

The Drama Triangle

The Drama Triangle is a description of a dysfunctional relationship in which two people in the relationship move between three roles, depicted as three points on a triangle. The three roles are: Persecutor, Rescuer, and Victim. The roles are held in place with guilt and blame.

Victim

The victim position is the key role in the Triangle because it is the position around which the others revolve. People operating in the Victim position take no responsibility for their actions or feelings. They truly believe that they are life's fall guys, and that everyone in the world is "doing it to them." They continually look for someone or something else to blame for things not working in their lives. Victims can frequently be identified by language that blames others for their poor situation in life. There are two basic types of Victims: the Pathetic Victim and the Angry Victim. The Pathetic Victim plays the pity ploy, using woeful "poor me" looks and desolate language of self-pity. The Angry victim pretends to be powerful, using angry and aggressive statements in an attempt to blame others for all their problems.

Both types of Victims are looking for someone to blame for the emotions that they are having and also for their lives not working. In addition, they are looking for a Rescuer, someone they can "hook" into taking care of them and their responsibilities.

Victims manipulate others into doing what they want with blame and guilt. They will find someone that they can blame for their unfulfilled life. The Victim sees this person as a Persecutor. If this person believes the Victim and accepts the blame, then he or she will feel guilty and try to remedy the situation. As soon as she or he tries to fix things for the Victim, she or he moves from persecutor to rescuer.

Rescuer

As any recovering person knows the role of Rescuer is the highly addictive role because it is the position of the "good guy". Because of the way we are raised people are raised whenever they feel guilty, believing that they have been "bad" and have done something wrong, they will try to get out of the guilt by moving into the Rescuer, "good guy" position. People do not like to be labeled as "bad guys" so they actively seek the position of Rescuer, "good guy", and because it affords them some relief from the guilt they get addicted to it.

We are raised from birth to believe that we must be good. We are trained by the standards of our parents, our churches and our society that in order to be good, we must take care of other people physically, emotionally, or spiritually, even at the cost of our own being. We are drilled with the idea that to take care of one's self is to be selfish and selfishness is bad. Therefore, when the Victim approaches us with blame or tales of woe, we are already prime targets for the manipulation of guilt. We already believe that we should take care of other people's problems, that if we do not, we are bad. Because we do not wish to be cast in the "bad guy" Persecutor role, we jump in to rescue the Victim, even when it is not in our best interest and not integral with the truth about who we are and what we want. This position of Rescuer in the triangle fits the traditional role of the enabler, or the co-dependent. This is the person in the family who enables others to continue their dysfunction by not insisting that they be responsible for their actions.

There is another important point to understand about Rescuers in the triangle. Because of the very nature of the triangle, Rescuers must have a Victim, someone to take care of, someone to control, and someone, who by their very need, makes the Rescuer feel good. When people are addicted to the Rescuer role, they will find that they actually have a need to rescue. In order to fill that need, they will have to have a Victim around that they can help. If there isn't one available, the Rescuer will attempt to make one.

In general, Rescuers need to be needed and they need to be in control and be right no matter what the cost. Being in control and being right allows the Rescuer to avoid dealing with any emotions or discomfort. In all addictions, the addictive substance or behavior, in this case Rescuing is used by the addict to avoid feelings.

Rescuers are so determined not to feel and not to pay attention to anyone else's feelings that they do not realize that the underlying communication that is transmitted to their chosen Victim is: "You are insufficient. You are inept. You cannot take care of yourself. You are not good enough; therefore, I need to be in charge."

Still another aspect of the triangle that is pertinent to the rescuer role is the one-for-one rule that every time someone rescues another, the Rescuer will end the final Victim in that play.

Here is how it happens. When you allow yourself to rescue a Victim, you are not acting in your own best interest. You are either taking care of someone else in order to try to feel good about yourself or to avoid feeling guilty. If you are looking for the emotional high of helping others, instead of the healthy action of taking care of yourself, you will jeopardize your own well-being and end up the Victim. In either case, you end up victimizing yourself but blaming the other.

Often the person starting the maneuvers in the triangle as a Rescuer is a rescuer-Martyr who will end up as a Victim-martyr. This is the person who helps someone with strings attached. This person has a hidden agenda; an expectation that is never openly communicated no agreed upon and is rarely, if ever, achieved. The Rescuer-Martyr believes that if they do something nice for people, people should feel obligated to do something nice for them. This sense of obligation gives the Rescuer-Martyr a false sense of control over people. Without necessarily saying it out loud, the Rescuer-Martyr is thinking: "Look at all that I've done for you. You owe me."

