

GAMES PEOPLE PLAY

by Eric Berne

INSIGHTS BY:

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ABOUT:

This is a comprehensive summary of the book *Games People Play* by Eric Berne. Covering the key ideas and proposing practical ways for achieving what's mentioned in the text. Written by book fanatic and online librarian Ivaylo Durmonski. (Printable available only for supporting members.)

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Our inner need to get recognition from others is the prime motivator for our manipulative behavior.
- Allowing the ego-state of the Child to take over when we need the Adult is the most common reason for behaving incompetently.
- Growing up requires being fully open with both others and yourself about your abilities and inabilities.

ABSTRACT:

Games People Play exposes the secret ploys and unconscious maneuvers (labeled as games by the author) of our psyche and why they are essential for our psychological well-being. The first part of the book introduces the hidden social transactions that are part of our daily interactions along with the 3 different ego states: the Child, the Parent, and the Adult. Once the transactional analysis is explained, Dr. Eric Berne walks us through the technicalities of the social games we engage in - what are the most common games, how we play them, and why.

THE CORE IDEA:

Our behaviors can be viewed as games where the main goal is to receive recognition from the rest of the players. Recognition-hunger, the author argues, is a need that is substantially more important than food-hunger. The bulk of our activities when around others are to collect favorable transactions in the forms of strokes – a hug, a pat, a nice comment, the feeling that we are better than the rest. Plainly, evidence that others acknowledge our existence and the value our physical presence brings to the table.

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KEY LESSONS FROM GAMES PEOPLE PLAY:

- LESSON #1: WHY GAMES ARE NEEDED
- LESSON #2: WE HAVE THREE DIFFERENT EGO STATES
- LESSON #3: THE PREREQUISITE FOR THE GAMES
- LESSON #4: LEARN FROM THE GAMES WE PLAY
- LESSON #5: HOW TO REACH ADULTHOOD

LESSON #1:

WHY GAMES ARE NEEDED

What exactly is a game?

Don't let the word game mislead you. The author stresses the fact that social games don't imply having fun or being pleasantly entertained.

Commonly, the end of the game is catastrophic for both the player and the people around him.

A game in the book means that people mask their real wants and needs in some sort of play with an insidious plot.

This is needed for various reasons. First, to protect the vulnerable inner Child that is afraid of being socially mocked. And second, in case the plot doesn't play out the way it was designed, to easily escape the social situation.

For instance, the game Wooden Leg refers to our tendency to cover up our bad behavior as a disease. For example, if we drink too much. The emphasis is shifted from “I am a sinner” to “What do you expect from a sick man?”

Why games are played?

On top of the just mentioned, the other main reason we strategically construct sophisticated games is to receive recognition from others. Also, for these reasons...

After the infant is separated from the mother. He begins his quest for both stimulus-hunger (physical intimacy) and recognition-hunger (the need to be recognized by others). These two are needed as the need for food and water.

We are social animals. We need not only to be around others. But to feel that others recognize us and see us as valuable citizens in the world we live in.

To achieve this manic desire to feel good, we play these social games where we set the stage in such a way, so we can come out victorious.

A victory is presented with a stroke. A recognition of some sort.

Dr. Berne actually labels this as a transaction. Expect your biological needs – food, water, sex – you are in the market for social transactions that are paid to you by stroke – a pat on the back, a nice comment, a hug, a medal, the magical feeling when

you are right and others are wrong.

If you are regularly deprived of these transactions, “your spinal cord will shrivel up” as the author states. Plainly, you will feel unappreciated, alone, and your emotional state will quickly deteriorate.

The other interesting thing is that the more recognition we receive. The more we want it in our daily lives.

An example the author share is of a famous actor. His famousness requires hundreds of strokes – sometimes even per day. While in contrast, a professor in a local school might be satisfied with one per week.

“Stroking’ may be used as a general term for intimate physical contact; in practice it may take various forms. Some people literally stroke an infant; others hug or pat it, while some people pinch it playfully or flip it with a fingertip.” Eric Berne

LESSON #2:

WE HAVE THREE DIFFERENT EGO STATES

You've surely noticed how some adults who are very serious in their day-to-day life sometimes act like a 5-year-old. Or, a 5-year-old to cease his game with his toys and attempt to read a newspaper like a grown-up.

