

Relationships With Others

thelisteningspace.org/workshops/drama-triangle-workshop

Stephen Karpman developed the Drama Triangle to define and raise awareness of the unconscious roles we take on in relationships, and the impact it can have on our relationships both personal and professional. The Drama Triangle is sometimes known as the Rescue Triangle.

The Drama Triangle

Most of us have a typical starting role and this role is formed in childhood and the result of beliefs we habitually hold

The Drama Triangle looks like this:



If you play one role you will probably end up stepping in and playing all three. We can even play all three roles in our own head. I know I have had dramatic conversations with myself. I attack and criticize myself, feel like a victim to my own judgement, and try to rescue myself from facing the facts of my own inaction. I usually try to take a breath, realize I'm spinning around the drama triangle in my head, and step out!

1. THE VICTIM IN RELATIONSHIP DRAMA

When a person enacts this role she believes life—through a person, condition or circumstance—is unfair to her. This position is supported by self-fulfilling stories about injustice and negative self-talk such as, “If only X had not happened, I would not be miserable.”

- Behaviour may include passivity, curling into self, and slumped posture.

- The victim believes life is just happening to her, that she has no power over what happens and what happens is not in her control to change.
- The self-talk and beliefs of the victim include Poor me. I am hopeless. I am helpless. I am not enough. Another basic belief is I am not OK while you are definitely OK.
- The victim denies her own resourcefulness and resilience.
- The victim feels hopeless, powerless, small and worrisome.
- The victim's theme song could be called, I Will Die If You Don't Solve My Problem!

The 'payoff' to taking on this role is "I don't have to deal with things that feel too difficult".

Ask yourself the five questions below to check how often you play the victim role:

1. Do I feel hopeless, powerless or weak?
2. Do I believe I can't make wise decisions or make positive changes?
3. Do I believe my life is just one problem after another?
4. Do I manipulate others or use guilt to get help or get what I want?
5. Do I blame others or circumstances for my difficulties?

2. THE PERSECUTOR IN RELATIONSHIP DRAMA

The person, who enacts the persecutor role, tries to control, criticize or bully the victim. She believes she has power over the victim. Behaviour may include bossiness, criticism, rigidity and insistence on how a problem should be solved.

- The basic belief of the persecutor is you are not OK. I am better than OK. So do what I tell you to do.
- The persecutor believes the world is dangerous.
- The victim may perceive the persecutor as a condition such as an illness, death of a loved one, or circumstance such as drought.
- The persecutor's words and behaviours are oppressive, blaming, critical, and insisting on being right.
- The persecutor's theme song could be called, It's All Your Fault: I Have a Problem!

The 'payoff' to taking this role is "I get what I want".

Ask yourself the four questions below to check how often you play the persecutor role:

1. Do I tell others what to do to solve their problems?
2. Do I see others as powerless, incapable and needing to be fixed?
3. Do I criticize others?

4. Do I speak and act in a rigid, dominating, or bossy manner?

3. THE RESCUER IN RELATIONSHIP DRAMA

The person who enacts this role intrudes on situations professing a desire to help. Note: This role does not refer to legitimate emergency rescuing or protecting those who are vulnerable; children, the frail, and seriously ill.

- The rescuer feels compelled or manipulated to help the victim. She believes she is responsible for the outcome of the victim's problem. Guilt is often a driving force. Often an underlying motivation to rescue is to feel superior or in control.
- The rescuer believes "My needs, wants and feelings are irrelevant."
- The rescuer is committed to making others happy and often fears conflict.
- The basic belief of the rescuer is, you are not OK, but I am nice. I will help you..
- The rescuer's theme song could be called, You're So Messed Up: Let Me Fix the Problem and You.

The payoff to taking this role is "I am needed/wanted/liked".

Ask yourself the five questions below to check how often you play the rescuer role:

1. Do I accept responsibility for fixing problems that are not mine?
2. Do I believe I cannot say no to a request for help
3. Do I feel guilty when I say no to a request for help and end up helping nevertheless?
4. Do I perceive others as incapable of making good decisions or of helping themselves?
5. Do I perceive others as needing to be fixed or their lives needing to be fixed?

Typically we move around the triangle switching roles. For example, the victim may turn into the persecutor or the rescuer might switch to attacking. Each person is playing out his or her unconscious pattern. We are attempting to receive the kind of attention or control each unconsciously desires (this is sometimes called a 'payoff').

How To Step Out of the Drama Triangle

The winner's Triangle

The Winner's Triangle was developed by Choy (1990) who adapted the Drama Triangle which shows the three roles without discounting other peoples' ability and human worth.

There are three healthy alternatives to enacting the **victim**, **attacker** or **rescuer** roles. Knowing and putting these alternatives into action will help you better stay out of a dysfunctional relationship pattern. They will help you establish healthier and more

effective ways to speak, listen and connect.

The Winner's Triangle looks like this:



1. HOW TO MOVE FROM THE VICTIM TO THRIVER?

People in the Thriver position do not discount their own abilities to use their thinking and feeling to work out how to get their needs met appropriately and problem solve. Rescuers reinforce someone's Victimhood.

They know they can ask for help and if someone says 'no' to them, they themselves are still OK and not 'bad' because someone said 'no'.

They know that they have resources to get their needs met. They have choices and autonomy to make decisions.

They accept personal responsibility and are accountable for their actions.

Actions to take:

- Active problem solving.
- Ask yourself 'how can I get what I want/need in a healthy way?'
- Acknowledge your strengths and weaknesses.
- Turning blaming others into self-responsibility.

2. HOW TO MOVE FROM THE PERSECUTOR TO THE POTENT POSITION

People in the Potent position, like Persecutors, actively pursue getting their needs met in the world. But Potent people use their energy to solve problems and not to punish, shame or belittle.

Actions to take:

- Understand that we cannot change others.

- Identify what you need and negotiate with others (rather than by shaming)
- If the other person won't do what you want, use your problem-solving skills/resources to get your needs met another way.

3. HOW TO MOVE FROM THE RESCUER TO THE RESPONSIBLE POSITION

Responsible people, like Rescuers, care about others. They also respect the ability of others to think, feel and ask for their needs to be met. Likewise Responsible people take responsibility for their own feelings and needs, so unlike Rescuers, they don't do things they are uncomfortable with.

They are able to assert their own needs, so they can say no to people in a way that is honest and respectful to both sides. The key skill for Responsible people is to listen to others without solving their problems for them.

Actions to take:

- Learn to respect yourself and say 'no' when you wish to. Remember "your yes does not mean a thing until you can learn to say no". A useful way to identify when we should have said 'no' is if we feel resentment. Sometimes feeling resentment at not saying 'no' means we slip into Persecutor behaviour as a passive-aggressive way to communicate.
- Identify when you are being a Rescuer over being Responsible (the key to understanding the difference is that Rescuing is when we are doing something for someone they have the ability to do themselves)
- Understand that sometimes Rescuing behaviour is actually for ourselves rather than others! I.e., it may make us feel good about ourselves/saviour complex etc.
- Remember it is disrespectful and a little patronising to assume that others cannot look after themselves!
- Everyone is entitled to make choices about their own lives even if we personally think they should be doing something 'better'.
- Far better than doing something for someone is empowering them to do it for themselves.
- Be intentional with developing and communicating your boundaries.