Drama Triangle

Relationships: Spotting the Roles You Play in Conflict

The drama triangle is a map of three roles people slip into during conflict: the Persecutor, the Rescuer, and the Victim. Psychiatrist Stephen Karpman, M.D., described it in 1968. Each role can feel natural in the moment, but together they keep a problem going without solving it. This worksheet helps you notice which role you take and what you could do instead.

1 The three roles

Persecutor "It's your fault."	Blames, criticizes, or tries to control. The Persecutor may be right that something is wrong, but attacks the person instead of working on the problem.
Rescuer "Let me fix it."	Jumps in to help, often without being asked. Rescuing can feel kind, but it keeps the other person from solving their own problem and can leave the Rescuer tired and resentful.
Victim "Poor me."	Feels helpless, stuck, or picked on. The Victim may wait for someone to save them and turn down ideas that could help.

Why does this work? *Karpman noticed that people rarely stay in one corner. A Rescuer who feels unappreciated can turn into a Persecutor, and a Persecutor who feels attacked can become the Victim. Naming the role you are in, even silently, gives you a moment to step out of the pattern.*

These are roles, not types of people. Most of us have played all three at some point.

2 Spot the roles

Think of a recent conflict that seemed to go in circles. Who was involved, and what role did each person seem to play?

Person	What they said or did	Role
My sister	*Said I never help with Mom, then said nobody ever helps her and nothing will change*	*Persecutor, then Victim*
Me	*Offered to handle everything myself, then felt used*	*Rescuer*

**This worksheet provides information but is not a substitute for therapy. It works best with guidance from a professional.*

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3 Step out of the triangle

Each role has a healthier version. Transactional analyst Acey Choy called these the winner's triangle.

Assertive Instead of Persecutor	Say what you want and where your limits are, without attacking. Ask for a change instead of punishing.
Caring Instead of Rescuer	Listen and offer support, and let the other person do their own problem solving. Ask "What would help?" before you jump in.
Vulnerable Instead of Victim	Admit that you are hurting or stuck, then look at what you can do about it. Ask for help directly.

Next time I notice I am in the triangle, here is what I could say instead:

Example: "I feel worn out. Can we split the jobs for Mom between us?"

4 Reflection

Which role do I fall into most often? What do I get from it, and what does it cost me?

Who is one person I often end up in the triangle with, and what could I do differently with them?

If someone is hurting, threatening, or controlling you, that is abuse, not a role you are playing. Your safety comes first, and a therapist or the National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-7233) can help.

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