

The Drama Triangle: The Three Roles of Victimhood

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The original article can be found at <http://www.angriesout.com/grown20.htm>.

(This document has been edited from its original source. Also note that Father Brian has not evaluated every resource mentioned here. If you have specific questions about a particular resource or program, he would be happy to talk with you about it.)

The three roles of the Drama Triangle are the three main positions that unhappy families play as described by transactional therapist Stephen Karpman in 1968. The three roles are Perpetrator, Rescuer and Victim. They operate to keep people in the illusion of power. The roles incorporate learned patterns of habit and control mechanisms that bond people together in sick ways. They are symbiotic, destructive behaviors that affect all members of the family.

Karpman drew these roles on an inverted triangle with the Perpetrator (whose behavior ranges from the dominant one to the abuser in the family) and the Rescuer at the upper end of the triangle and the Victim at the bottom. The two positions at the top are considered the “one-up” positions where the people feel superior, while the Victim is at the “one-down” position feeling looked down on and helpless. The positions often shift as people change emotions to protect the ego which feels threatened. The Victim may become angry at the injustice of being persecuted, thereby shifting into the Perpetrator role. The Abuser may become tired with his angry barrage, then feel guilty and shift into the Rescuer role.

These roles are unconscious scripts of how unhealthy family life is played out that keep people disconnected from true intimacy. They manifest in behaviors that people engage in to distance and disconnect from each other. They are the ways people attempt to stay safe, feel important and stroke their own egos. Participating in the drama of the triangle keeps people stuck in lies, blame and shame, unhealthy secrets, “shoulds” and addictions to crisis, chaos and manipulation.

The Drama Triangle positions are largely unconscious in nature and kept in place by denial, arrogance, helplessness and collusion (tacit agreement from all players to keep the status quo). Unconscious scripts of guilt and shame are programmed into the young child’s psyche. Themes of desperation form around the roles--themes of depression, alcoholism, abuse, incest, scapegoating, manipulation and codependency. These thematic patterns are passed down from one generation to the next. According to one authority, approximately one fourth of all families have some version of a tyrant member who tells the others what to do.

All roles are perpetuated by the denial of feelings, first in the self and then in others. Denial is the defense mechanism that keeps people acting out in unconscious, perverted ways

instead of seeing the reality of how they hurt themselves and others. The huge stash of denied feelings continues to build over a life time to perpetuate misery in the person's life by alienating him/her from loving connections with a partner or with children.

The children in the family learn all three roles and as adults perpetuate them among their children. According to their personality type, they choose a primary role but have the other two roles at their disposal to bring up in specific situations. Each family member "moves around the triangle," shifting roles as needed. Each person has a primary role but can shift to another role to maintain the illusion of power. With others outside the family, different roles are played depending on how much the relationship is valued and what healthy boundaries have been set in place. For example, a man might be dominant and abusive at home, but be subservient to his boss at work.

Psychotherapist Lynn Forrest described how there is typically a primary position with which the person identifies the most. "Our primary positions are generally setup in childhood. For instance, if a parent is overly protective, doing everything for a child, then that child may grow up to feel incapable of taking care of themselves. This sets them up for a life-time role of Victim. Or, the opposite: they might come to feel angry and vindictive if others don't take care of them, thereby adopting a primary Persecutor stance."

In healthy families, there can be a minor version of these roles which erupt more so when huge stressors hit. Instead of the abusive Perpetrator dynamic, there is a dominant partner with the other partner going along with decisions but little drama as shown in traditional marriages. In healthy families there is honesty and permission to talk about acting out behaviors of others with problem solving instead of abuse, giving in and enabling. (See John Gottman's research on how healthy families communicate with each other.)

Addictions Create Havoc in Families

Severe addictions always cause major destructive role playing. One form of the Perpetrator is the "nice guy" who turns mean while drinking. Another form is the angry person who rages when using drugs or alcohol. The alcoholic who withdraws regularly into stupor is a form of neglect. Addictions in some family members correspondingly bring up rescuing and victimhood in others. The deeper that one or more family members move into destructive addictions, the bigger the family drama will become.

