but an individual or gang from another neighbourhood are not okay. We often do this at work as well. We find other people who we like and then we gossip and put other people down. We are therefore saying that we believe we are okay, but those others are awful (underneath this there may be a belief that we are not okay either, but we feel better by putting someone else down). In this way the two-dimensional model of okayness i.e. that there are only two people involved, becomes three-dimensional model where there can be three or more involved.

There is also the way in which we view life itself. If we consider that there is something wrong with us, and that others are not to be trusted and are not OK either, then the world would be a scary place and we are likely to experience life as tough and believe we will only be all right if we keep alert and on the lookout for danger and difficulties.

Blame model

The Transactional Analysis 'OK Corral' can be linked to 'blame', for which Jim Davis TSTA developed this simple and helpful model. Commonly when emotions are triggered people adopt one of three attitudes relating to blame, which each correlate to a position on the OK Corral:

- I'm to blame (You are okay and I'm not okay - 'helpless')
- You are to blame (I'm okay and you are not okay - 'angry')
- We are both to blame (I'm not okay and you are not okay - 'hopeless')

None of these is a healthy position.

Instead the healthy position is, and the mindset should be: "It's no-one's fault, blame isn't the issue - what matters is how we go forward and sort things out." (I'm OK and you are OK - 'happy')

(With acknowledgements to Jim Davis TSTA)

The script

The script is a life plan, made when we are growing up. It is like having the script of a play in front of us - we read the lines and decide what will happen in each act and how the play will end. The script is developed from our early decisions based upon our life experience. We may not realise that we have set ourselves a plan but we can often find this out if we ask ourselves what our favourite childhood story was, who was our favourite character in the story and who do we identify with. Then consider the beginning, middle and end of the story. How is this story reflected in our life today?

Another way of getting to what script is may be to think about what we believe will happen when we are in old age. Do we believe we will be alive at 80 or 90 years old, be healthy, happy, and contented? What do we think will be on the headstone for our grave? What would we like to be on it?