

TA Today: A New Introduction to Transactional Analysis by Ian Stewart and Vann Joines

Chapter 17

Discounting

In the process of living, I am continually being presented with problems. How do I get across the road without being killed? How do I deal with the work assignment I've just been given? How do I respond to a friendly or an aggressive approach from someone?

Each time I meet a problem, I have two options. I can use the full power of my grown-up thinking, feeling and actions to solve the problem. Or I can go into script.

If I do move into script, I begin perceiving the world so that it seems to fit the decisions I made as an infant. I am likely to blank out my awareness of some aspects of the real situation. At the same time, I may blow up other aspects of the here-and-now problem into giant proportions. Instead of taking action to solve the problem, I rely on the 'magical solution' that my script offers. I hope in Child that by working this magic, I can manipulate the world into providing a solution for me. Instead of being active, I become passive.

Later we look at this contrast between passivity and problem-solving. This area of TA theory is known as *Schiffian* or *Cathexis* theory, after the 'Schiff family' who first developed it, and the Cathexis Institute which they founded.

The Schiffs define *passivity* as 'non-problem-solving behaviour', i.e. how people don't do things, or don't do them effectively'.

Nature and definition of discounting

Discounting is defined as '*unawarely ignoring information relevant to the solution of a problem*'.

Imagine I am sitting in a crowded restaurant. I begin to feel thirsty and think I'd like a glass of water. I try to catch the eye of the waiter. He pays no attention. I gesture again. Still no response.

At this instant I go into script. Without being aware of it, I begin replaying a time in my infancy when I had wanted to call my mother to me and she had not come. I put my mother's face on the unresponsive waiter. At the same time I begin acting, feeling and thinking as though I were still a young child. I droop and feel hopeless. I say to myself in my head: 'It's no good. No matter how much I try, he's not going to come'.

To get to this conclusion. I have had to ignore some information about here-and-now reality. I have *discounted* several options I have as a grown-up, options I did not have as a baby. I could have stood up, walked over to the waiter and tapped his shoulder. I could have gone to the nearest table where there was a water jug, asked for it and poured myself a drink. Had I acted in these ways, I would have been active in problem-solving instead of being passive.

A friend is sitting with me in the restaurant. Seeing the waiter's lack of response to my gesture, my friend gets angry. He snorts: 'That fellow is obviously incompetent. If I had my way, I'd see him fired!'

My friend has also gone into script. But as a child he decided upon the life position I+U-, rather than my own I-U+. Now he sees the waiter through the spectacles of his own script. He discounts the waiter's competence to respond to my call. Like me, my friend is being passive. His sitting there snarling about the waiter will do nothing to get me my glass of water.

Grandiosity

Every discount is accompanied by *grandiosity*. This is an exaggeration of some feature of reality, either minimising or maximising. The expression 'making a mountain out of a molehill' aptly describes grandiosity. While a person is discounting, she will 'blow up' some features of the situation out of proportion, while at the same time minimising other features, again out of proportion. The typical pattern of thinking in grandiosity is one of 'all or nothing'.

Whereas discounting is intrapsychic and outside of conscious awareness, grandiosity takes place in the person's conscious thinking. Discounting is the unconscious mechanism the person is using, grandiosity is the conscious justification for doing so.

When I sat in the restaurant feeling hopeless because the waiter wasn't bringing my glass of water, I was discounting my own options. In doing so, I was crediting the waiter with power he didn't have, the power to determine whether or not I got any water. I was also not recognising my own power. My belief was: 'He has all the power; I have none.' Both these statements are grandiose.

As my friend discounted the waiter's competence, he was also being grandiose about himself and the waiter. He was taking on himself the role of judge and jury, when he had neither adequate evidence nor responsibility to do so. He was also seeing the waiter as totally incompetent.

Exercise:

Think back to a recent situation in which the outcome was unsatisfactory for you. That situation represents a problem you didn't solve.

Looking back, do you now identify a feature or features of reality that you were discounting? Could you have acted in a different way that you 'didn't think of at the time'?

Were you ignoring somebody else's ability to act in a particular way? Were there resources in the situation that were available but which you didn't think of using?

Do you identify where you are being grandiose? What features of yourself, others or a situation were you blowing up minimising out of proportion?

If you are working in a group. Or if you have a friend who is willing to help you, get a second opinion on your answers. It is often easier for us to spot other people's discounting and grandiosity than to spot our own. Whether or not you have got immediate answers to these questions, keep your problem situation I mind. You can refer to it again as background to the further discussions in this chapter.

The four passive behaviours

When I discount, I do so by making a statement to myself in my own head.

Thus, *a discount itself is not observable*. Since you can't thought-read, you have no way of knowing I am discounting unless I speak or act in some way that indicates the presence of the discount.

There are four types of behaviour that always indicate that the person concerned is discounting. These *four passive behaviours* are:

- *Doing nothing*
- *Overadaptation*
- *Agitation*
- *Incapacitation or violence*

Doing nothing

The members of a TA group are sitting in a circle. The group leader says: 'Let's go round the group and each person say what he or she appreciates or resents about today's session. If you don't want to take part, it's OK to say "pass".'