An article from Al Anon illustrates how family members can shift Drama Triangle positions in their despair and frustration: "It is appalling how well the alcoholic controls the family, especially the wife, husband or mother. The alcoholic drinks again and again. The family screams, cries, yells, begs, pleads, prays, threatens or practices the silent treatment. It also covers up, protects and shields the alcoholic from the consequences of drinking. The alcoholic continues to act like a little god, it is because the family is inadequate in opposing this attitude and abets the preservation of the illusion of omnipotence."

Rescuing and enabling interrupt the natural aversive consequences of the roles. Sometimes people need to experience the painful consequences of their choices. Sometimes they need to suffer and hit bottom before they understand that they need to change. For example, bringing a court-ordered, restraining order to anger management classes after domestic violence gives the shake-up and reality check that the perpetrator needs. He needs to suffer the pain of aversive consequences rather than have the family members continue to suffer his destructive behavior.

**Playing the Roles Always Creates Lose–Lose–Lose.
No One Wins in the Drama Triangle.**

All positions:

- cause pain.
- come from denied pain.
- perpetuate lies and unhealthy secrets.
- come from a sense of shame and cause shame.
- come from feelings of unworthiness.
- are about a loss of personal power.
- perpetuate guilt and a “sick sense of love.”
- keep people caught in dysfunctional behavior.
- are passed down to the next generation of children.

Here are the roles that keep you stuck in unhappy relationships. Remember that you can have some traits of each of the roles and switch back and forth between them!

Perpetrator: “I Get To Feel Safe by Hurting Others and Putting Them Down”

- Stuck in a false sense of superiority and defense mechanisms that keep people in denial.
- Addictive role: feeling the adrenalin rush during anger and rage. Getting high from fighting and witnessing fights. (If you get energized watching the Jerry Springer show, you might check out adrenalin addiction.)
- Unconsciously uses anger as an energizer to keep depression at bay.
- Needs to be in control and uses verbal or physical force to stay in power.
- Deals with threat, new ideas and conflict with anger to stay safe in the role of being the dominant person.
- Uses blame, criticisms, attacks and then venting to release stress.
- Is highly judgmental of others and angry when others do not do what they say.
- Self righteous judgments about other’s weaknesses subtly allows the weakness to continue.
- Strong sense of entitlement: “you owe me,” and willing to use verbal or physical force to get it.
- Feelings of frustration trigger the right to get angry rather than deal with own uncomfortable feelings.
- Unable to feel vulnerable and denies own weaknesses.
- Shame-based and uses negative behaviors to cover up/deny own problems.

- Strong need to be right and not have their authority challenged.
- Finds reasons to make others wrong and scapegoats them.
- Believes others deserve the abuse and punishment the Perpetrator dishes out.
- May have had a parent who modeled aggressive behavior and winning through force.
- May have had a parent who spoiled the child, setting up feelings of entitlement and getting his way.

Rescuer: “I Get to Feel Safe by Enabling Others”

- Stuck in a false superiority with defense of acting unselfishly to help others.
- Addictive role: feeling good at the expense of the Victim’s responsibility to take care of him or her self.
- Good-guy beliefs, such as takes the “high moral ground” of rescuing and enabling others.
- Needs to be in control of others to avoid own feelings and problems.
- Garnering self-esteem by being seen as unselfish for someone else’s own good.
- Uses rescuing and enabling to connect or to feel important.
- Highly judgmental of others and angry when others do not do what he/she says.
- Blames Perpetrator for problems in the family while refusing to address one’s own problems.
- Is anxiety-driven and uses rescuing to reduce feelings of anxiety.
- Feels guilty when not involved with another’s problems.
- Has shame about loss of self to meet other’s needs.
- Super caretaker role can create sense of giving own self away and create depression.
- Strong sense of entitlement with the Victim of “You owe me because of all I’ve done for you.”
- Can become a martyr/Victim when he/she feels that he/she has been taken advantage of by others.
- Parents the child though meeting his/her own needs of shame and guilt rather than meeting the needs of the child to be a responsible person who is allowed negative consequences and learns from them.
- May feel guilty and try to make it up to a child because of a divorce or due to choosing a lousy spouse who abuses, scapegoats or neglects the child.
- May feel guilty and try to make it up to a child because of drinking or using drugs when the child was small, neglecting the child or being a single mom.
- May feel guilty and try to make it up to a child because of a handicapping condition or a perceived weakness in the child.