These shifts in moods, feelings, posture, and overall behavior are due to our different ego states.

The book categorizes our overall existence in three ego states that we all have and enable depending on the situation.

The fancy names of these states are extero-psycho, neo-psycho, and archaic-psycho ego states. However, the following three are mainly used in the book for simplicity: Parent, Adult, Child.

The point is that we shift between these three behavior patterns several times during the day.

Probably the social situation requires playfulness – the need to entertain your boss’s child. When this is the case, you shift your serious look to a friendly smile and start behaving like a clown.

More technically, as the names of the ego states imply, we have:

- **Parent:** Your mental state is such of a parent. You use a vocabulary and a posture of a parent.
- **Adult:** You consider the situation objectively and you take an autonomous decision about how to move forward.
- **Child:** You react emotionally to a situation without giving much thought and consideration – like a child would.

As mentioned, these states “activate” in different moments during the day.

All of them are important. Even if you consider yourself old, you need to morph occasionally into the Child state – to have genuine fun. And quite logically, you have to behave like an Adult for most of the time to survive – don’t jump off cliffs and surely don’t say everything that goes through your mind.

Sadly, as you can imagine. It’s not like we have a switch that can allow us to activate Adult or Child when we desire. These ego states take over depending on the situation.

The most disconcerting thing we do – which is actually the main thing behind the games we play. Is that we act like a Child when the situation requires an Adult.

For instance, in the game labeled as “See What You Made Me Do.” You blame others for your mistakes – i.e., someone interrupts you while you are doing something which causes you to drop the thing on the floor.

In this scenario, we get angry at the intruder and use the situation to unleash a wave of full-force anger.

What actually happens is that we do what we do because we want to be perceived as blameless. We cover our mistakes to appear faultless – exactly like a child would do.

“If the Child in the individual is confused and unhealthy, then the consequences may be unfortunate, but something can and should be done about it.” Eric Berne

LESSON #3:

THE PREREQUISITE FOR THE GAMES

An eternal question every mortal battles with is how to structure his life. A question that is so complex that we constantly seek the assistance of others.

After you are done with your homework. Your job. Your chores. Or after you greeted the person next to you. An inevitable next question arises: “What’s next?”

Sitting idle is rarely an option. Internally, we desire to engage in some sort of exchange with the person next to us. Not so much because we want to know them. But because we want them to know *us*. And, to have something to do.

Besides the need for recognition. We also have a never-expiring appetite for structure-hunger. Namely, how do we structure our free time? What we should do with our free time?

Structure-hunger expresses our need to avoid boredom.

We might think that we want peace and alone time, but when left with no one to speak to and nothing to do. Our experience quickly deteriorates. We start to seek ways to be emotionally aroused.

Commonly, with the progression of a relationship, the social programming the author labels as rules for exchange when amongst others – i.e., commonly adopted manners like don't belch while you eat. The transactions between subjects transition into a quest for individual satisfaction – individual programming.

Or plainly, games.

Don't get excited. When the author says playing games, this doesn't mean that these activities are fun. It's more sophisticated.

In particular, a carefully arranged setting where individuals are looking – as stated in the book – “to obtain as many satisfactions as possible from his transactions with other members.”

When you meet someone. At some point, one or the other will open his mouth – acknowledging the presence of others. This now social interaction sets the stage for a game.

The more you get to know someone. The more the game is intensified. The manners that your parents taught you are no longer followed. You are using the social dynamic to make others stroke your own spine and gain satisfaction.

In simple terms, your actions are carefully arranged so you can receive praise from others. All of this, so you can nurture your lonely or hurt Child.

The need for recognition has a survival value. Children are not afraid of expressing their needs when they are still young. They will come and cuddle when they are afraid or when they need emotional support. Adults, in contrast, mask these needs in layers of interactions (games).

A simple example from the book is the following:

“Salesman: ‘This one is better, but you can’t afford it.’

