

IN BRIEF: The Drama Triangle

Background

The drama triangle is a psychological model of human interaction developed as part of transactional analysis (TA) and was first described by Stephen Karpman, MD, in 1968. The drama triangle is a “game” in which people engage to get their unspoken (and, often, subconscious) needs and wants fulfilled. Understanding of the model helps therapists, mediators, and other professionals to effectively understand and respond to this unhealthy way of interacting between people.

How It Works

A “game” in transactional analysis is a series of hidden behaviors in which two or more people engage. It consists of ulterior (hidden) motives and moves toward a predictable outcome. Games are often characterized by the players switching roles as the process nears its end.

These roles fall into three categories, each being a position on the triangle (refer to the illustration to the right):

1. **A victim** is being persecuted. The victim attempts to gain power by manipulating the game through playing the sufferer-in-need and using shame to get power — a classic martyr stance.
2. **A persecutor** assumes domination to get power. This person bullies, threatens, pressures, coerces, or otherwise persecutes the victim. The persecutor attempts to gain power through domination and intimidation.
3. **A rescuer** vies for power by assuming the role of the aloof champion of justice, the underdog, and

fair play. The rescuer intercedes — seemingly with pure intentions — on behalf of the victim and at the expense of the persecutor. The rescuer has an avowed motive to resolve the problem but is really motivated to make sure the issue is not resolved (thus continuing the heroic illusion) or to have the issue resolved in such a way that they benefit.

The hidden agenda for each player and the reason the situation persists is that each participant is fulfilling their unspoken (and often subconscious) psychological needs and wants in a way that seems powerful and satisfying.

This is done without having to reveal themselves authentically or acknowledge the (often frightening) powerlessness they experience in the situation.

In this framework, each player acts upon their own selfish needs, rather than acting in a genuinely responsible or compassionate manner. Because it's a psychological game, the

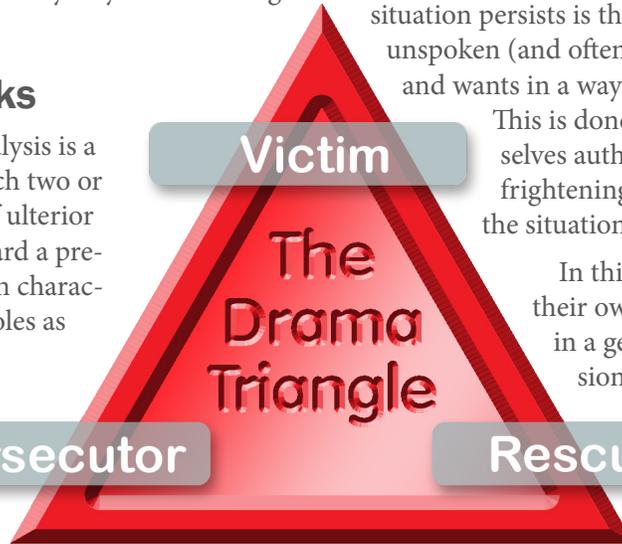
players can change positions when they are not meeting their

objectives. For example, one

of the strongest ways to persecute is by beginning from the victim position.

Ending the Game

The drama triangle game is ended when the players become aware of the inauthentic and unhealthy nature of their behaviors and begin to communicate with each other authentically and with patience, understanding, and compassion. Interrupting the game may require an intervention by someone who recognizes that others are caught in the drama triangle.



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