

The Drama Triangle (Karpman)

Have you ever felt let down, upset, guilty, angry, frustrated, sad or hurt? If so, there is every chance that you have been pulled in to The Drama Triangle. The Drama Triangle is all about relationships – relationships with unequal power, and the resulting manipulation. Every dysfunctional interaction takes place around the Drama Triangle and remember, the minute we expect things from other people, we are being dysfunctional.

The Drama Triangle has three roles – if you consider transactional analysis, they are formed of one child role and two parent roles.

The Victim is the child role and gives away its power. Its characteristics are:

- “Poor me”
- Feels victimized, oppressed, helpless, hopeless, powerless, ashamed
- Looks for a Rescuer that will perpetuate these negative feelings
- If stays in victim mode, will block self from making decisions, solving problems, pleasure and self-understanding
- “dejected” stance

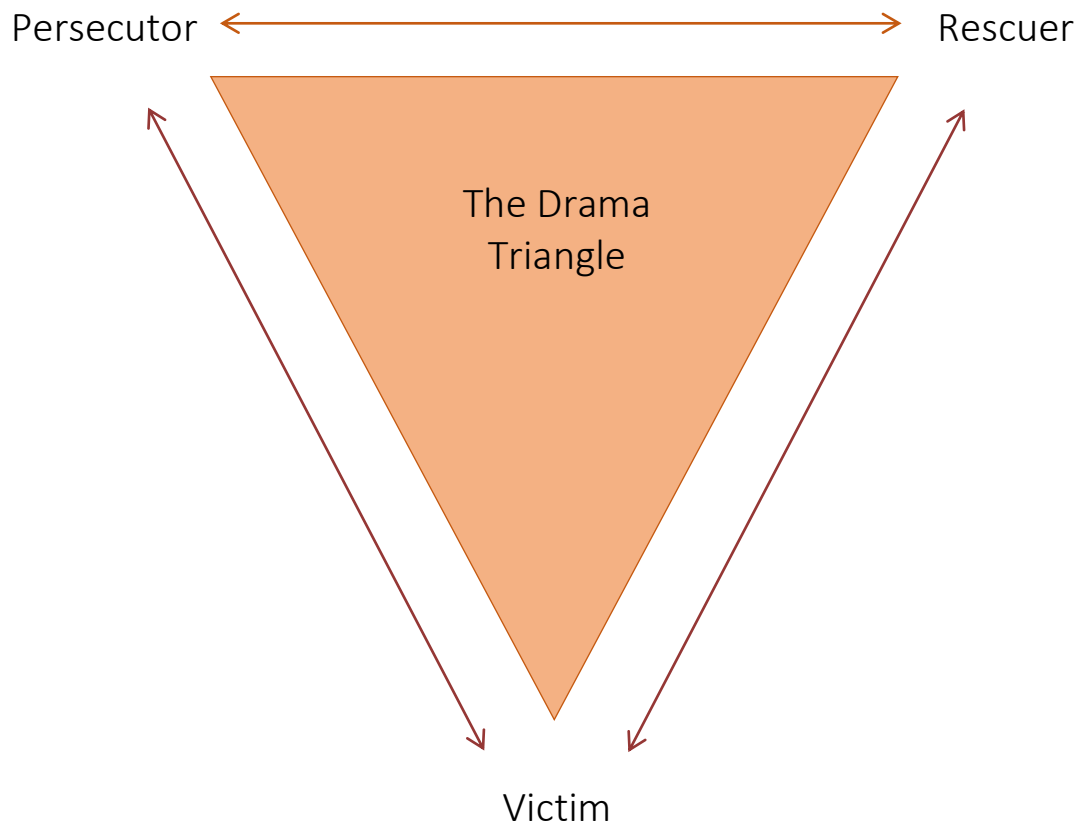
The Rescuer is a parent role and accepts power. They believe they have all the answers and know the right solutions for others but this is often a false cloak as it is more about gaining a sense of identity, attention and respect from others. Its characteristics are:

- “Let me help you”
- Rescues when doesn’t really want to
- Feels guilty if doesn’t rescue
- Keeps victim dependent
- Gives permission to fail
- Expects to fail in rescue attempts

The Persecutor is the second parent role and displays power. Its characteristics are:

- “It’s all your fault”
- Sets strict limits unnecessarily
- Blames, criticizes, keeps Victim oppressed
- Is mobilized by anger
- Rigid, authoritative stance
- “Critical” parent

Victims and Rescuers can become Persecutors. Rather than accepting personal responsibility and walking away, they stay locked in destructive patterns. Persecutors may then become Victims and so the dance around the triangle of dependency continues...