The exercise begins. People round the group each give an appreciation or resentment. One or two say 'pass'.

Then comes Norman's turn. There's a silence. People wait for Norman to say something, but he doesn't. He sits unmoving and silent, staring into space. Since he doesn't seem to want to speak any appreciation or resentment, the person next to him waits for him to say 'pass'.

But Norman doesn't do that either. He continues to sit as if *dumb*.

Norman is showing the passive behaviour called *doing nothing*. Instead of using energy to take problem-solving action, he is using it to stop himself from acting. A person exhibiting this passive behaviour feels uncomfortable and experiences himself as not thinking. He is discounting his own ability to do anything about the situation.

Overadaptation

Amy comes into the house after a hard day's work. Her husband Brian is sitting reading a newspaper. Looking beyond him into the kitchen, Amy sees a huge pile of unwashed dishes beside the sink.

'Hi', says Brian. 'Hope you've had a good day. Just about time for tea, isn't it?' Taking her coat off, Amy goes straight through to the kitchen. She washes the pile of dishes and gets down to making tea.

Neither Brian nor Amy notice that he has not asked her to wash the dishes and make tea. Nor has she asked him if he wants her to. Still less has she paused to think whether she herself *wants* to wash the dishes, or whether it might be more appropriate if Brian washes them.

Amy's passive behaviour is *overadaptation*. When someone overadapts, she is complying with what she *believes* in. Child are the wishes of others. She does so without checking with them what their wishes are in reality, and without any reference to what her own wishes are. The person in overadaptation, unlike the person who is doing nothing, experiences herself as 'thinking', during the passive behaviour. Her 'thinking', though, actually proceeds from a contamination.

Someone in overadaptation will often be experienced by others as helpful, adaptable or accommodating. Thus overadaptation is frequently stroked by those to whom the person relates. Because of this social acceptability and because the person appears to be thinking, overadaptation is the most difficult to detect of the four passive behaviours.

The person in overadaptation is discounting her ability to act on her own options. Instead she follows options she believes others want.

Agitation

The class of students is listening to the lecturer. At the back of the room sits Adam. The lecturer is speaking rather quietly, and Adam has difficulty in hearing him. As the lecture

period goes on, Adam has more and more trouble following what the lecturer is talking about. He puts down his pen and starts drumming his fingers on the desk. If we could see underneath that desk, we'd notice that Adam is wagging his foot rapidly up and down in time to his finger-drumming.

Adam is showing *agitation*. In this passive behaviour, the person is discounting his ability to act to solve a problem. He feels acutely uncomfortable and engages in purposeless repetitive activity in an attempt to relieve the discomfort. Energy is directed into the agitated activity instead of into action to solve the problem. During agitation, the person does not experience himself as thinking.

If Adam were using his clear Adult, he could simply attract the lecturer's attention and ask him to speak up. As it is, his finger-drumming and foot wagging do nothing towards solving his problem.

Many common habits entail agitation. Nail-biting, smoking, hair twiddling, and compulsive eating are all examples.

Incapacitation and violence

Betty is in her late thirties. The younger of two daughters she still lives at home with her aged mother, whom she looks after. The old woman, despite her age, is really in pretty sound health.

Out of the blue, Betty meets a man, and they fall in love. Happily, she announces to her mother that she intends to move out to live with him and perhaps get married.

A couple of days later, the mother begins having dizzy spells and has to take to her bed. The doctor can find nothing physically wrong with her. But Betty begins to feel guilty about her intention to move out.

Mother's passive behaviour is *incapacitation*. Here, the person disables herself in some way. Discounting her own ability to solve a problem she hopes in Child that by incapacitating herself she can get someone else to solve it.

Incapacitation can sometimes be in the form of psychosomatic ailments, as here.

Alternatively, it can be achieved by mental breakdown or by the abuse of drugs or alcohol.

Robert has just had a furious row with his girlfriend. He storms out of the house and walks the streets for a long while. He goes down town, has a few beers. Then he picks up a chair and smashes all the plate glass windows in the bar.

Robert's passive behaviour is *violence*. It may seem strange to refer to violence as a 'passive' behaviour. But it is passive, because it is not directed at solving the problem in hand. When Robert smashes the windows, he does nothing to resolve his differences with his girlfriend.

Incapacitation can be viewed as violence directed inwards. In both incapacitation and violence, the person is discounting his ability to solve a problem. He releases a burst of energy, directed against self or others, in a desperate attempt to force the environment to solve the problem for him.

Incapacitation or violence will often follow a period of agitation. When the person is agitating, he is building up energy which he may then discharge destructively by either incapacitating or getting violent.

The purpose of all the passive behaviours is to get someone else more uncomfortable with the problem than I am, in the hope that they will take over and solve it for me.

Exercise:

Review the problem situation you considered in the last section. Do you identify which of the passive behaviours you engaged in?

Now re-run the situation in your mind's eye. When you come to the moment where you began the passive behaviour, imagine yourself instead staying in Adult and using the full power of your grown-up thinking, feeling or behaving to solve the problem. How do you then act differently?

