

TEN CONCEPTS IN TREATING ALCOHOLICS WITH TA

by Stephen B. Karpman, M.D.*

Transactional analysis provides a new approach and therefore new insights into the treatment of alcoholism. The following paper brings together six years experience in running alcoholic groups at the Center for Special Problems, a city clinic in San Francisco. During that time, ten TA concepts emerged as most useful and were emphasized frequently in the group setting.

1. **"THROWING IT ALL AWAY"**. I found this position to be at the core of the alcoholic script. As a youth the alcoholic was taught in so many ways that he/she was worthless, so in later years whenever he/she accumulated anything of worth, the impulse was to "throw it all away" in order to return to the customary state of being "less worth", or worthless. In one example, a man as a youth had worked for two years as a paperboy to save money for his first bicycle, but his parents took the money away for their own use, as "punishment." In later life he stripped himself of worth by accumulating a job and family, then "throwing it all away" by drinking.

2. **"TRY AND STOP ME IF YOU CAN."** In "Games People Play," Eric Berne presented this as the *thesis* of the Alcoholic Game. This is the challenge the alcoholic offers others to deal with. On occasion, if the Rescuers got hot on the trail of solving the game, the alcoholic will raise the stakes of the game and add to the complexity to make it more and more difficult to solve.

3. **"EVERYBODY IS TRYING TO DEPRIVE ME."** Eric Berne presents this as the *payoff* of the Alcoholic Game, or the net result of feeling after all the moves are played. Forces of Rescuers and Persecutors will have gathered to deprive the alcoholic of their alcohol, possessions, friends, etc. Childhood experiences of deprivation, often at the hands of unpredictable alcoholic parents, sets the stage for the later life use of alcohol to reconfirm their childhood decision that "everybody is trying to deprive me." Even while sober, the alcoholic may feel "deprived" of their alcohol and collect deprivation "trading stamps." Their Child may later trade these in for the free prize, the deserved drunk, after enough worth had been accumulated to require the "throwing it all away."

4. **THE "DON'T THINK" INJUNCTION.** This is the key script injunction from Claude Steiner's book. "Games Alcoholics Play" and his later update, "Healing Alcoholism" which are recommended reading for the group. The "Don't Think" injunction appears in a variety of forms and needs to be confronted repeatedly in the group. The alcoholic will attempt to create a non-thinking environment in the group, encouraging (episcripting) others to not think and making it difficult to confront the alcoholic on their own non-thinking. The "Don't Think" injunction, which rules as a Parent inside the Child Ego State, virtually prohibits the person's return to the Adult ego state and the sobriety that comes from the Adult control. Whereas the social drinker may only decommission the Parent ego state while drinking, the alcoholic will also decommission the Adult ego state, and be left to act without reason in drinking excessively or driving drunk and endangering the lives of others. (fig. 1)

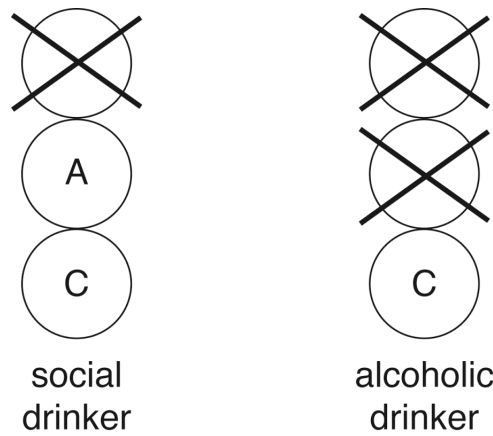


fig. 1

5. **THE GALLOWS LAUGH.** This is another Steiner concept from the books listed above. The alcoholic talks about their drinking with such humor (while winking or flashing a broad smile) that others are conned into smiling back. The alcoholic will then misread these smiles as approval and permission to keep on drinking, or go even further with the drinking to get even more smiles. A T.A. therapist will alert the group to the gallows transaction, and advise the patient with a "that's not funny" confrontation or analyze the transaction and the motives behind it.

6. **"GOT IT MADE."** This is the first of three "Slip Slogans" I found heralded the slip from Adult ego state (decision to not drink) to Child ego state (scripted to throw it all away) (fig 2). The alcoholic can learn to listen and monitor himself/herself internally to heed these warning slogans in the Child self, and then get back into Adult control. These slip slogans incidentally, apply to all slips from Adult control to Child "giving up," e.g., late in a game a team may feel they "Got it Made" and throw away the lead, or throw it away by saying "Aw What the Hell," or by being mad at a teammate or management with a "I'll Show You."

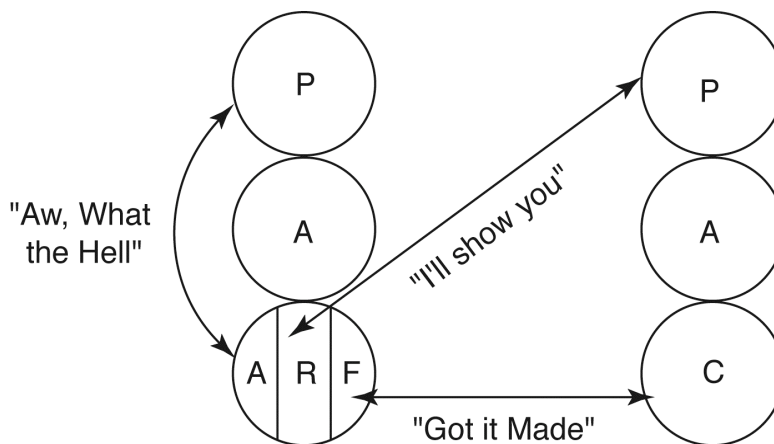


fig. 2 The three "slip slogans"

In "Got it Made," the alcoholic is high in an ungrounded, unprotected Free Child and feels that *this time* they can drink. They feel connected to the Child ego state of others as illustrated above.