Unconscious collaboration in the Drama Triangle is emotionally draining and may lead to burnout.

So, how do we get out of the triangle?

Be true to ourselves, use the Five Agreements (see below) and understand the Drama Triangle fully (see Gill Edwards work [Appendix 1]– this may re-iterate some of the detail you have been given above but might also give you a slightly different or deeper understanding).

The Five Agreements (Don Miguel Ruiz)

The Toltecs were native South Americans. They had a well-developed system of wisdom about life and how we should live it. They were described as five agreements.

1. Be impeccable with your word

Your word is an affirmation of your intent, a casting out of your will into the world, reinforced by power. So, say only what you mean and speak with integrity. Don't waste the power of your word in idle gossip or putting yourself down. Use your word as a vehicle for the power for your will, for good, with love and truth.

2. Take nothing personally

We are all part of an interconnected universe, but we are each having our own experiences. My stuff is my stuff, your stuff is your stuff. So nothing you do is because of me – it's your stuff. How I interpret that is my stuff – but it is better to take nothing personally for nothing is done personally. If I do take it personally then it is me that chooses to suffer!

3. Make no assumptions

Ask the question “why?” often and find clear answers for yourself. Express your wishes clearly to avoid misunderstanding. Communicate clearly with others to avoid needless emotions, mistakes and upsets.

4. Always do your best

When you are present in yourself, and stand in your power, you are the best that you can be. In life, everything is always changing – if we just do our best, whatever the circumstances, we are expressing ourselves with integrity. That way, we avoid self-criticism and regret. Avoid any emotional attachment to the outcomes of your efforts.

5. Be sceptical, but learn to listen

People tell us their story – but it is from their perspective, not necessarily the whole view. When we learn to listen, we understand truth at a deeper level. Using the power of doubt allows us to discern the truth behind their words and communication. So it is important to use curiosity when assessing the story, asking ourselves “is it truth, or is it not? Is it reality or is it a virtual reality?” Everything we do is guided by a positive intention – try to find out what the other person’s positive intention is and life becomes a whole lot easier.

Getting off the triangle

Ask yourself:

What is my motivation for acting the way I do?

Am I consciously acting out of choice and giving freely, or are my actions designed to change, control or get something from others?

Do I give and do things freely, or do I have expectations?

The Empowerment Dynamic (TED – David Emerald)

The key to getting off the triangle is to move from external referencing (i.e. looking outside of ourselves for approval) to internal referencing (i.e. getting in touch with our authentic self, who has the answers, solutions, love, happiness and identity we choose for ourselves).

A Victim must stop looking for someone or something external to themselves to fix them, to give them the answers or to give them the love and support they need. A Rescuer must stop trying to change, control or get support from helping others. Both must learn how to love, honour, support and respect themselves. Persecution, blaming others, only results in greater negativity and never achieves anything positive. We all need to improve our attitudes towards change, control, risk and responsibility. We need to reframe our perspective to view life as a grand adventure rather than something of a chore to be endured. Above all we need to find the courage to admit that we are practically imperfect but appreciating all of our individualities for the benefits they bring.

Dave Emerald developed a polarity map of the Drama Triangle which he called The Empowerment Dynamic, which suggests moving to the positive pole of the interpersonal dynamic by challenging instead of persecuting, coaching instead of rescuing and creating rather than being a victim.

Reconnecting to our dreams and desires, taking action forward towards those outcomes can require a major shift in mindset for many people, but can result in greater awareness of ourselves and more options available to us.