Housewife: ‘That’s the one I’ll take.’” Eric Berne

In this case, the salesman – who is apparently well-versed in human psychology – is directly targeting the housewife’s inner Child.

If the housewife was to reply using the Adult ego state. She would have stated something like: “Indeed, what you’re suggesting is not something I can afford considering my income.”

However, since the housewife wants to prove to the arrogant fellow – and to herself! – that she’s worthy of possessing what’s suggested – i.e., she earns enough like the rest of the people who are purchasing this equipment. She quickly accepts the offer.

“If the maid rebels during a discussion of dishwashing, the

Adult-Adult conversation about dishes is finished; there can only ensue either a Child-Parent discourse, or a discussion of a different Adult subject, namely her continued employment.” Eric Berne

LESSON #4:

LEARN FROM THE GAMES WE PLAY

As we learned so far, we can't stand boredom. We are hungry for both recognition (recognition hunger) and for having something to do (structure-hunger).

Since it's unwise to express your true wants and needs openly, we masterfully mask these in the so-called games.

I must confess. I'm guilty of playing a lot of the games mentioned in the book – we all are. What's interesting is that somewhere during the process of reading, you realize how flawed you are. But this is good.

The main benefit this book provides is that it will help you spot your own flaws and see what others commonly do to hide theirs.

This knowledge can be used so you can further improve your relationship with other people and with yourself.

While the text provides a wide variety of games and how they are played.

I'm going to mention only a couple of them – the ones I found most interesting:

GAME: DEBTOR

A young man buys an expensive apartment putting him in great debt. People are cheering him. The world is commonly rewarding such actions. After all, everyone is doing it.

And while the man thinks that the new purchase will lead to eternal happiness. Life soon starts to feel aimless again. So, more and more debts are collected to restore the happy state of the person.

The possible outcomes here are few.

If the person can regularly cover his bills, he will enjoy the perks he gets. If he has occasional trouble with the monthly bills, he will enjoy the chase between him and the bank – the “Catch Me if You Can” game.

If the person is in a social situation where others are sharing their lavish lives but he has little to contribute to the conversation. He will play a game of “If It Weren't for the Debts.” Putting him again in an advantageous position.

The game becomes serious when the person doesn't have money. At this point, if the bank needs to collect the apartment. The person feels justified in his actions to feel angry at the bank. He labels them as greedy and enjoys his status as a "Good Joe" in front of his friends.

GAME: KICK ME

The main player of this game wears a sign saying, "Please Don't Kick Me." Eventually, life does its thing and he gets kicked. At this point, the person is agitated and depressed. He moves to a state of, "Why does this always happen to me?" (WAHM).

Obviously, others also have misfortunes. But internally, he's convinced that his troubles are worse than what the rest of the folks are experiencing. This provides him with an all-access pass to whine about his troubles and inner expectation is set that the surrounding people should support him.

GAME: NOW I'VE GOT YOU, YOU SON OF A BITCH

The deep existential reasoning behind Now I've Got You, You Son Of A Bitch (NIGYSOB) is extremely simple: The person is convinced that people can't be trusted.

He is constantly monitoring the actions of others and only looking for opportunities to interfere and judge their behavior.

By finding flaws in the actions of others, his vigor anger is

justified. He can scream and shout.

However, internally, the NIGYSOB player avoids confrontation of his own deficiencies. He has flaws, but he doesn't have the courage to share them. That's why he is on a constant lookout to find issues in the behavior of others.

GAME: COPS AND ROBBERS

Externally, the Cops and Robbers games is about material rewards. That's the aim of the functioning Adult – rob a bank and don't get caught. Internally, the game the Child is playing is hide and seek.

As any parent knows, the child always wants to be caught. Not immediately. But after a certain period of time – when there is enough suspense. Hiding is fun. But getting caught is the desired payoff the child seeks when playing hide and seek.

The same is happening when Cops and Robbers is played in the real world. Players who are not caught by the police go away with it mainly due to luck rather than skill – or if they are professional robbers who are able to manage their issues.

Internally, however, the inner Child wants to be caught. And when this happens, the Adult loses – goes to jail.

And finally, on the existential side, the person playing Cops are Robbers holds the thought of "I've always been a loser." Getting caught confirms this.