Victim: “I Get to Feel Safe by Being Submissive”

- Stuck in a false sense of being unworthy with defenses of feeling sorry for self and passive-aggressive behavior.
- Deals with threats by giving in, in order to feel safe, and is submissive when others act inappropriately.
- Unable to stand up for self and avoids confrontation.

- Believes his/her needs do not count.
- Can be overly sensitive, wish-washy and unable to make and stick to decisions.
- Doesn't take responsibility for own feelings.
- Feeds off of the beliefs of Perpetrator and Rescuer that he/she cannot take care of self.
- Has shame base for being irresponsible and inept.
- Is anxiety-driven and makes excuses for staying stuck in Victim role.
- Blames Perpetrator for problems in the family.
- Anger, resentment and retaliation through manipulation and refusal to act as a responsible adult.
- Moves between "Poor me" and anger with blaming others: "He/she is bad."
- Angry when goes along with what the Perpetrator or Rescuer says to do.
- Feels stuck and unfulfilled in life but does not risk moving forward.
- May have had a lenient or overly-protective parent who set up expectations of helplessness.
- May have had a parent who feels anxiety when the child has to suffer natural consequences from mistakes.

The Call from the Soul

The Soul reaches out to get the person to examine the unresolved pain of the past to provoke personal and spiritual growth. There are certain developmental milestones across life where the personal pain is so great that the person is willing to be open and stop some of the defenses he/she has built up. The pain of the past has to be addressed. Severe pain of the present life can be an impetus to get the person to wake up and learn, stretch and grow spiritually. The call from the Soul comes forth to spur the person into becoming the best person they can be.

Creating the Escape Hatch: Rising Above the Drama Triangle

Some family members find it easier to get into recovery and change than others. Rescuers and Victims are usually more sensitive people and are more likely to read books, attend self help meetings and come to therapy to get help. Perpetrators are less likely to change as they seem to have a bigger dose of arrogance, defensiveness, shame and denial to overcome. Of course, the recovery is dependent upon seeing and releasing the underlying needs that the Drama Triangle roles feed into.

Sometimes other family members see the value of getting healthy in their interactions with others; others do not. You can interrupt your Drama Triangle role playing and change the way you interact with family members. The whole recovery movement—therapy, self help books, AA and other help-yourself groups, Oprah and Dr. Phil—teaches you how to change **your** part of the dynamics of interacting with others. You can only change yourself. You can learn to be direct and straight with people without playing games.

Education is the first key. Understand and observe the roles that you play and how you shift

from aggressor to Victim to Rescuer. Healthy relationships can happen if you are willing to work and change yourself and learn to act in ways that form intimate connections.

Through imagery, see yourself in the middle of the triangle. Observe yourself when you start to go into thoughts, feelings and behaviors of the Perpetrator, Victim and Rescuer roles. Rise above the roles through being mindful. Mindfulness is noticing what is happening rather than reacting to it. Watch how you are about to get hooked back in—observe your emotions and body reactions that indicate that you are being triggered. From up above, look down on the behaviors of the people involved—not to judge but to try to understand.

Become accountable and own all thoughts, feelings and behaviors that keep you in the drama roles. Take care of yourself and your feelings. Expect and insist that others take care of their feelings and problems. Make getting clean your number one priority with your behavior.

