The Karpman “Drama Triangle”

The Drama Triangle shows the dramatic roles that people act-out in daily life that are unstable, unsatisfactory, repetitive, and emotionally competitive. Largely unconscious, these roles will generate misery and discomfort for all persons involved.

The Drama Triangle, first described by Dr. Stephen Karpman a pioneer in the field of transactional analysis, identifies 3 predictable (often unconscious) roles that people in problem situations can find themselves in. The 2-way arrows indicate that the roles can switch.

Example: Patty was staying with her friend Mary and Mary’s daughter, Ann. One day a pair of Patty’s earrings came up missing and she asked if anyone had seen them. Everyone said “no”. Suspicious of Ann, Patty went into her bedroom and looked in her jewelry box. And, they were there! Patty took them back and announced where she had found them. Patty was clearly the Victim here (of Ann’s obvious theft). And, the Persecutor was clearly Ann (the thief). Mary became the Rescuer by chastising her daughter, Ann. However, Ann denied taking the earrings and all the roles suddenly switched. Now, Patty was seen as the Persecutor (falsely blaming Ann who was now the Victim). Mary stood up for her daughter Ann, and became the Rescuer. Then, asked Patty to leave her home which made Patty the Victim and Mary the Persecutor….. and so the drama continues.

Such Dramas are so common in our society that we may not even notice we are in one, until the hurtful feelings occur. Karpman says you can tell when you are in such a Drama because you can see all three roles, how the roles can suddenly switch up on you, and how every person involved will feel upset. The Drama will continue as long as someone is willing to be “Victimized.”

As Karpman puts it: “Win-lose always turns into lose-lose. A win in the Drama Triangle is always temporary”. The (unconscious) purpose is to act out a person’s Life-script, and maintain a psychological “advantage” in relationships. The switching that happens between the roles generates the Drama and the painful feelings that occur when people have hidden agendas and secrets, and then manipulate for dysfunctional personal advantage.

Without realizing it, a particular role can become a “comfortable life habit” for a person. For instance, someone who sees himself as a Rescuer may be drawn to become a nurse, doctor, or policeman. A person can learn to be comfortable with the benefits of being a Victim. A bully may feel a sense of power or security in his role as Persecutor, etc.
Getting Off The “Triangle”

Becoming aware when you’re in the Drama Triangle is the first step to getting off of it. The next step is to identify the role you’ve been “assigned” and ask yourself some soul-searching questions: Is this a “comfortable” role? A familiar role? Am I aware of personal history with this role? Etc. Finally, what new action is called for?

It’s helpful to remember that: “Other than survivors of floods, car accidents, shootings, etc. there are no Victims after age 18, just volunteers.” Here is more information about the roles.

**Persecutor Stance: “It’s all your fault”**
- Sets strict limits unnecessarily
- Blames and Criticizes
- Keeps Victim oppressed
- Is mobilized by anger
- Has rigid, authoritative stance
- Like a “Critical Parent”

“If you keep doing what you’ve always done, you’ll keep getting what you’ve always got”

If you find yourself in this Role, get off the Drama Triangle, by setting healthy, realistic boundaries & consequences.

**Victim Stance: “Poor me”**
- Feels victimized, oppressed, helpless, hopeless, powerless, ashamed
- Looks for a Rescuer who will perpetuate their negative feelings
- If stays in Victim position, will block self from making decisions, solving problems, feeling any pleasure, and self-understanding.
- Maintains “dejected” stance

If you find yourself in this Role, get off the Drama Triangle, by getting help with problem solving.

**Rescuer Stance: “Let me help you”**
- Rescues when really doesn’t want to
- Feels guilty if doesn’t rescue
- Keeps Victim dependent
- Gives permission to fail
- Expects to fail in rescue attempt
- Like a “Marshmallow Parent”

If you find yourself in this Role, get off the Drama Triangle, by giving help without “enabling” and allow the person (Victim) to learn, and grow, by solving their own problems.

Accepting Help to Change old Habits

The next step after having new awareness is taking new action. This can be a very scary step because you are risking leaving “The Familiar” (your comfort zone), and this brings up anxiety. It’s suggested that people get support from others facing the same type of challenges. It’s helpful to realize you’re not alone and that you can give and receive encouragement, support, and new ideas for solving problems from other people. People with the same challenges you have, so you can relate to them, and build trust with them. This is the basic premise behind all self-help groups.

“If you have to do it yourself, and you can’t do it alone”