

The 'OK' authors tell you how to keep it together

Reviewed by
Eve Glicksman

If *I'm OK — You're OK*, why do we need another book telling us we're not? Authors Amy Bjork Harris and Thomas A. Harris respond with *Staying OK*, the sequel to their 1969 best seller about having healthy relationships. Essentially, the new effort is more of the same, restyled in a how-to format.

Like the first book, *Staying OK* is based on the theories of Transactional Analysis, a school of psychotherapy developed by Eric Berne (*Games People Play*) in the 1950s. The premise of TA is that all of us are three persons in one: Child, Parent and Adult. The goal of TA is to liberate us from our limiting Parent and Child components so that our wise and winning Adult natures prevail.

Being OK, in a nutshell, means feeling our Adult is in control. To be OK, say the Harrises, we must overcome all the dos, don'ts, shoulds and musts rooted in our childhoods that cause us to feel despairing, insignificant and distressed.

The "Good Guy," for example, is not OK, say

STAYING OK

Amy Bjork Harris
and Thomas A. Harris

Harper & Row. 297 pp. \$15.95

the Harrises. Good Guy asks how you're doing but doesn't listen to your response because he's plotting what to say next to gain your favor or impress an onlooker. The Good Guy goes to great lengths to gain approval from others, which is really the internal action of his Child seeking to please his Parent.

"Our history follows us around like a patient dog, nudging us for attention, and dropping long white hairs on the carpet of life," observe the Harrises. "If we tell it to go lie down, it is soon back."

Unfortunately, suggest the authors, the more common intrusions from our past are negative, "feelings of wanting and wishing and not getting."

"We may wake up feeling like a million dollars, but sometimes it takes only a second for a frown, a slight, a remembered failure, to

reduce us to zero, and the zero may last all day."

The Harrises contend that although we can't eliminate bad feelings, we can take charge by diffusing them. "Trackdown" is the seven-step method they outline to heal what ails you. After pinpointing a word that describes the hurt (for example, feeling stupid, ugly, guilty or unwanted), you are to determine what incident just triggered this emotion and recall a childhood experience that made you feel the same way.

By retrieving the Parent message in your past ("Be perfect," "You're not important" or "Don't trust"), you take the problem away from your irrational, confused Child and put it into the hands of your objective, analytical Adult. You preserve your self-esteem by handling the emotion maturely and perhaps gain enough insight to prevent the same hurt from recurring.

The Harrises also recommend stroking — eye contact, listening, dropping a note — a means of relieving bad feelings in ourselves and others.

"Stroking is like manna from heaven. . . It is

our belief that every person, on entering a room of people, a meeting, a convention, a sidewalk gang fight, a party by the pool, a trip to the moon, has surging within him or her a primary question, *the primary question, How do you get strokes here?*"

As self-help books go, *Staying OK* succeeds: It's accessible, logical and offers practical, common-sense advice to anyone striving to be OK. The TA framework is well-conceived and the formula is lucid enough to plug in your own variables. Lots of step-by-step lists, illustrative anecdotes, psychosocial diagrams and you-can-do-it assurances will lead you down the OK path.

However, don't read *Staying OK* for entertainment or academic insights — it's too didactic to be engaging and too derivative to be intellectually important. The Harrises have something to say about our patterns of behavior, but the regurgitated sequel by no means transcends the self-help genre — one that many of us are all too bored and familiar with.

Reviewed by Eve Glicksman, who wrote about the experience of surviving cancer for *The Inquirer Magazine* last year.