

# **STROKES, THE STROKE ECONOMY AND OPENING THE HEART**

**by Claude Steiner PhD**

**Strokes:** Eric Berne coined the term "stroke" to denote a unit of human recognition. In so doing he made it possible to discuss the exchange of affection or love in fine, textured detail.

Wilhelm Reich, Freud's psychoanalytic disciple developed the concept of the "sex economy," which, in the Germany of the 30's, he defined as the intentional squelching of sexual exchanges among the young for the political purpose of promoting conformity to the nazi regime. In the 1960's I saw a similar trend in our culture, applied to simple affection and love and called it the "stroke economy."

**The Stroke Economy.** The stroke economy creates a scarcity of love and affection by imposing a set of rules that govern the exchange of strokes.

The rules of the stroke economy are:

Don't give strokes you would like to give.

Don't ask for strokes you would like to get.

Don't accept strokes you would like to accept.

Don't reject strokes you don't want.

Don't give yourself strokes.

These rules are enforced internally by the inner Critical Parent and externally by the restrictive social mores that surround us. Disobedience to these rules results in feelings of guilt, shame and unworthiness and externally in widespread social disapproval. As people--intimidated by these internal and external sanctions--follow the stroke economy's rules on a culture-wide basis, the outcome is a lowering of affectionate exchanges resulting in generalized "stroke starvation". Stroke starved people, will become depressed and will resort to self-damaging methods of obtaining strokes just as starving people will eat rotten food or people dying of thirst will drink salt water. Eventually harmful methods of obtaining strokes become habitual to stroke hungry people who know of no other way of fulfilling their need for human recognition. (See [The Warm Fuzzy Tale](#) for a story that illustrates this point)

**Opening the Heart** With this in mind I devised a transactional exercise which I initially called "Stroke City" and which I have refined over the years and renamed "Opening the Heart." The exercise has the purpose of defeating the stroke economy, helping people satisfy their stroke hunger and teaching them how to obtain what they most want: *to love and be loved*.

How is this accomplished? Quite simply I encourage people to personally defy the stroke economy by:

Giving the strokes they want to give,

Asking for and accepting strokes they want,

Rejecting strokes they don't want and

Giving themselves strokes.

These transactional exercises, monitored at first by a skilled trainer, are like psychological heart aerobics which, practiced over time, can actually transform people, making them more capable of giving and receiving love; they represent an advanced technique for building or rebuilding a person's loving capacities. Like a highly sophisticated diet regime in which we learn what, when and how much to eat or not eat, this stroke regime aims for similar healthy goals in our emotional lives. In conjunction with a program of meditation or other therapeutic activity that is aimed at dealing with the feelings of unworthiness that are so often associated with stroke starvation these exercises can transform the quality of a person's love and intimacy life.

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