7. **"I'LL SHOW YOU."** In the second slip slogan, the alcoholic is in the Rebel Child ego state, reacting to the presumptuousness of the Critical Parent in others who is ordering him not to drink or harassing him with reminders of his problem. The rebellion into the "I'll Show You" drinking position is for revenge and to prove that they can't be beaten down, but also to *really* show someone how bad they can be. If there is syrupy coercion from the Nurturing Parent ("Oh, you sweet thing, I know you won't drink, just for me") they will likewise rebel to prove that phony sweet talk cannot rob them of their freedom (and they don't deserve such faith anyway).

8. **"AW, WHAT THE HELL."** In the third slip slogan, the hook to the Child comes from their own Critical Parent who has worn down the Adapted Child with self-deprecating background chatter and relentless accusations that they are "lazy, crazy, sick, stupid, bad, and ugly." Among other things, therapy can teach them how to turn off the tapes and create a healthier internal environment.

9. **DRAMA TRIANGLE.** The Drama Triangle (*fig. 3*) is useful in analyzing the roles and switches during social game playing. The Alcoholic Game can be played wet (with alcohol) or dry (without alcohol), and at a first degree (socially acceptable), second degree (socially embarrassing), and third degree (destructive) level. The alcoholic is particularly needy and susceptible to the excitement, drama, and chaos of the game because of the underlying problem of loneliness and boredom common to all alcoholics (a child discouraged from enjoying people and enjoying things).

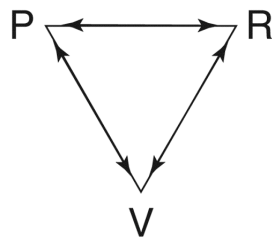


fig. 3 The Drama Triangle

In therapy group, the alcoholic learns to prepare for the Persecutors, Rescuers, and Victims in the world; the 1) Persecutors who want him/her drunk, or will tell alcoholic myths ("you're no fun if you don't drink"), or will kick the vulnerable just to be mean; the 2) Rescuers who want to feel needed, to keep someone needy, and to see the problem in someone other than themselves; and the 3) Victims who will "need" a drinking partner, ask for help which they will never listen to, or will drain the helpers and Rescuers until they need a drink too, as the new Victims in the game. The line between helping and Rescuing is clarified in the group (Rescuers feel driven to help, Rescuers wind up Victims when the help isn't used, and Rescuers buy the Victims pitch "*You're the only one in the world who can help me*").

With the Drama Triangle, games are pointed out in the group, such as the Corner Game in which an alcoholic appears to be ready to start drinking again as the Victim. If the therapist, as Rescuer, doesn't want to think the worst and says nothing, this is taken as tacit permission to drink. If the therapist does point out the predictable clues, the alcoholic can be hurt and offended by the lack of confidence, see the therapist as accusing Persecutor, and be justified in drinking.

10. **PARENT, ADULT, AND CHILD.** T.A. reading is encouraged and patients like the identity of being in a labeled "TA group," possibly as a replacement for a less healthy family of origin. The T.A. concept of Adult control of the Parent and Child is highly useful. AA is encouraged to complement therapy and to strengthen Parent (*fig. 4*). T.A. can be used to remove patient blocks to accepting AA. The AT in the diagram stands for Antabuse therapy, which has been used regularly with good results to quiet the Child illusions of being able to drink.

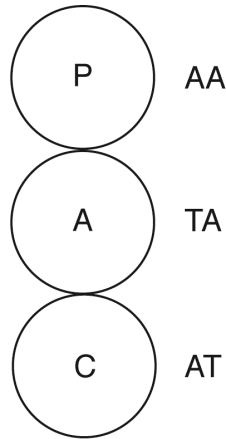


fig. 4 Combined treatment approach

Group notes. The group discussed in this paper had a large on-going drop-in membership in addition to a core group of regulars. It functioned as a protected, fun, support group that gave information and insight therapy, and had the additional aim of replacing the bar as a primary social network. If a person arrived intoxicated, they could sit and listen but were required not to speak. If a person made a drink sound tasty, I may expose the game from my Child by saying "sounds delicious" to the laughter and relief of the group members who were getting scared at the unchallenged temptation; or from my Adult I may say "It sounds like you want to get us all drunk;" or for Parent I would ask a longtime AA member what he thought, and he may use an effective retort such as "You can hear this at any old bar." Hooks and games were regularly pointed out. There was time allowed for congenial pastiming. General goals in the group were Sobriety, Support and getting Smarter about drinking.

This paper, about alcoholic groups in an outpatient setting, is a follow-up to an earlier paper ("Alcoholic Instant Group Therapy" T.A.B. 4:16) on alcoholic groups on a closed acute psychiatric ward.

*This article was originally published as: Karpman, S. (1981). Ten concepts in treating alcoholics with T.A. Bulletin of the Eric Berne Seminar. 3(4), 6-9. Reformatted for the website www.KarpmanDramaTriangle.com. Copyright © 1981, 2006 by Stephen B. Karpman, M.D. All rights reserved. Downloads free.