

# An Action Glossary

Harry A. Olson

Adlerians consider all behavior as movement through life, that is, purposive activity in the service of the fictional life goal. One's behavior is also the answer one makes to the questions and tasks posed by life, based on one's biases, one's accurate and mistaken notions.

Since all life is an active process, then it follows that in order to understand behavior most fully, it must be examined in action terms. In other words, we must understand not what a person *is*, but what he is doing. The best way to communicate this concept, is to make it a point to use verbs, i.e. action language, when discussing or describing behavior as opposed to noun or adjectival terms or variants of the verb, to be.

In our society, we are very prone to use nouns or descriptive adjectives (labels) to describe ourselves. In reality, this beclouds self and mutual understanding and actually does us a disservice in that such language is often limiting and implies total essence, ignoring the multifarious bitter-sweet facets which contribute to each of our unique personalities. For example, "He's such a bad boy," (or "He's such a *good* boy," for that matter), implies, through the use of the verb, to be, that the boy is *entirely* bad (or good), and that there is no room for good deeds or positive virtues (or misbehavior, as the case may be). Almost invariably, when we use a label or a variant of the verb, to be, we imply essence, we imply the whole based on a part. While this may sound picky and extreme, the problem is that language conditions us, helps us set our expectations, and thus influences our action and reactions. To use our current examples, how many persons would trust a "bad boy" with money, or the family car, or have faith that he would carry out responsible tasks, or believe that he could ever care for people other than himself? How many would be puzzled or chagrined if the "good boy" misbehaves? Might he not be punished more than an "average boy" for the same transgression because of higher parental expectations associated with his "goodness"?

This writer has been particularly impressed with the ease with which behavior can be understood, and with how much confusion can be cut through by redefining static concepts into active dynamic language. This article is an attempt to provide active redefinition to a number of common static or self-limiting behaviors, terms, or statements that we see or hear every day. The writer has collected many of these informally over several years from speakers at conferences and workshops. Harold Mosak is credited with the

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majority of these, as well as Leo Gold, since it is from these persons the writer obtained much of the material. Most of these ideas have become part of Adlerian tradition and the original source of several is unknown to this writer, hence no identifying citation following the redefinition.

In applying the concepts in the glossary, it should be remembered that since we all suffer from chronic human imperfection, we will all probably see ourselves in a number of these redefinitions. When we wish to understand ourselves or another, we need to observe how often and under what condition the particular statements or behaviors in question are used. If they are used frequently and in a broader range of situations, particularly if their use in a given situation is patently inappropriate, we then may conclude that such statements or behaviors reflect core mechanisms to safeguard the self-esteem, mechanisms which are well-butressed by mistaken ideas and are more intractable to change. Conversely, the less frequently and broadly such statements and behaviors are used, the less central they are to the lifestyle.

This glossary is far from comprehensive and is not intended to be final. It is hoped that it will stir some thoughts and prompt the reader to make additions on his or her own.

## **An Action Glossary**

When a person says (or demonstrates): S/he may often really be saying (or doing):

*“I AM MOODY”*

I can do anything I want, and use feelings to discourage others from dealing with me. I will keep you guessing.

*“I AM STUBBORN”*

I plant my feet and dare the world to move me. (Mosak)

*“I AM AN INDIVIDUAL”*

No one can make (should make) me do what I don't want to do.

*“I AM SENSITIVE” (“I hurt”)*

Mark of power. Has built-in accusation, “I cry and it's your fault!” “Get off my back”—typical of pleasers when they get criticised or don't get continual affirmation.

*“I AM TIMID”*

I force attention upon myself. (Mosak) (If at a party, everyone is dancing but you, whom do you think they will notice.)

*“I AM SHY”*

I force attention upon myself. (Mosak)

**“I WORRY”**

- (a) I control others by trying to make them feel guilty for causing me pain.
- (b) I stop action and thus avoid resolving the problem.

**“I FEEL GUILTY”**

I will continue to misbehave, all the while trying to convince the world that I am good, with good intentions, but I have this area of my life that I can't control. (McKelvie)

**“I CAN'T”**

I won't.

**“I'LL TRY”**

I won't.

**“YES, BUT”**

I won't.