Persecutor

The role of the Persecutor is the role of the "bad guy", the villain. It is the one role that few people consciously choose as their starting place in the triangle. In fact, it is the role that keeps the triangle going because people in the triangle are attempting to avoid that position by moving into the Rescuer role or by perceiving themselves as Victims. No one likes to see themselves as a bad guy. Even criminals in prison want to be seen as the Victims of society rather than society's Persecutors. The Persecutor role is the one that Victims use, along with blame, to maneuver others into rescuing them.

What makes this position truly unique is the fact that once you are in the triangle and you decide to leave it, you must leave from this position. In other words, when you remove yourself from playing the triangle, anyone still playing will perceive you as the Persecutor.

Positions, Maneuvering, and Rules in the Triangle

Now that you have a basic understanding of the positions in the triangle, there are a number of key points to consider:

1. The triangle is based on lies. Tell a lie to yourself or someone else, whether it is a lie about data or a lie about your emotions or your experience and you move immediately into the triangle.
2. All “shoulds” are a lie. Therefore, “shoulds” will throw you into the triangle. An important piece of your healing process is learning how to go about getting your needs and wants met after you learn to distinguish them from your “shoulds” or the things that other people have told you are your needs
3. All positions in the triangle cause pain. No matter what position you are in at any given moment, you will be in pain and *will be causing pain*.
4. There is no power in the triangle. When you are in the triangle, you are operating from powerlessness and irresponsibility no matter what position you are playing.
5. Everyone has a favorite starting position which is usually either the Rescuer or the Victim. Few people choose Persecutor as a starting position.
6. Once you are hooked into the triangle you will end up playing all the positions, whether you like it or not, because of the nature of the triangle. You may have perceived yourself as a Rescuer, who wound up as someone’s Victim, while, at the same time, that person perceives you as a Persecutor.
7. Guilt is the experience that hooks you into the triangle, and therefore you need to learn a few points about guilt:
 - a. Guilt is a signal that someone is attempting to pull you into the triangle.
 - b. In order to stay out of the triangle, you will need to learn to give yourself permission to feel guilty without acting on that guilt. In other words, do not let guilt push you into a Rescuer position.
 - c. Learn to sit with the guilt and be uncomfortable. This experience called guilt is a learned response; it is not the same thing as being out of integrity with yourself.
 - d. The “escape hatch” out of the triangle is located at the Persecutor position. Telling the truth about your emotions and thoughts open the escape hatch. In other words, in order to leave the triangle, or for that matter to stay out of it, you have to be willing for others to perceive you as the “bad guy” and then go through whatever emotions surface as a result of their perception. This does not mean that you are the “bad guy”. It does mean that others choose to see you that way. If you are not willing to be seen as a Persecutor, you will get hooked into rescuing and place yourself back, or keep yourself in, the triangle. If you are already in the triangle and wish to leave, you have to be willing for others in the triangle to see you as the Persecutor.
8. When you are in the process of leaving the triangle, you are in the process of telling yourself the truth about your feelings, your motives, and the situation in general. You are willing to experience whatever feelings you are having and are willing to let others experience their feelings without having to rescue them. If the other people in the triangle are willing to tell the truth and experience their feelings, the triangle disappears. If they are not, as is more often the case, then you leave looking like a Persecutor.
9. You can play the triangle alone with yourself. Once you have been raised in a dysfunctional family, you do not need anyone else to push you into the triangle.

- a. The way you play the triangle by yourself is by listening to the negative voice inside your head that beats you up, puts you down, and constantly “shoulds” you.
 - b. Remember: “shoulds” are a lie.. They have nothing to do with who you are. They are someone else’s interpretation of what to do and what is good.
 - c. When you play the triangle with yourself, your “should-er” will persecute you so that you will feel like a Victim. At the same time, you will be feeling guilty. This will trigger the belief that you are the Persecutor. The guilt will drive you to rescue someone, or some situation, even when no one except you is there attempting to manipulate you into the Rescuer position.
10. When you actively participate in a relationship with someone who lives in the triangle, you must be very careful of the hooks. It is difficult to be around people who constantly operate in the triangle and not get hooked in yourself, especially if your personal boundaries are not clear and you have not learned to recognize the triangle.
 11. You internalized “should-er” is also the voice that pushes you into the triangle when others around you are in and attempting to hook you.
 12. As any recovering person knows, the role of the Rescuer is the highly addictive role because it is the position of the “good guy”. Because of the way most people are raised whenever they feel guilty believing that they have been “bad” and have done something wrong, they will try to get out of the guilt by moving into the Rescuer position.
 13. Telling the truth and experiencing your emotions is the only way out of the triangle. To do this you have to learn to know and define your boundaries and take responsibility for recognizing, experiencing, expressing, and completing your emotions.