GAME: THEY'LL BE GLAD THEY KNEW ME

This is considered a good game. In this setting, the person is working hard to gain prestige. Not mainly for his advantages, but to prove to his friends and former colleagues that his character was worthy of respect and admiration.

Winning here is described by creating a worthy life, business, family. This game is superior to any other game because while surely the aims are to prove to others his greatness, his ambitions are primarily noble.

“Many games are played most intensely by disturbed people; generally speaking, the more disturbed they are, the harder they play.” Eric Berne

LESSON #5:

HOW TO REACH ADULTHOOD

The best thing about this book is not the vivid examples. Not even the type of games we play. But why do we play them?

In all the games. The end goal of the person is to gain recognition from the other players because of some repressed childhood dramas. The whole play revolves around pleasures that were suppressed or not provided to the Child when he/she was little. Probably not being cared for, didn't receive enough attention – or received too much attention.

The application of the book is not only to learn about what we and others do. But equally why you do what you do. Once you figure out your issues – and why you have them. You will better approach the games you create or get involved in.

But besides this knowledge, the book ends with a framework that can assist us in becoming autonomous figures and gain the

strength we need to fight our own inner problems.

In particular, to finally become adults.

According to the author, adulthood is reached when the following three conditions are met:

AWARENESS

It might sound simple, but gaining awareness is probably the hardest thing we all have to do in our daily lives.

Awareness, as explained in the book, is about living in the here and now.

Being fully present in the moment and the avoidance of thinking about what happened before or what will happen a moment from now.

How to channel our thoughts in the present and prevent our minds from constantly thinking about past problems and potential future disasters?

We must unlearn.

During our development. We were taught to analyze, to compare, to think about all the possible outcomes. All of this, prevents us from experiencing what's currently happening.

In short, awareness is keeping the mind exactly where the body

is. Not going through all the scenarios if you are late for work. But allowing yourself to enjoy the current surroundings while traveling to the desired destination.

SPONTANEITY

This means being unafraid and having the freedom to freely express your inner feelings.

As you can imagine, not every social situation comes with the option for us to be spontaneous. There are bosses to please and other people that force us to carefully consider our choice of words and our actions.

If you can find an environment that doesn't require hiding your true self. A group of people who do not force you to modify your thoughts to fit the situation. This will lead to liberation. The safe feeling of being and enjoying who you are.

INTIMACY

The author puts it like this: "Intimacy means the spontaneous, game-free candidness of an aware person, the liberation of the eidetically perceptive, uncorrupted Child in all its naïveté living in the here and now."

When we are young, our thoughts are still uncorrupted. Thus, we naturally express our emotions without considering what others might think or say. As the years pile up, however. We get more concerned about how we should respond to others. This prevents

candidness and sets the stage for games.

To resurrect intimacy, we need to first work on the previous two – awareness and spontaneity. Once we are liberated from the social norms, we can again be a loving child who is unafraid of showing it.

“Awareness requires living in the here and now, and not in the elsewhere, the past or the future. A good illustration of possibilities in American life, is driving to work in the morning in a hurry. The decisive question is: ‘Where is the mind when the body is here?’ Eric Berne

ACTIONABLE NOTES:

- **Mature and immature:** There is no such thing as an immature person. We simply allow the Child ego state to be the dominant behavior for us. Usually, this means that we have some unresolved problems from the past – when we were young. Or, we simply can't adequately control our emotions which in terms translates into inappropriate and unproductive behavior. To transition from immature to mature person. Inner work needs to be done. The starting point is figuring out what type of games you play and why you play them.
- **What do you expect of yourself?** When a patient who uses a certain problem to justify his lack of results asks, "What do you expect from an ill man?" A good therapist would respond, "I don't expect anything. The question is, what do you expect of yourself?" The easiest thing a person can do is to hide behind an illness. Sadly, this illness can be indeed a huge obstacle for the person. And yet, if the common reaction is defensive. This person will never progress in life. If you expect too little from yourself, you will achieve little. If the expectations are high. Eventually, a high reward will be reached.
- **Choose your games:** Playing social games is inevitable. Not only because games are passed from generations. But also because society doesn't respond well to candidness – except in a private setting. Being open means being vulnerable. The inner Child fears this. So, a mask is placed and a game is played. To maneuver in a social setting with little at stake, you set the stage for a game. The question is: What type of games you are primarily playing? What

are you not saying? What issues are you disguising? A major part of understanding your inner motives starts with understanding the games you play. Once you have a better understanding.

