

Hilary Williams - Coaching

The OK Corral

Understanding our thoughts, actions and reactions



Introduction

The “I’m okay, You’re okay” model was described by Thomas Harris in his book titled “I’m okay, You’re okay”, published in 1967. Franklin Ernst expanded this idea into the OK Corral model, showing how the positions described play out in behaviours. These are two of the simplest yet most powerful ideas within Transactional Analysis.

At its heart, they about how we see ourselves and others. These perceptions shape our relationships, our confidence, and the choices we make.

The Four Life Positions

Picture a grid with two axes:

- How I see **myself** (OK / Not OK)
How I see **others** (OK / Not OK)

From this, we get four positions:

1. **I'm Not OK, You're OK** – self-doubt, people-pleasing, comparison.
2. **I'm OK, You're Not OK** – blame, criticism, frustration.
3. **I'm Not OK, You're Not OK** – hopelessness, stuckness, withdrawal.
4. **I'm OK, You're OK** – mutual respect, empowerment, connection.

These aren't permanent labels, we all move between them. The power lies in noticing, then shifting toward *"I'm OK, You're OK."*

Enter the OK Corral

Thomas Harris and Franklin Ernst expanded this idea into the OK Corral, showing how these positions play out in behaviour:

1. **I'm OK, You're OK → Win-Win (Get On With)**
 - Collaboration, problem-solving, growth.
 - "We can work this out together."
2. **I'm OK, You're Not OK → Win-Lose (Get Rid Of)**

- Pushing others away, dismissing, or criticising.
- “I’ll do it because I can’t rely on you.”

3. I’m Not OK, You’re OK → Lose-Win (Get Away From)

- Avoiding, withdrawing, or letting others dominate.
- “They’re better than me, I’ll step back.”

4. I’m Not OK, You’re Not OK → Lose-Lose (Get Nowhere)

- Giving up, despair, or apathy.
- “There’s no point in trying.”

The OK Corral is sometimes called a map of life scripts, showing where our early decisions and patterns can lead us. The good news? These positions are not fixed. We move between them, often unconsciously. By becoming aware of them, we can shift into “*I’m OK, You’re OK*” more often.

Why This Matters in Coaching

Transformative coaching is about recognising old patterns and expanding into new possibilities. These models allow us to:

- Notice the *default position* we slip into under stress.
- Understand recurring patterns in relationships.
- Practise choosing “*I’m OK, You’re OK*” behaviours that open doors rather than close them.

This model is not about judging yourself for slipping into the other positions. It’s not about being perfect. We all occupy each of these states and one time or another, even if we pretend not to. It’s about building awareness, and then choosing, more often than not, to step into the stance that empowers you and your relationships.

You are OK. And so is the person in front of you.

That simple truth can be the foundation for profound transformation.

Exercises to Explore Between Sessions

1. Spot Your Corral

During the week, notice situations where you “Get On With,” “Get Rid Of,” “Get Away From,” or “Get Nowhere.”

- What triggered the behaviour?
- How did it feel?
- Which life position does it connect to?

2. Shift the Script

If you catch yourself in “Get Rid Of” or “Get Away From,” pause and ask:

- *What would it look like to choose ‘Get On With’ instead?*
- *What small action could I take right now that affirms both me and the other person as OK?*
 - Saying “thank you” instead of brushing off praise.
 - Speaking up once in a meeting.

3. Journal Prompt

Reflect on these questions:

- Where in my life am I already practising “Win-Win”?
- Where do I fall into old patterns of “Win-Lose” or “Lose-Win”?
- What might change if I brought “I’m OK, You’re OK” more consciously into that space?

Figure 3

		Your Decision About Others	
		OK	Not-OK
Your Decision About Yourself	OK	1. I'm OK - You're OK	2. I'm OK - You're Not-OK
	Not-OK	3. I'm Not-OK - You're OK	4. I'm Not-OK - You're Not-OK