Address addictions and co-dependent behaviors through self help groups such as AA, AlAnon and Codependents of America Anonymous. There is tremendous, loving help out there if you but reach out and ask for it!

Stop the blame and shame game. Interrupt all blame either for self or others. Watch for attitudes and behaviors of “Who did it? Who can be blamed?” Looking for someone to be called on the carpet when something goes wrong is a constant in dysfunctional families. You can go one of two ways when there is an issue: You can look for someone to blame OR you can start problem solving.

The habit of blaming comes from being judgmental. Address your constant need to judge others when they do not meet your standards and values. Mind your own business! And don't give too much credence to anyone's negative opinion of you. Remind yourself, “What ____ thinks of me is none of my business. My business is to change so that I think well of myself.”

Address any irrational beliefs that you should be perfect. Error correction is analyzing your mistakes and deciding to act differently next time. The moment you realize that you have goofed up, you have a choice: You can beat yourself up or you can figure out what you did wrong through problem solving. Stop self condemnation and learn from your mistakes.

Put yourself around positive people who don't have the need to play the roles of the Drama Triangle. Insist on equality in relationships. Insist that people treat each other with respect. Figure out your values and what you will and will not put up with in your life. Set boundaries and stick to them, giving consequences to those who continually go past the limits you have set. Your Bottom Line is that place where you decide to walk away when someone acts in ways you can no longer live with. Discontinue relationships with friends who use or abuse you.

Have courage to do a thorough self-examination: what the fourth step in the 12-step community calls “a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.” This is a necessary step of learning to identify that which is in us that is broken, fallen, marred or disobedient to God’s commands. Only with getting in touch do we then learn what needs to be fixed, restored, healed and forgiven by God himself. Through this process we learn greater depths of forgiveness, grace and love.

Learn release techniques for processing unhappy memories of the past and current negative emotions. The techniques of hypnosis, imagery, cognitive behavioral interruption of negativity, Eye Movement Desensitization (EMDR), Thought Field Therapy (TFT), The Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT), The Tapas Acupressure Technique (TAT) and many others help process and release issues. Yes, you can do a lot to help yourself, but therapy is the fast track to moving off the Drama Triangle.

When there has been severe dysfunction in families, you can’t get to the depth of your pain on your own without an objective guide. Find a therapist who does not just let you talk. If you’ve been with the same therapist for some time and seem stuck, consider a new approach. Therapists who know the processing techniques listed above have better recovery success than ones who just listen to you.

Forgive yourself for learning the roles in the past and understand that you learned what was modeled for you. Therapists who use spiritual approaches to therapy are more likely to use techniques that help you forgive yourself and those who hurt you. One of the best techniques to promote forgiveness and moving on with your life is the Emotional Freedom Technique. This fast, effective technique incorporates forgiveness statement along with affirmations and acupressure to promote relaxation, which helps neutralize strong emotions and attachment to problems.

Learn congruence, which is the art of having your outside behavior match your inside feelings. In congruence, all thoughts, body states, emotions and actions are similar. When you are congruent, you state your feelings and act in a direct, fair manner. Make a new contract with friends and family members that you are going to avoid game playing and speak in fair, firm ways and express feelings. Learn the “I formula” and use it when appropriate—“I feel _____ when you _____.” Understand that others will not change just because you express your feelings.

Get professional help early on for children who show signs of the dysfunction in the family. Anger issues, suicidal gestures, depression, use of alcohol and drugs and refusal to do school work, failing and dropping out of school are all signs of a child’s cry for help. Often the child’s acting out behavior is a barometer for the family, signaling that there is unaddressed family pain. Many families find help in getting off some of the Drama Triangle by first bringing a child who is hurting to therapy.

Interventions—confrontations with loving intent—can help bring insight and change to the

family sometimes. When you come from a place of centeredness and love, you can ask a family member to look at their abusing, enabling or staying-in-Victim attitudes and behavior. Be prepared to get denial, anger or abuse in return.