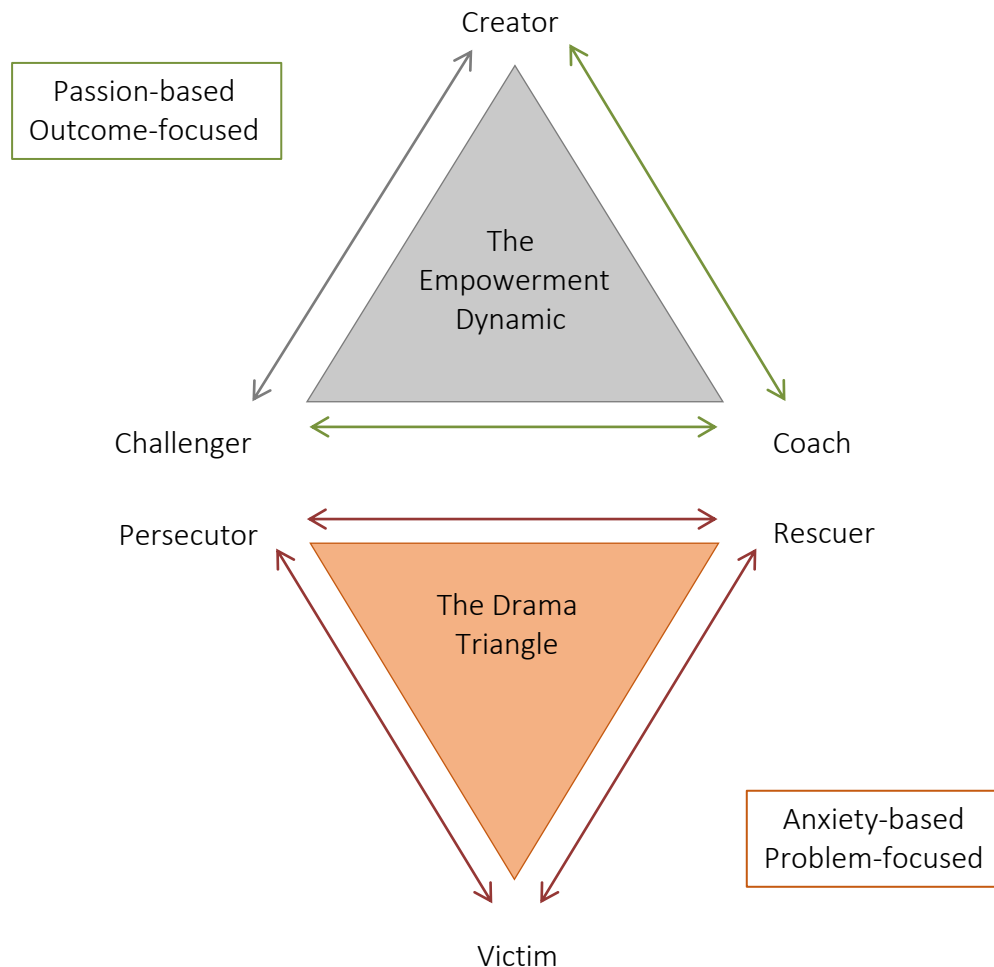
So, The Empowerment Dynamic also has three roles – all adult.

The Creator is the central role and taps into an inner state of passion. Directed by intention, it focuses on a desired outcome, propelling the creator to take small steps towards whatever it is that they want to create. The Creator owns their own ability to choose their response to life (takes response-ability)

The Coach uses compassion and questions to help the creator develop their vision and action plan. The Coach provides encouragement and support in place of “rescuing’ actions

The Challenger is focused on learning and growth, holding The Creator accountable while encouraging learning, action and next steps. The Challenger consciously builds The Creator up, as a positive alternative to putting someone down by criticising, blaming or controlling

Shown in this format, you can see how The Empowerment Dynamic is the positive mirror image of The Drama Triangle:



So, be aware of the Drama Triangle playing out in life, and in your consultations with patients. Do not allow boundary infringement or trespass to become boundary violation. Remember that at the end of the day, the doctor is **never** the patient's friend, no matter how friendly the relationship.

And finally...

How to appear brilliant!

Every patient has six questions which, whilst rarely uttered, are always thought.

