

# Problems With Difficult People? Learn To Take Control

By Nick Adde  
Special to the Times

Everybody gets along with somebody, but nobody gets along with everybody all the time. Often, two people just can't seem to coexist at all.

When somebody constantly rubs you the wrong way, the easiest thing to do is ignore that person. But that isn't always possible. Conflicting personalities often must work in the same offices, ride the same buses, attend the same social functions — regardless of choice.

Robert Mumford, a retired Navy captain who spent part of his career conducting management training courses, doesn't claim to have a universal solution for personality conflicts. But he does have a workable model to follow, for people who want to reach detente with constant adversaries.

Mumford, who lives in Gaithersburg, Md., teaches a course called "Handling Difficult People." The objective of the one-day, five-hour session is to establish enough self-confidence to positively redirect a sticky relationship.

He states from the first that he is no psychiatrist. When discussing difficult people, Mumford talks about practical ways of dealing with them. He spends a little time speculating on why a person chooses to be difficult.

A difficult person, for the sake of the course, is described by Mumford as someone who is "probably difficult to most people, most of the time. That person probably won't change. Situations sometimes change, but not always. "How you react will determine how much change will take place.

Mumford's main tool for dealing with difficult people is a technique called transactional analysis (TA). He credits several books on TA and his own experiences in coping with difficult people with helping him formulate his ideas. But, he says, about 40 percent of the ideas he puts forth in his class are his own.

Mumford describes TA as a method for understanding communications, in both family and work situations. TA preserves the dignity of the individual: There are no good guys or bad guys.

In Mumford's scheme of things, the personality is broken down into "ego states," a system of feelings and behavior patterns. The three categories of ego state — parent, adult and child — are similar to but simpler than the Freudian ego, superego and id.

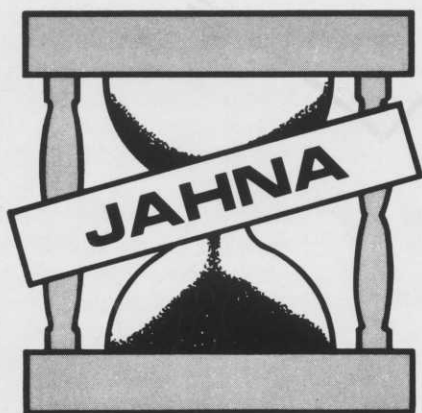
The parent ego state is subdivided into two more categories: the critical parent, who is opinionated and moral and sees error, and the nurturing parent, who is sympathetic and understanding.

The adult ego state is the processing part of personality. It is completely analytical.

The child ego state is also subdivided, this time into three categories.

The first is the natural child, who is uncensored and uncontrolled. Basic emotions — joy, love, anger — exist in the natural child in their purest forms.

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Then there is the adopted child, whose behavior has been modified by authority figures. A negative modification would be procrastination; a positive one, courtesy.

The third is the "little professor" who takes care of the creative, intuitive and manipulative instincts.

After discussing the three ego states and their subdivisions, Mumford then defines three interactive processes characteristic of a difficult person's behavior: stroking, stamps and games.

"Stroking is any act implying recognition of another's presence. It can be verbal, eye contact or touch. Stroking can be positive or negative. Saying hello to a person at the bus stop every day is a stroke, probably a positive one."

Everybody seeks a minimum amount of strokes each day, says Mumford. And they will do what ever is necessary to get them. If a person can't get a positive stroke, he will settle for a negative one. Difficult people have learned to seek negative strokes, says Mumford.

Stamps are unexpressed feelings people collect in the child ego state. They are "pasted" into a book, like trading stamps, to be "redeemed" for guilt-free behavior that expresses emotion. X amount of stamps might be redeemed for a good cry, for example.

Instead of amassing a big stamp collection, a healthy person expresses emotion at the time, says Mumford.

Games take place when emotions are regulated — in a working situation, for example. On the surface, a game may seem plausible or rational. But there is always an ulterior transaction taking place. These games are not fun, says Mumford. The payoff is always negative because games avoid intimacy and openness.

Mumford lists some "caveats" in dealing with difficult people. It's tough to change behavior, he says. He also warns class participants never to use TA tactics to "consolidate or win." The upper hand, he says, cannot be maintained. Finally, don't expect miracles. "Nothing works all of the time."

## TA IN ACTION

People who have taken Robert Mumford's course in handling difficult people say they have come away enlightened. Transactional analysis is not modern-day voodoo; it is a practical tool which can be used to diffuse tense situations.

Peter Kern, who analyzes data for a sheriff's department, says, "Now, when confronted by a difficult person, I not only know what to use, I know what not to use."

Mumford course made Doug Pray, a college student who works part-time in a ski shop, recognize faults within himself.

Bill Henning had his interests in TA whetted enough to

pursue the matter further. He has since read several books on the subject, he says.

The three men took Mumford's class with 14 other people, on a cold, blustery Sunday.

At that time, Kern says, he was taking the class only as a matter of interest. He had no specific difficult person in mind when he registered. "But the very next day, when I went back to work," says Kern, "a person in the office began giving me a hard time about the way I was dressed. I think he was just looking for a reason to make fun of me."

Instead of becoming defensive or getting angry, Kern responded by asking his would-be prosecutor analytical question. "I asked him why what I was wearing bothered him, using plenty of what/how questions," says Kern. "By doing this, I avoided giving him the payoff he was really after." That person, says Kern, isn't bothering him anymore.

Rather than direct any what/how questions to anyone in particular, Doug Pray took the points Mumford expressed in another direction — inward. "Everybody in some way is guilty of being difficult — in the terms Bob illustrated," he says.

Pray pointed out that even though Mumford didn't go into that facet, "If you're under a lot of pressure, you can help yourself with the same analytical approach." Pray works with most of the other 11 people in the ski shop on a "peer level." But, he says, "Some — myself, my peers and my superiors included — don't always take criticism well." Kern thinks he found a way to come to terms with his own and his peers' emotions.

Bill Henning, who is an oceanographic engineer, says he uses what he learned "both at home and when dealing with customers." One particular customer Henning encountered since taking the course was particularly livid — and rightfully so. "The problems he had were our fault."

"But he was so upset, there was no talking to him for quite a while." Finally, Henning was able to "get into what was actually going on" by responding analytically rather than emotionally. "We got past the anger," says Henning, "and into the matter of discussing what was needed to correct the problem." ■

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