The two rules in unhappy families are don't shake up the system and don't threaten the status quo. Understand that as you get healthy and refuse to play the Drama game, your family members may become angry and see you as bad if you refuse to play the old, manipulative games or if you call them on their dysfunctional behavior. If you stop bailing out irresponsible family members with your money and attention, you will be called selfish.

Some people choose to dissociate themselves from their game-playing family as they become healthy. If they do not pull away completely, they limit the amount of time they spend with dysfunctional members of their family. They shorten family visits where there is excessive use of alcohol and verbal abuse. They drop in on holidays before people become drunk and abusive instead of spending the entire day.

There is strength in numbers. Get together with members of the family who are ready to address the pain. Family dysfunction has to be recognized and processed. If you are the only one in recovery, get a support group of like-minded people who are working on their own releases from Drama Triangle roles.

Healthy Skills for each Role Player to Leave the Drama Triangle

Perpetrator Role

- Stop denying that you reject, punish, or persecute others.
- Face the reality that you have damaged others by your unrealistic expectations and anger.
- Give up the need to be right and to feel self-righteous and superior to others.
- Stop rationalizing and justifying domineering beliefs and behaviors.
- Get honest with yourself—tell yourself the truth! Own the effects of your loud voice, angry stare and cold shoulder on others. Catch and interrupt yourself when you increase the volume and force to get your way.
- When others disagree with you, ask yourself, “Am I really being threatened or is it just a difference of opinion?”
- Learn how your use of force makes you feel powerful and find healthy ways to feel good about yourself.
- Own how you are energized by getting angry. Identify the adrenalin rush that anger gives you.
- Find new, healthy highs and energizing experiences to replace the adrenalin high of anger.
- Attend anger management classes to learn anger containment and anger release techniques.
- Attend parenting classes to learn about children's age-appropriate behavior and learn appropriate discipline techniques.
- Monitor anger and take a time-out by walking away before you become verbally or physically abusive.
- Learn to feel vulnerable with uncomfortable feelings instead of exploding out in anger

when stressed or threatened.

- Learn and use the Intentional Dialogue Technique (Harville Hendrix's Imago Therapy) to feel empathy and compassion for others.
- Apologize to those you have harmed and begin the repair work to set the family on a healthy course.
- Get a life where you can live in peace, without anger!

Rescuer Role

- Catch yourself in the act of feeling good because you helped someone. Stop basing your self-esteem on helping others.
- Give up the need to feel superior because you are the good guy who always helps others.
- Address your self-esteem needs to control others and know what is best for them.
- Address your own problems, shortcomings and negative emotions instead of focusing on other people.
- Set limits about solving other people's problems and put ALL of your energy in to solving your own.
- Learn the "hooks"—how others use guilt and manipulation to pull you into the Drama Triangle.
- Stop rationalizing and justifying your caretaking and enabling behavior.
- Stop feeling sorry for other people and giving them advice, money or support.
- When others overwhelm you with their problems, tell them you are not qualified to deal with such deep issues and suggest they get professional help.
- Get clean and sober with your codependency. Read at least five books on codependency and do the mind-opening exercises.
- Attend Adult Children of Alcoholics and AlAnon, get a sponsor and work the steps.
- Deal with your anger of being the good little girl or boy and the "parentified" child who did not get to have a childhood.
- Read five books on the heavy emotion of shame. Do the exercises in the books to help release shame.
- Interrupt guilty feelings when you refrain from unnecessary giving by reminding yourself that your old family programming is coming up.
- Define your new self-esteem as a person who takes care of your own feelings, thoughts, actions and problems.
- Bow out of the drama and encourage the Victim to stand up to the Perpetrator whenever possible.
- Take an assertiveness course.
- Get a life where you are responsible only for yourself!

Victim Role

- Stop expecting someone else to rescue you. Think and problem solve for yourself. Act boldly.
- Take responsibility for your feelings, thoughts and actions that contribute to your Victim role.
- Be authentic with others and learn to state your feelings and your needs firmly.

