

WE'RE NORMALLY NOT NEUROTIC by Pam Levin Landheer

The word "neurotic" is often bandied about rather loosely: especially in relation to that vague but omnipresent class of people known as "them" who are distinct from "us."

According to Taber's Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary, "neurotic" means ... a minor mental or psychic disorder irrespective of etiology." Many people, including conscientious clinicians, use the word neurotic to refer to processes which are normal in children. They are also normal processes of the inner Child in all of us. Eric Berne pointed out that although these inner processes develop during childhood, they do not drop away, but remain active throughout adult life. In other words, they are normal, and not neurotic. They occur naturally and are not the result of disease.

Eric called them ego states because they are states of the self - different ways of being which we have available in each moment. In so doing, he restored the dignity of these processes to their rightful place as the normal, respectable functions of everyday people.

However true his observations may have been, ego states are not consistent with what we have been taught to believe about people. Unfortunately, clinicians are no exception to the furthering of some of the old, societal definitions of what is supposed to be normal and what is not.

Eric Berne gave names to the ego states. The Natural Child, the Little Professor, the Adult, the Witch Mother or Troll Father, and the Parent ego state are all names familiar to us as parts of the personality drawn in stacked circles and enclosed in a larger, unifying circle.

These states of our self develop during childhood. The Natural Child begins to function at birth, saying "I exist! Feed me, touch me, love me, play with me. I need, I want, I feel, I am!" At about six months, we begin to develop our Little Professor when we learn to sit up, walk, talk, crawl, and explore the world by tasting, touching, smelling, seeing, and hearing. Next, having fed our senses and gained a sensory, kinesthetic knowledge of the world, we break out of the dependency relating of our early years as we develop our Adult ego state. Beginning sometime between one and a half to two years, we push and test our caretakers, we act demanding, have temper tantrums, and exert ourselves with "No! "We want to be separate, individuals with our own position, capable of thinking for ourselves.

Next, between three and six years of age, we create our own personal identity. We decide who we are, what it means to be the sex we are. We test our power by experimenting with what effect we have on others. Eric Berne called this part the Witch Parent or Troll Father because it contains our script injunctions. I prefer to call it the SuperNatural Child, both because it's above the Natural Child, and because it serves a healthy function as the connecting center or switchboard of our personality. The course of our development here is central to the next stage, where, between about ages six through twelve, we form our Parent ego state. We concentrate on the how-tos of life as we learn the skills necessary

for survival in a social world. We learn how to tie our shoelaces, cross the street, cross up the teacher, read and write, and even moralize.

Thus equipped with all our ego states, we go through the turbulent times of adolescence. We develop our sexual self as we re-visit in brief but rapid succession all the earlier stages, thus unifying our personality from all the component parts.

Many developmental theories end there, as if to infer that's all there is. However, such is not the case, a fact to which those of us who've lived beyond eighteen can readily attest. We continue to grow, there is life after puberty, it's just that we don't continue to grow new ego states. Instead, we merely add sophistication to the processes of the ones we already have. In other words, it's really normal to continue the basic processes of childhood in more sophisticated form. It's not neurotic to want to be fed, played with, have room to explore become negativistic, test our power, develop new morals, become sexually active. These are our natural, health promoting processes.

Well, we might then ask, what is neurotic? Perhaps we need a new definition of a mental disorder which includes, first, that order is before disorder, and second, that it is not these processes in themselves, but the failure to develop sophistication in any one of them, which points to a problem.