

## **Introduction to the Drama Triangle - And the promise of a Healthy Life with your Higher Self**

In 1968, Stephen Karpman published an article titled *Fairy Tales and Script Drama Analysis*, in Transactional Analysis Bulletin. It was a hugely impactful description of how drama is played out in real life, as well as in Fairy Tales.

In short, the idea is that there are three dysfunctional roles that people play with each other, switching roles at times. The faster the switching goes on, the more drama there is between them all. There is the Rescuer, the Persecutor, and the Victim.

A healthier, more adult way to be is to be the Coach or Consultant, the Truth Teller or Confronter or Challenger, and the Client or Helpee or Co-Creator.

The section that follows was found on the Internet somewhere. I don't know whom to credit for it, but it isn't me. I've made some formatting changing, and tweaked it a little, but it basically comes from someone else. I've put it in a different font in order to differentiate it from the rest of my work.

You will also see that I've added some more material at the end about how this drama triangle fits in a variety of situations. I'm responsible for that material.

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### **Drama Triangle**

The Drama Triangle is a model of how individuals interact with the overall result being the creation of painful emotional states. (Why we do this is an important question. My belief is that we create drama as a defensive way of managing the pain we feel around either our small ego-self or our divine Unique Self. We can talk about this to get more clarity - ADA). This is mostly an unconscious process, so there is collusion at some level around a shared intention. The design of the model requires two or more individuals but three roles. It is suggested that all drama originates from one of these three roles, and the switching that takes place from role-to-role.

The rules of the game are as follows:

- If one plays a role, then you will eventually play all three roles.
- Each person has a preferred and familiar role.

- The more switches in roles, the more excitement and drama is created.
- The underlying motive of the game involves “strokes.”
- If positive strokes are not available, human beings will accept negative strokes. (It is better to be wanted for murder than not wanted at all.) However, people will not live without strokes.
- One negative outcome of this interaction is that the victim is left without strokes, power, esteem, and still lacks the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed. There are more negative outcomes than this, of course, for each player.
- The Drama triangle is predictable and therefore individuals play roles in an attempt to avoid the risk of uncertainty. Roles manage the anxiety of uncertainty in predictable ways, even though they are dysfunctional.

A closer examination of the roles:

### **RESCUER:**

- Perceives self as having most, if not all of the answers. Wants to relate to the world and others as a helpful and nurturing minor deity.
- Can only feel good and needed by having someone else who requires help from the Rescuer.
- Personal worth is based upon helping out others who are in trouble.
- Feels superior to Victim (and the victim feels inferior) although these beliefs are not often spoken out loud.
- Believes Victim cannot succeed without help for one reason or another.
- If Victim is not in trouble, the Rescuer may have a stance of aloofness or coldness.
- Rescuer is significantly more invested (emotionally and behaviorally) in the transaction with the Victim than the Victim himself or herself. The Rescuer is overinvested in the situation.
- Rescuer volunteers helpful suggestions, solutions, answers, even though they have not been requested by another.
- Experiences difficulty in stating feelings, particularly anger.
- Has to ignore or rebuff compliments or positive feedback; to accept them means the Rescuer has needs and is as human as the victim.
- Receives strokes from rescuing the victim, just as the victim does from being rescued.
- Basic stance: I’m acceptable and you’re not. (I’m Ok, and You’re Not Ok)

### **VICTIM**

- Perceives that their own needs and feelings are insignificant.

- The task to be completed, or the other's needs and feelings are more important than the Victim's.
- Only feels cared about when in trouble; otherwise he or she believes that no one will care or notice them.
- Positive interactions with others can only occur if Victim remains in a one-down, loser, hurting position.
- The Victim either does not provide an agenda, or has a completely unrealistic agenda, thus setting the Rescuer up to take control and provide the agenda.
- Desires that others engage in mind-reading (reading the Victim's mind), and when they do the Victim will often deflect or comply.
- Refuses compliments because to accept positive feedback will result in feeling better and gaining self esteem.
- Perceives outside forces to be controlling one's life. "I am only a helpless pawn in the overall scheme of the universe."
- Furnishes less than 50% of the energy in the transaction.
- Plays "Yes, but", "*Manana*", "I'm too weak, small, powerless, helpless, stupid, old, inept, etc."
- Basic Stance: I'm unacceptable and you are okay (I'm Not OK, and You are OK)

## PERSECUTOR

- Has no real power, but act like he or she does.
- Primary feeling is outrage.
- Behavior is rage, sarcasm, criticism, shaming, blaming.
- Behaves in an effort to control and manipulate the victim.
- If the Persecutor is unable to motivate the Victim, then the Persecutor wins the game by making the Victim experience emotional pain.
- Can either place more than 50% of the energy into the transaction, or adopt a passive-aggressive, defiant stance. In either case, the position is one of punishing and control.
- Emphasis in on a win/lose strategy
- Basic stance: I'm acceptable and you are not. (I'm OK and You're Not OK)

## Healthy Life Triangle

The motivation for these roles focuses on obtaining the stated outcome or goal, and doing so in a healthy way. There might well be some work done to define the goal and to make it clear and shared. Upset and emotion are a byproduct and not the primary objective. Negotiation is involved in order to create an outcome that is close to win-win for everyone.