Change from destructive games to constructive.

- **Child to Adult:** All of this talk about games begs the question: At what point do you stop playing games and you start functioning as an Adult? Towards the end of the book, the author presents a conversation between a patient and a therapist. The conversation is labeled as jerk-free, game-free discussion. A genuine talk between two Adults. The main thing that stands out from this sections is that people who don't play games are 100% honest. This means that growing up is basically being 100% open. The words you use are not meant to deceive. You are not trying to set a stage or influence the conversation. For instance, you don't say: "This is the last time I'll be late." You say: "I have a new project – being on time." The first implies that if the person is late the next time, he can complain about something. The second is an Adult decision. It's a project that the person will work on.
- **Living in the moment:** Too much time is spent worrying about past actions or fantasizing about future possibilities. It turns out that little time is devoted to what's happening right now. Our physical presence doesn't accurately represent our real location. Commonly, our mind is elsewhere. Not in the car driving. But at the door of his office – preparing a scrip if we are late for work. A large part of becoming a functional adult is being fully present. Living in the here and now and not trying to escape the current situation. And most importantly, living in the moment means that you are fully alive. You engage with your surroundings and you start to enjoy your life as it happens, not as what will happen at some point.

COMMENTARY

A large part of our survival requires things beyond food and water. We desperately need emotional stability and recognition from others.

Erick Berne argues that recognition-hunger (the need to be recognized by others) is one of the most powerful motivators in the world. Stronger than hunger and desire for sex.

This need is the precondition for the games we play.

And as you can imagine from the title itself. Games People Play categorizes the usual behaviors of people disguised as psychological “games” in common social dynamics.

Some of the mentioned games in the book are easily recognizable. Like the famous I’m Only Trying To Help You, where you give random advice to people knowing that it won’t help much but masking it as a genuine recommendation based on your experience. Eventually, when people confront the usefulness of your suggestion, you explain that it’s based on “proven” evidence and then you label them as ungrateful.

Or, Why Don’t You - Yes But - the other classic. In this game, someone is expressing his difficulties and others start to offer suggestions - e.g., “Why don’t you get another job?” To this, there is always a counterargument from the complainer, “Yes, but I can’t

because...” In these situations, the person who is whining is simply looking for reassurance to his problems, not solutions.

There is a lot you can learn from this book. Not only quickly spot what type of games people around you are playing. Why do they play them yourself. But also find cracks in your own psyche.

Key takeaway:

Living a game-free life where you don't have to constantly think about your next move clashes with how we are programmed. People don't respond well to honesty – the component that is needed for an adult conversation.

NOTABLE QUOTES:

“The solitary individual can structure time in two ways: activity and fantasy.” Eric Berne

“An operation is a simple transaction or set of transactions undertaken for a specific, stated purpose. If someone frankly asks for reassurance and gets it, that is an operation. If someone asks for reassurance, and after it is given turns it in some way to the disadvantage of the giver, that is a game. Superficially, then, a game looks like a set of operations, but after the payoff it becomes apparent that these ‘operations’ were really manoeuvres; not honest requests but moves in the game.” Eric Berne

“To hurry is to neglect that environment and to be conscious only of something that is still out of sight down the road, or of mere obstacles, or solely of oneself.” Eric Berne

WORKSHEET

Reading alone won't help you understand the actionable notes. You need to engage with the content. Answer the question below to plan your next steps:

1/ How often do you let the Child ego state to take over control?

2/ It's not about what others expect from you. But what do you expect from yourself?

3/ Define what type of games you commonly play and why:

4/ Are you in an environment where you can freely express yourself?

5/ Where is commonly your mind when the body is here?

THANKS FOR READING!

Ivaylo Durmonski

