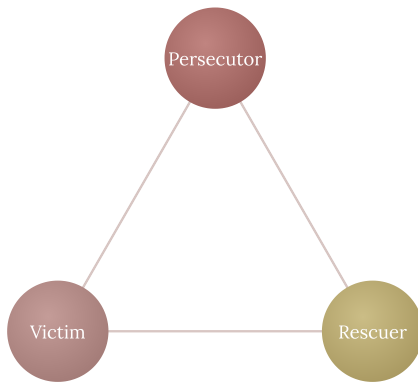


The Drama Triangle

Recognising the roles that keep conflict going

Psychiatrist Stephen Karpman described three roles that can emerge in interpersonal conflict: **Persecutor**, **Victim** and **Rescuer**. These describe positions people may move into within an interaction, rather than fixed personality types or identities.



Persecutor

"It's your fault."

Blames, criticises or controls. May become focused on fault, control or being right, particularly when feeling threatened, frustrated or powerless.

Victim

"Poor me."

Feels unable to cope, influence or change the situation, and may look to others to solve the problem. This can temporarily reduce responsibility or distress, while making it harder to recognise available choices.

Rescuer

"Let me fix it."

Steps in to solve, protect or take responsibility for another person's problem, sometimes without being asked. This may provide a sense of usefulness or relief in the moment, but can contribute to over-responsibility, exhaustion or resentment.

01 Beneath each role

What it offers, and what it costs

ROLE	WHAT MAY BE HAPPENING UNDERNEATH	WHAT IT OFFERS IN THE MOMENT	WHAT IT COSTS OVER TIME
Persecutor	Feeling vulnerable, threatened or out of control	A sense of power and being right	Damaged trust; others feel attacked
Victim	Feeling unable to cope, influence or change what is happening	Care, sympathy, less responsibility	Feeling stuck and powerless
Rescuer	Feeling responsible for another person or uncomfortable when not needed	Feeling useful, good and in charge	Exhaustion, resentment, others' dependence

02 How the triangle keeps turning

People often switch roles in the same conflict

1 · RESCUER

Sam stays late to finish a colleague's overdue report: "Don't worry, I'll sort it."

2 · VICTIM

A week later, exhausted: "Nobody ever helps me. I do everything around here."

3 · PERSECUTOR

Sam snaps at the colleague: "You're completely useless." The colleague now feels like the Victim.

Why the pattern can be compelling

- **Familiarity:** interaction patterns learned earlier in life can feel familiar and automatic.
- **Avoiding vulnerability:** blaming, withdrawing or fixing can sometimes feel easier than expressing a vulnerable need.
- **Short-term relief:** each role can reduce discomfort briefly, even when the overall pattern keeps repeating.

You may be entering a triangle when you notice:

- ☐ I feel blamed, blaming, or responsible for fixing it
- ☐ The same argument keeps coming back
- ☐ I feel drained, resentful or unappreciated
- ☐ Nobody is saying directly what they need

03 Which role do I tend to take?

Most of us have a favourite starting point

As Persecutor

When, and with whom?

As Victim

When, and with whom?

As Rescuer

When, and with whom?

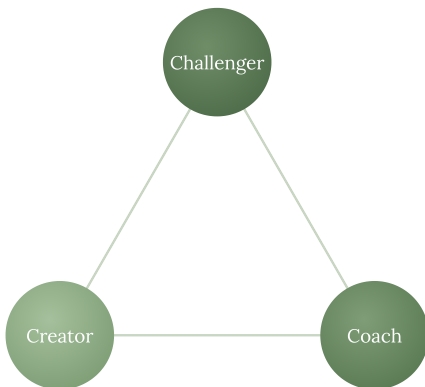


An important distinction. The "Victim" role describes a position within an interpersonal pattern. It does not mean that someone who has experienced genuine harm, abuse or violence is responsible for the situation. If you are experiencing abuse or feel unsafe, this model should not be used to assign blame or suggest that you are contributing to the harm. Please prioritise your safety and seek appropriate support.

Stepping Off the Triangle

The Empowerment Dynamic: from drama to choice

David Emerald later developed the **Empowerment Dynamic** as an alternative framework to the Drama Triangle. It describes three constructive positions: Creator, Coach and Challenger.



Challenger

instead of Persecutor

Speaks honestly and holds boundaries without blame, inviting growth rather than shame.

"This matters to me, so I want to talk about it."

Creator

instead of Victim

Takes ownership of choices, focusing on what can be done rather than only on the problem.

"What can I do about this?"

Coach

instead of Rescuer

Supports others to find their own solutions, trusting them to be capable.

"What do you think would help?"

03 Making the shift

A question for each move

Victim → Creator

"What do I want, and what's one step I can take?"

Move from what is happening to me toward what I can choose.

Rescuer → Coach

"What do you need from me, if anything?"

Offer support without taking over, and respect my own limits.

Persecutor → Challenger

"How can I say this honestly, without blame?"

Name the issue and the need, not the other person's faults.

A related later framework

Acey Choy's **Winner's Triangle** offers another approach to moving beyond the Drama Triangle, using **Vulnerable**, **Caring** and **Assertive** positions. These frameworks are conceptual tools for reflection rather than diagnostic models.

04 In the moment: four steps

01 Notice

Which corner am I in? Blaming, helpless, or rushing to fix?

02 Pause

Take a breath before reacting. The pull of the role eases a little.

03 Name the need

What am I actually feeling, and what do I need right now?

04 Choose

Respond as Creator, Coach or Challenger, even in a small way.

05 Mapping a recent conflict

Bring this to your next session

The situation...

The role I found myself in

☐ Persecutor

☐ Victim

☐ Rescuer

What I was feeling, and what I needed...

The empowered role I could step into

☐ Challenger

☐ Creator

☐ Coach

Roles others seemed to take

☐ Persecutor

☐ Victim

☐ Rescuer

What that role gave me in the moment...

What I could say or do next time...

SOURCES

Choy, A. (1990). The winner's triangle. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 20(1), 40–46. · Emerald, D. (2015). *The power of TED** (*The Empowerment Dynamic) (10th anniversary ed.). Polaris Publishing. (Original work published 2005) · Karpman, S. (1968). Fairy tales and script drama analysis. *Transactional Analysis Bulletin*, 7(26), 39–43.