Discounting and ego states

Discounting can be related to what you already know about ego-state pathology.

Discounting may indicate the presence of *contamination*. That is to say: when I am discounting, I may be mis-perceiving reality to fit Parent or Child script beliefs, which I mistake for Adult thinking.

Exclusion may be another source of discounting. Here, I am ignoring aspects of reality because I am blanking out one or more of my ego-states. If I am excluding my Child, I will ignore the wants, feelings and intuitions I carry from my own childhood, which might in reality be relevant to the problem I have to solve in the present. With the excluded Parent, I will blank out the rules and definition of the world I learned from my parent-figures, though these also can often be useful in problem-solving. An excluded Adult means that I discount my own ability to assess feel or act in direct response to any feature of the here-and-now situation. As you would expect, excluded Adult is the most disabling of the three exclusions in terms of the person's intensity of discounting.

Often discounting can occur without an ego-state pathology. In these cases, it is simply the result of a person's Adult being uninformed or misinformed. For instance, an overweight woman decides to go on a slimming diet. She stops eating bread, potatoes and pasta.

Instead, she takes nuts and cheese. In fact, the nuts and cheese have more calories per ounce than the foods she's given up. She discounts this fact simply because she doesn't know about it.

Detecting discounts

You know that discounting, not observable in itself, can be inferred by the person's showing any of the four passive behaviours. There are many other ways of detecting discounts.

Driver behaviour always indicates a discount. Remember that when I show a driver, I am internally replaying the script belief: 'I'm only OK *if* I ...Try Hard, Please Others etc.' The reality is that I'm OK whether or not I follow these driver messages.

The Schiff's specify certain *thinking disorders* as clues to discounting. One of these is *over-detailing*. Asked a simple question, the person showing this disorder will reply with a long tirade of minute details. Overgeneralisation is the opposite of this, in which the person expresses ideas only in sweeping, global terms. 'Well, my problem is something huge. People are after me. Things are getting me down.'

Verbal clues

One of the skills of TA is to identify discounting by listening to the words people use. In the examples we have given in this chapter, we have chosen words that made it clear the speaker was discounting. In everyday conversation, the verbal clues to discounting are usually more subtle.

In theory, what we are listening for is straightforward. We know the speaker is discounting when she says something in which information about reality is ignored or distorted. The difficulty in practice is that everyday speech is full of discounts, so much so that we become desensitised to them. We need to re-learn the skill of listening to what is really being said and testing each statement against reality.

For instance, when someone says, 'I can't...' he will most often be discounting. The test is to ask yourself: 'Well, can he, either now or sometime?'

'I'll try to...' is usually a discount, since what it implies is usually 'I'll try to, but I won't do it'.

The same is true of all other driver wording. Be Strong discounts are particularly common.

'What you say is boring me'.

'I'm baffled by this problem'.

'A thought just crossed my mind'.

Sometimes a discount is signalled by leaving out part of the sentence. For instance, a member of a TA group may look around the other members and announce: 'I want a hug'.

She doesn't say whom she wants a hug from. She is omitting information relevant to the solution of her problem – how to get the hug she wants – and her request thus entails a discount.

Non-verbal clues

Equally important is the skill of identifying discounts from non-verbal clues. Here, the discount is signalled by a mismatch between the words being said and the non-verbal signals that go with them. This mismatching is called *incongruity*.

For example, a teacher asks his pupil: 'Do you understand the assignment I've given you?' The pupil replies 'Sure'. But at the same time he puckers his brow and scratches his head. If the teacher is alert to 'thinking Martian', he will ask more questions to check whether his pupil is discounting.

Incongruity does not always indicate discounting. For instance, the chairman of a meeting stands up and pronounces: 'Today, we have a lot of work ahead of us.' But as he makes this serious statement, he beams round the table. His 'Martian' signals simply: 'and I'm glad to see you all here'.

Gallows laughter

One frequent indication of a discount is *gallows laughter*. Here, the person laughs when making a statement about something unpleasant.

'Oh! That was silly of me, ha, ha, ha!'

'Hee, hee, hee I sure got the better of him'

'Had a bit of a bump in the car on the way over here, ho, ho!'

In gallows there is incongruity between the laugh and the painful content of the words.

Whenever someone gives a gallows laugh, smile or chuckle, he is making a non-verbal invitation to the listeners to reinforce one of his script beliefs. The invitation is accepted on psychological level if the listeners join in the gallows laughing. For instance, the person who says, 'I'm silly, ha, ha' is in script, inviting the listeners to join his laughter and thus 'confirm' his script belief: 'I can't think'.

The straight response to gallows laughter is to refuse to join in the laughing or smiling. You may also say: 'That's not funny', if you are in a situation where it is socially appropriate to do so.

Exercise:

You have already practised the skill of 'thinking Martian'. Now you can refine this skill by distinguishing the non-verbals that signal discounts from those that do not. In fact, it is not always possible to tell clearly from someone's non-verbal signals whether he is discounting. If it is important for you to know, you may have to check your impressions by questioning.