Barefoot Psychotherapy, Reflection & Training

Pause, reflect, and heal with grounded intention



Understanding the PAC Model in Transactional Analysis

Have you ever caught yourself saying something and thought, “I sound just like my mum (or dad)”? Or maybe you’ve noticed moments when you react in a way that feels younger, maybe slamming a door, feeling small, or getting defensive even when you know you shouldn’t. That’s where the Parent, Adult, and Child model, often called the PAC model, can help.

It’s one of the central ideas in Transactional Analysis (TA) and offers a simple, practical way to understand how we think, feel, and behave in different situations.

The PAC Model

According to TA, our personality is made up of three “ego states”

- **PARENT** The part of us that copies or re-enacts what we saw and heard growing up.
- **ADULT** The part that thinks, reasons, and responds to what’s happening right now.
- **CHILD** The part that feels and reacts based on our early experiences and emotions.

These aren’t separate people inside you (I’m not saying that you have different personalities), they’re different mind states we move in and out of throughout daily life. Learning to recognise which one is active helps you gain insight into yourself and those around you.

The Parent Ego State

The Parent state is like an internal voice of authority, it holds the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours we absorbed from caregivers, teachers, and other role models. It's that critical voice in your ear that tells you that you're not enough, silly or going to fail.

It can sound like:

"You should know better."

"That's not good enough."

"Don't cry."

But the Parent ego state isn't all bad, it has two main sides:

- **Nurturing Parent** is caring, comforting, and protective. ("It's okay, take your time.")
- **Critical Parent** is rule-based, judgmental, or moralising. You might even use this state with the intention to protect someone you love, like a child for example. ("That's wrong, you need to do better.")

In therapy, we often explore how these internal voices shape our conversations with others, sometimes helping us feel safe and cared for, other times holding us back or fuelling self-criticism.

The Adult Ego State

The Adult is the part of us that lives in the present moment, it listens, observes, and makes decisions based on facts rather than old emotional patterns.

It might say things like:

"Let's look at the evidence."

"What are my options here?"

"I feel stressed right now, maybe I need a break."

When our Adult is active, we're grounded, rational, and able to respond instead of reactive. In therapy, the Adult state helps us slow things down, question automatic thoughts, and make choices that fit the current situation rather than replaying the past.

A strong Adult doesn't silence the Parent or Child though; it listens to both, considers their input, and makes the final call.

The Child Ego State

The Child is where your emotions, creativity, and spontaneity live, it's also where your early emotional memories sit, both joyful and painful.

Like the Parent, it has two main sides:

- **Free Child** is playful, expressive, imaginative, and curious.
- **Adapted Child** is compliant, anxious, or rebellious, shaped by what helped us feel safe or gain approval when we were younger.

When you find yourself people pleasing or avoiding conflict, your Adapted Child may be trying to stay safe. When you're laughing freely with friends, your Free Child is shining through.

How We Move Between Ego States

It's important to understand that we shift between these states all the time. A disagreement with a partner might start with your Adult, calm and logical, but slip into a Child ego state of mind (*"You never listen to me!"*) or Critical Parent (*"You always do this wrong."*)

In therapy, you can start to notice these shifts. Once you can see which ego state you're speaking from, you can begin to choose a different one, which allows you to create space for healthier, more balanced responses.

Ideas for using the PAC Model in Everyday Life

1. Notice your inner voice. Is it critical or caring?
2. Who does it remind you of? Whose voice is it?
3. Pause before reacting. Ask yourself: "Which part of me is speaking right now: Parent, Adult, or Child?"
4. If it's the critical parent voice, question how useful or relevant it is in this moment.
5. Stop, notice how old you are and where you are. You are not 'little you' anymore. Remind yourself that you have options, you can trust the Adult state (in the here and now) to look after you in this moment.
6. Strengthen your Adult, consider your options and make the adult voice louder!
7. Take a breath, name what you're feeling, and focus on the present moment. Your Adult ego state can help you pause, assess, and respond with awareness.
8. Soften your inner Nurturing Parent. Turn "You should have done better" into "You did your best, what can we learn next time?"
9. Reconnect with your Free Child. Do something creative or playful simply for the joy of it, not because it's productive or expected of you.

Why it Matters

Understanding these ego states helps you recognise emotional and behavioural patterns that have been embedded and around for years. You might discover that your Critical Parent fuels

perfectionism, or your Adapted Child keeps people-pleasing to avoid rejection or disappointing someone, (like a parent/caregiver). Making space to explore these states of mind safely (with compassion), will help you strengthen your Adult state so you can respond more calmly and confidently in everyday life.

The PAC model is not about blaming or judging yourself or others, it's about growing your awareness of self and gaining control of your state of mind.

Once you can recognise which part of you is leading in a situation, you can make conscious choices that align with who you are today, not who you were told to be. Exploring how these different parts of you interact, will help you step into a more balanced, authentic you.