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Victim ♦ Rescuer ♦ Persecutor Triangle (the drama triangle)

Karpman's triangle, or the drama triangle, is a relational theory proposed by Stephen Karpman in 1968, based on Transactional Analysis, developed by Eric Berne in the 1960's.

The triangle reflects a **conflictual relational dynamic**. Once the triangle has been activated, the people in the dynamic bounce from one point on the triangle to another. Conflict and miscommunication quickly escalates.

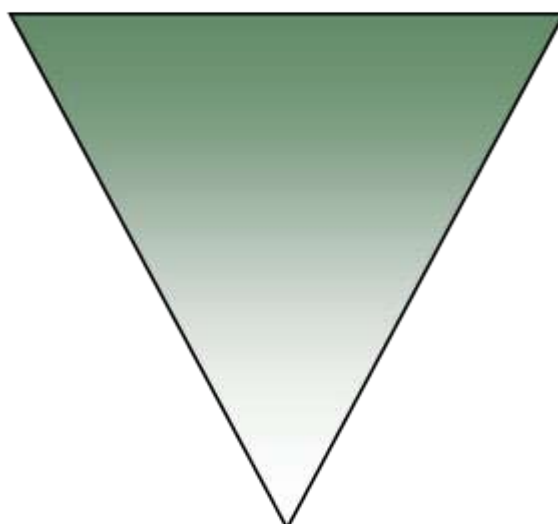
The triangle can play out **between two, three or more people or players**. We can all find ourselves caught up in this dynamic from time to time. It can flare up in any relationship; with a partner, family member, friend, work colleague, stranger and between a therapist and client.

It is also a **dynamic that can operate within the individual**, with different parts or aspects of self taking up different points on the triangle. An **internal conflictual relational dynamic**.

Here's how it works:

Rescuer

Persecutor



Victim

VICTIM

The **Victim** in this dynamic is different from being literally victimised by another i.e. bullied, harassed, neglected or abused in some way. The Victim in the triangle dynamic feels overwhelmed by a sense of **vulnerability, inadequacy, powerlessness** and **helplessness**. It is a **self-perception** not necessarily reflecting what is actually happening. The person may be triggered to past experiences. In therapy this is called transference, where the qualities of another, or memories from the past, are projected onto someone or something in the present.

The Victim is experiencing difficulty in taking responsibility for him/her/themselves and is projecting blame or responsibility on to others, e.g. family, partner, friend, boss or government. The Victim will look for a **Rescuer** to take care of them; "You make it better for me" or "fix it". This is different to reaching out for help. Externalisation of responsibility keeps the individual in a powerless or 'Victim', position.

PERSECUTOR

The **Persecutor** is unaware of their own power and how they are using it in a negative or controlling way. The Persecutor's internal perception is often that they are being victimised. This internal perception drives persecutory behaviour. There may also be instances where a persecutor knowingly, deliberately or maliciously persecutes another.

RESCUER

The **Rescuer** is someone who seeks to 'rescue' or save those whom they perceive as too vulnerable and unable to take care of themselves. The rescuer may think that they know better and will take over in a situation, taking responsibility and power away from others. The Rescuer often does more than 50% of the work in a relationship or interaction. They may impose 'help' that is not required, requested or wanted. When the help is rejected the Rescuer may feel resentful, used or unappreciated. The Rescuer is often driven by a need for approval, to bolster self-worth and to feel powerful.

The players on the triangle bounce from one position to another:

- 1) The **Victim** will seek a **Rescuer**.
- 2) The **Rescuer** keeps the **Victim** in the Victim role by taking over.
- 3) The **Victim** will defend and protect themselves by moving into the **Persecutor** position (lashing out – pushing away – withdrawing).
- 4) The **Victim** may also enlist another **Rescuer** to 'save' them from the original Rescuer, who is now experienced as a **Persecutor**.
- 5) The **Rescuer** feels like the **Victim** because their attempts are not appreciated or valued. They may become resentful or punishing, thereby stepping into the **Persecutor** role.
- 6) The **Persecutor** tries to avoid feeling powerless and vulnerable by maintaining a sense of control over the **Victim**.

Each position on the triangle is adopted as a result of feeling discounted, unappreciated or unvalued by the other person. All positions are defending against vulnerability and feelings of not being good enough in some way. Each position disowns their behaviour and contribution. When people find themselves on the triangle they may be unconsciously repeating (re-enacting) a relational dynamic from their past, often from their family of origin or other early childhood experiences.

Think of a situation where you were a **Victim**, **Rescuer** or **Persecutor**. Perhaps in this situation you found yourself in all three roles.

Ask yourself the following questions.

Triangle Exercise

- What feelings, thoughts or sensations come up for me when I recall this situation?
- How would I prefer to feel or think?
- What did I do or not do that contributed to how this situation played out?
- What would have been a better way to respond?
- Who was taking responsibility for whom and who was not taking responsibility?
- Did I allow the other person to take responsibility for their actions?
- Who had the power in this situation and how do I know?
- Did I agree to more than I wanted to do, was able to do or was fair for me to do?
- Was I seeking approval or did I fear being rejected or punished?
- Was I doing more than half the work?
- Were my boundaries clear and if not what boundaries do I need to set up?
- Does this situation or person remind me of an experience from my past?
- What action can I take to make sure that I approach this person or situation in the best possible way, while recognising I am not responsible for what others do or don't do?

How to stay off (or step off) the triangle

- Observe what position you are taking (or tempted to take) on the triangle.
- Acknowledge your potential to project responsibility and disown your power.
- Be assertive and ask to be treated with respect.
- The **Victim** needs to own their vulnerability and take responsibility for themselves.
- The **Rescuer** needs to resist the urge to take responsibility for others which is projecting a need for approval, to feel powerful and to avoid feeling vulnerable.
- The **Persecutor** needs to recognise and own their power and express it in a way that empowers themselves and others. They also need to embrace their vulnerability and fear of being controlled by others.

It is human nature to want the other person in a conflict to change. We can often think of many things the other person is doing wrong or that is unfair. We may also at times be correct.

However, we cannot control what another person does or doesn't do or what they may think or feel. We are not responsible for the behaviour or actions of others.

We can only change our position on the triangle through taking responsibility for ourselves and stepping off.



Stepping off the triangle requires setting **clear, safe and appropriate boundaries** where each person is respected, valued, held accountable and takes responsibility for their behaviour and actions.