**“I ARGUE”**—(*Harangue, Not debate*)

I feel superior by putting others down. I must compete.

**“WHO AM I?”**

I am struggling to conform the world to my personal desires (to ask “who am I?” as an attempt to find identity is mistaken. He has an identity: Lifestyle).

**“I HAVE A TEMPER”**

- (a) I need to intimidate to get my way.
- (b) When I am right and you are wrong, righteous indignation. (Gold)

**“I CAN'T FORGIVE”**

I am striving to be holier than God. God forgives. (Moral superiority) (Gold)  
Excuse to remain distant.

**“I LIKE CAUSES”**

I am looking for perfection. At least world could be better.

**“I'M AMBIVALENT”** or **“IN CONFLICT OVER”**

I am unwilling to take action to solve my problems. (One step forward, one step backward—won't move off center.) (A. Adler)

**“I'M CONFUSED”**

“Don't pin me down” (Mosak)

**“IT'S A HABIT”**

“You won't get me to change *that!* (Mosak)

**“I'M A REBEL”**

“I can't afford to submit to life. I must be in control of me. (Mosak)

**“I CAN'T KEEP FRIENDS”**

I wish to dominate others. (Mosak)

*“I HAVE TROUBLE WITH MATH”*

I question my ability to stand on my own to solve problems, be independent. (People good in math usually are independent-minded.) (Mosak)

*“I HAVE TROUBLE WITH SPELLING”*

I tend to be a rebel (Spelling is a high conformity subject.) (Mosak)

*“I’M A PROCRASTINATOR”*

(Artificial cliff-hanger) Look how great I must be to pull it off at the last minute. (Mosak)

*“I’M AN ALCOHOLIC”*

I (a) control my world through my drinking, and (b) set up artificial supports to see me thru life, and (c) con others into my service through the tyranny of my sickness. (Mosak)

*“I TAKE COPIOUS NOTES IN CLASS”*

I intend to forget what I hear. (Gold)

*“I DAY DREAM A LOT”*

I can’t get what I want in reality. (In fantasy I can set it up my way and no one can interfere with it or my greatness.) (Especially conquering hero) (Mosak)

*“I’M A ‘JOINER’ ”*

I must find my place (because I don’t feel I have one) or I must continually prove to myself that I’m acceptable. (Mosak)

*REGRESSION*

“I want to go back to old ways”—has only not yet integrated new learnings. (Gold)

*UNCONSCIOUS*

That which I don’t want to remember, or which is irrelevant at this time.

*OBESITY (not organically caused)*

Purpose: Avoid questions of intimacy, especially with opposite sex. Also provides “padding” between self and others. Provides a reason for complaining that others do not pay attention to me. (Mosak)

*CYNICISM*

“Life is at fault, not me.”

*EMOTIONAL BLIND SPOTS*

“If I don’t look at it, it will go away.” (Mosak)

*RESISTANCE*

“You and I have different goals and I won’t compromise mine.” (Mosak)

*RETREAT*

“Nothing ventured, nothing lost.” (Mosak)

### CONTRITION AND SELF-DISPARAGEMENT

By blaming myself, I (a) forestall punishment and (b) fish for compliments.

### SUFFERING (*As defense*)

*(The louder you suffer the more you are playing to the grandstand.)*

- (a) Since I feel bad, I'm entitled to make demands
- (b) Amount of my suffering proves my nobility
- (c) You'll be sorry!
- (d) I have a right to my own way; look how I suffer when I don't get it.

### POOR PENMANSHIP

I secretly rebel. I outwardly appear to cooperate, but inwardly I don't go along. (Mosak)

### CATATONIC

I fear the destructive potential of my rage. If I move, the world will tumble down. I am the most powerful person.

### RAGE

I must control (will to power) (Mosak)

### CRYING

*(when not in happiness or sufficient physical pain)*

It's your (somebody else's) fault. (Mosak)

One can see from the glossary that even "chance" or everyday comments can convey a great deal of subtle but powerful meaning. Clinicians can find such a glossary useful in sharpening their skills in assessing their clients' ultimate purposes or in views on life. Side comments, metaphors, and the manner in which one expresses oneself are often more important in understanding lifestyle than much of the actual "facts" and data the client consciously presents.