- Learn the body sensations and reactions that signal you are about to collapse into helplessness.
- Listen to your constant Victim statements and break into them.
- Address the terror and release traumatic memories of being abused by Perpetrator.
- Learn to handle confrontation and deal with other people's anger.
- Study Learned Helplessness and Learned Optimism (Martin Seligman) and apply the ideas from his research to your life.
- Challenge any belief or thoughts that say you are unworthy and can't take care of yourself.
- Decide what you expect and state your minimum standard of behavior that you consider to be decent treatment from others.
- Set limits with Perpetrators and Rescuers and walk away if they don't respect your boundaries.
- Stop blaming the Perpetrator and Rescuer and focus on getting out from under their influence.
- Deal with your anger at being scapegoated and punished by others and your taking on the Victim role.
- Start a self-nurturing, self-care program to bolster your ability to take care of your own needs.
- Take an assertiveness training course. Read five books on assertiveness. Take the course again.
- Surround yourself with new, positive friends and define yourself as an independent person who can handle life's problems.
- Get a life where you are responsible for yourself!

Hello. My Name is _____ and I'm in Recovery from the Drama Triangle

Get honest. Recovery from family dysfunction is a time of facing the truth about your childhood and delving into the dark hole of lies, manipulations and devious behaviors that exist inside of you. It is about examining how you treat others and allow them to treat you. Drama Triangle work is Soul work. It is a call from your highest self to address the guilt, shame and sense of unworthiness within that percolates up and refuses to go away. You can create the space to watch and address your thoughts and behaviors as they present themselves daily.

Let this really sink in: when you play out the familiar roles of Perpetrator, Rescuer and Victim, you do not serve yourself. You do not serve others. It is just something you have learned because it was modeled for you. So you need not have guilt or feel ashamed for what you have learned living in your family. As learned patterns of habit, the attitudes and behaviors that make up all the roles of the Drama Triangle can be unlearned. To do nothing to change the roles guarantees that things will remain the same.

Real love in a family is a combination of checks and balances—calling a person on his inappropriate behavior when necessary and giving enthusiastic support for strivings for growth. Giving in to disrespectful or destructive behavior reinforces the Perpetrator role as

it does not provide any motivation for change. Giving in to rescuing, enabling or victim behavior enhances continuing dysfunction. It may appear to be real, unconditional love, but it is not. Real love is honest and asks the people in the family to become the best they can be without shaming or guilt-ing. The ability to share feelings honestly and respectfully is one sign of healthy behavior in a family. Real love communicates a belief of positive regard for the person. It expects and gives respect to all family members.

The undoing of the pain is an ongoing process of emotional and spiritual maturity over time. It can be hastened through study, observation and confrontation of negative behaviors. You learn, stretch and grow as you mindfully watch your interactions with others. The techniques from Energy Psychology Therapy and Imago Therapy are so easy to learn to help you release negativity with amazing quickness.

Forgiveness is the ultimate key to true change and recovery. It can't be forced, but by studying this humbling process of release, it comes, sometimes out of the blue, to take you to a place of higher consciousness. Forgiveness happens gradually for some as there is a realization that, as Virginia Satir said, "We are all victims of victims of victims." Forgiveness is threefold: forgiving oneself, forgiving others and, perhaps, even forgiving God. Start with yourself: accept that you are a person with strong feelings, who was born in a life of trauma and injustice, but who now calls out for transformation.

Remember, recovery from your family pain is a day-to-day process. Life becomes brighter and more cheerful when you address your personal pain. With practice and mindfulness, you can break down those walls of delusion and dysfunctional behavior you have built in a misguided attempt to stay safe. Make honesty the only language you speak. In your recovery from lies, deceptions, and manipulation, decide to be as honest as you can and treat those you love with respect. The process of recovery is being mindful as you heed that call from your Soul to wake up and become all that you can be.

Additional Resources

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