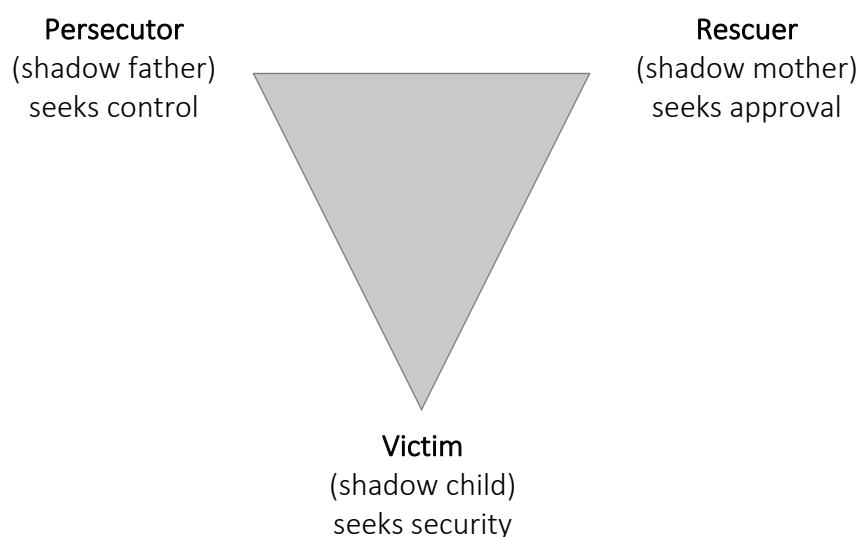
1. What is it?
2. Why me?
3. Why now?
4. What's going to happen?
5. What can you do about it?
6. What can I do about it?

The first 5 can be dealt with in a complementary transactional way (adult-adult or parent-child) but the last requires a lifting of the child into adult. Awareness of this may prevent you entering the drama triangle!

APPENDIX 1:

Gill Edwards, July 2007

Every dysfunctional interaction takes place around the drama triangle. It involves blocked or distorted communication based on fear, judgment and insecurity. Whenever you feel disempowered, guilty, stuck, resentful, blaming, helpless, trapped, dependent, misunderstood, bewildered, betrayed, controlled, manipulated or abused, you re in a drama triangle – which might involve two, three, or more people. At the top of the triangle are the one-up positions (parent), while at the bottom is the one-down position (child). Although many people have a familiar position, the roles can rotate with lightening speed, playing all the toxic games of co-dependency. There are no winners in the drama triangle. Everyone loses and feels like a victim – until someone stops playing the game.



Dysfunctional relationships rotate constantly around the drama triangle, resulting in:

- Pervasive sense of guilt and shame
- Lies, pretence and unhealthy secrets
- Manipulation, control and power games
- Blaming and resentment
- Feelings of 'entitlement'
- Misguided loyalty which promotes lying/abuse
- Perceived lack of freedom
- Chaos, crisis and drama
- Scapegoating
- Denial of problems
- 'Protecting' others from facing their issues (also known as enabling)
- Inappropriate sense of responsibility for others' feelings, needs or well-being
- Feelings of helplessness, worthlessness and inadequacy
- Distancing and avoidance of conflict in relationships
- Superficial conversations which avoid issues or repeated cycles of blame/rage/abuse/guilt then denial

- Fear of change – with desperate attempts to avoid change or maintain stability
- Inability to express emotions in healthy, empowering and responsible ways which increase intimacy
- Relative absence of healthy, loving and intimate interactions, or joy, freedom, creativity and spontaneity.

Co-dependent/dysfunctional relationships tend to repeatedly hook in a third ‘player’ – a process known as triangulation – either as a common point of concern (e.g. sick child or needy friend/parent), a common enemy to unite against, or a Rescuer who might become labeled a Persecutor. This third person/issue serves the purpose of ‘distance regulation’ to avoid real intimacy or more threatening issues. For some couples, an ex-partner serves this function; or they attract one ‘lame dog’ or worthy cause after another to focus on.