### **COACH:**

- Furnishes less than 50% of the energy in the transaction. Does not over-invest in the relationship.
- When Coach decides to initiate a transaction or offer help, the goal is to quickly transfer responsibility to the Client or Helpee.
- Negotiates with the Client or Helpee for involvement, jointly determining what content and the extent of Client or Helper's contribution.
- Knows when to say "yes" or "no".
- Able to identify and express feelings at any point in the transaction.
- Accepts, provides and requests deserved compliments and strokes.
- Understands that the Client or Helpee is in really the one in charge of the transaction.
- Goal is for a win/win outcome.
- Basic stance: I'm acceptable and so are you (I'm OK and You're OK)

### **CLIENT / CO-CREATOR / HELPEE:**

- Clearly states an agenda and identifies his or her needs.
- Perceives and expects himself or herself to be in charge of the transaction.
- Furnishes more than 50% of the energy.
- Is able to identify and express feelings at any point in the transaction.
- Readily expresses those feelings in appropriate ways.
- When anxiety surfaces, the Client or Helpee "holds their own hand" and works through their anxiety utilizing their own Higher Self.
- Requests and provides deserved compliments and strokes.
- Basic stance: I'm acceptable and so are you (I'm OK, and You're OK).

### **TRUTH TELLER / CONFRONTER / CHALLENGER:**

- Furnishes less than 50% of the energy.
- May furnish the initial piece of the energy, but quickly transfers the responsibility to the Client or Helpee.
- States clearly when problems or trouble lies ahead.
- Is open to new information that might inform and transform the Truth Teller or Confronter's beliefs.
- Is not open to managing the Client or Helpee's anxiety.
- Allows natural consequences to occur.
- Basic stance: I'm acceptable and so are you (I'm OK, and You're OK).

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Here are some observations I've made over the years about how Drama Triangle work. This is an evolving list. Feel free to add your own observations.

1. Whenever there is drama in the home or the workplace, the Drama Triangle is at work. We get into drama all the time, and the location isn't that important. Having two or more players is all it takes.
2. Two or more players might even be Iraq and the U.S.A.
3. We learn to play these roles and the Drama Triangle when we are children. Mom Rescues the Victim Child, and then Dad comes home and Confronts again, and then Mom Rescues the naughty Victim Child... and around and around it goes. Remember, the drama comes from switching roles! Dad feels badly for having been such a bad parent, and then Mom rescues Dad, and then the Child acts out again, pulling them back into their roles.
4. Truly, the faster the switches between roles, the more Dramatic it all is, and the more Drama we all feel.
5. Feelings are really important. You can feel your role. You can feel the Drama Triangle at work. Your gut will churn, your anxiety will rise, and your anger will emerge. All are sure signs that you are into the Drama Triangle.
6. The piece about energy, and who puts in how much is really true. I've worked with many a client when all of a sudden I realized that I was putting in more than my 50% of the energy into the relationship. Now this can be tricky because I'm paid to be a Coach and Helper. But, if I'm doing more than 50% of the work, I've been sucked into the Rescuer role, and it is draining. I get weary from Rescuing, and energized from Coaching and Helping. They are really different experiences.
7. It is true that a Victim will get angry at you if you stop playing the game. The Victim will often make matters worse, act out more, get louder, cry harder, fail more often, suck in more people... anything to escalate the drama until someone comes along to Rescue or Persecute. The Victim can be very passive-aggressive, too. Noncompliance with regard to recommendations from parents, physicians, coaches, teachers, clergy... are all signs of a committed Victim who wants to be Rescued.
8. It is hard to stop the game. Most of the time it is the nurturing parent Rescuer, or the critical parent Persecutor who stop the game. Once in a while the Victim gets tired of being a loser. The game stops when one person won't play. Others will work hard to get him or her to play the game, but if there is persistence and more behavior that comes from the Higher Self, then the game can be interrupted.

9. This was true with Martin Luther King, Jr. who wouldn't play the role of Victim any longer. He challenged both the Persecutors and the Rescuers alike to move to Coach and Helper, and Truth Teller and Confronter positions. He wasn't passive-aggressive, but he was a non-violent, non-anxious presence to those who persisted in being Persecutors and Rescuers. Of course, other change-agents in other times and places have modeled this sort of Adult-to-Adult change process. Dr. King modeled after Jesus and Gandhi. I'm trying to do so as well.
10. The implied message from a Rescuer is that "I'm better than you are, and you are *inferior* to me."
11. The implied message from a Persecutor is that "I'm better than you are, and you are *inadequate* compared to me, or my standards."
12. The Persecutor may be a Perpetrator. Perps commit horrible acts of physical, verbal, sexual violence toward their victims, while society attempts to Rescue the Victims.
13. Rescuing doesn't break the cycle. Coaching and Helping someone who is willing to work hard to fix his or her own problem is smart, and he can actually help. Teamwork!
14. Whatever role you are playing, it will be necessary to do some deep work inside yourself to make a change. If it is familiar to be a Victim, you will have to figure out how to stop playing the Victim, and how to stop setting others up to be your Rescuer or Persecutor. This is hard work. Taking responsibility for your own life, for your own thoughts and feelings is a really important step. Start small with a safe person, and re-contract with them for a healthier relationship.
15. The skills of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy can help here. Catch it. Check it. Change it. Those three steps are important. When you slip into a familiar role, say Persecutor... and you catch yourself being too critical and making someone a Victim, check it! Then, change it. Let the other person know you are doing so. That will elicit the Higher Self adult in them.
16. The Drama Triangle goes on between little kids and their parents, between adults and their older parents, between bosses and their employees... age makes no difference.
17. It is healthier to simply say, "I've got a problem and I'd like you help, please." If the other is there to give advice and coaching, that is wonderful. If they start to take over, fire 'em! And tell them why. That is a boundary violation.
18. If, in response to your request for help, the other person persecutes you, fire 'em! That, too, is a boundary violation. They took too much responsibility for your outcome and put themselves in a position of power. Fire 'em! Don't turn into a persecutor yourself, but just clearly and forthrightly set the limits and politely stop being the victim.