Two common rules in dysfunctional systems:

1. Pretend everything is fine (i.e. don’t be honest/authentic)
2. Don’t threaten the status quo

PERSECUTOR

Get to feel safe by hurting, criticizing, controlling or abusing others

False sense of superiority or arrogance (which sometimes collapses into shame/insecurity of Victim)

Want to be in control; might manipulate, use unspoken threats, ignore or bully others into submission

Self-righteous, judgmental and blaming; need to be seen as perfect or beyond reproach

Strong need to be ‘in the right’ and to see others as ‘in the wrong’

Get adrenaline rush from being angry/righteous – so need an enemy to battle against

Can justify and defend their abusive or controlling behavior

Feel ‘entitled’ to have others meet their needs, or to behave as they wish them to

(This is the hardest pattern to acknowledge in ourselves. Chronic Persecutors are the least likely of the three to recognize their own issues or to seek help/growth. Can be borderline personalities)

RESCUER

Get to feel safe/worthy by ‘enabling’ others – i.e. bailing out, covering up for or protecting others

Believe they know what is best for other people, what is ‘right’ or what others should do

See themselves as wiser, stronger or more resourceful; might hand out money, moralistic advice or guidance

Foster dependency or helplessness in others; disempower others by taking ‘parental’ role

Over-responsible for others’ feelings/needs; avoid looking at own feelings/problems by focusing on others

Anxiety-driven; often ‘bound by loyalty’ to dysfunctional relationships or situations

Proud of their care-taking (and might make a full-time job or profession out of it)

Feel guilty if not caring enough for others; tend to deny and sacrifice their own needs for others

Often feel like martyrs – over-burdened or unappreciated; play game of “After all I’ve done for you...”

VICTIM

Get to feel safe by being submissive, giving in or being dependent/helpless

Blame other people, circumstances or past decisions for how they feel

Expect others to solve their problems for them – to ‘rescue’ them; often play “Yes, but...” games

Passive, child-like dependency; find it hard to make decisions for themselves

How to escape the drama triangle

- Hold on to knowing you are a good, worthy and loving person – and so are they
- Take responsibility for your own feelings, and use your emotional guidance
- Insist that others take responsibility for their own feelings (and their own lives)
- Stop shaming/blaming yourself or others, whatever the circumstances
- Stop caring what anyone else might think of you, or trying to control others (i.e. mind your own business)
- Insist that others treat each other (and you) with respect and compassion
- Befriend your Shadow (so that you don’t project it on to others)
- Pull back from relationships which are critical, abusive or manipulative – and look at how you attract that
- Stop bailing others out, protecting them or trying to help “lame ducks”
- Don’t get hooked in to power games; engage only in honest and direct communication
- Recognize the family-ar games you play, and catch yourself slipping in to those patterns

Drama triangles are highly seductive and controlling; even when you recognize that games are being played it can be difficult to opt out! When you stop playing in the drama triangle, others are likely to get angry, accuse you of being selfish, or even be abusive; or they might feign helplessness and fall into Victim mode. This is an attempt to shame you back in to your familiar role of Rescuer or Victim, so resist it! Recognise what needs of *yours* are being met by the drama triangle – such as feeling in control, or trying to feel worthy, or feeling safe. Then make new and healthy choices based on love, self-empowerment and authenticity.

If you slip into being Persecutor:

Give up the need to be right; recognize that everyone is in the right from their own perspective

Be honest with yourself, and listen to others with an open heart

Sit with vulnerable feelings, instead of ‘acting out’ from fear or anger

Stop justifying or defending being hurtful, critical, controlling or abusive

Let go of any feeling of entitlement, and set others free

If you tend to be a Rescuer:

Stop basing your self-esteem on helping, caring for or protecting others

Focus on yourself and your own needs/issues, instead of focusing on other’s needs

Stop justifying taking care of others; don’t protect anyone from facing uncomfortable feelings or issues

Notice how others use guilt/manipulation to control you

Don’t collude with seeing anyone as helpless or a victim; never take sides in a drama

Be responsible only for yourself and your feelings – trust your own guidance; do what feels joyful

If you tend to be a Victim:

Acknowledge your own strengths instead of looking for a Rescuer; think and problem-solve for yourself

Deal with your anger – and learn to handle confrontation without giving in, rescuing or persecuting

Be authentic; stop pretending or manipulating. Take responsibility for your own needs and self-care