

# Roles and Rules of the Drama Triangle

The following roles and rules are based on extracts from the following book by Marsha Utain:

[Scream Louder: Through Hell and Healing With an Incest Survivor and Her Therapist](#) (Marsha Utain, 1989, pp.173-175)

## What is the Drama Triangle?

The Drama Triangle was first described by Stephen Karpman in 1968 to understand the “roles” and “rules” that govern the way dysfunctional families and relationships play out.

When you grow up in a family where physical/emotional control and abuse are common then your opportunity to be your authentic-self is overlaid by the dysfunctional roles of the Drama Triangle which are learnt and played out within your family.

The roles are described as:

### **Victim**

In the drama triangle, the Victim position is the central, or key role around which the other positions revolve. Anyone operating from the Victim position avoid taking responsibility for their actions and/or feelings. Their consistent approach is to look for someone or something to blame for their problems in life.

There are two basic types of Victims: Pathetic Victim and Angry Victim. The Pathetic Victim employs the language of self-pity, crying “poor me” with facial and other non-verbal expressions that epitomize the look of desolation, while the Angry Victim makes use of “*You’re bad*” types of language. The Angry Victim fronts with a powerful sounding, “*I won’t let you do that to me!*” or “*You won’t do that to me again!*” stance.

Both victim roles search for someone they can blame for their emotions as well as for everything that does not work out in their lives. In this way they can attribute all of their problems and conflicts to someone or something else – a Persecutor - which relieves them of responsibility for their actions and/or emotions.

Additionally, Victims look for a Rescuer, someone that can be “hooked” into caring for and maintaining their role in the Drama Triangle.

If one accepts that blame, he/she will feel guilty and may try to correct the situation. As soon as this individual (Persecutor) attempts to repair things for the Victim, his/her role shifts from that of Persecutor to Rescuer, and the Rescuer has effectively been hooked into the Drama Triangle.

It must be made clear that Victims’ use of open and/or implied blame to manipulate others into rescuing them, is an unconscious defence mechanism, a survival mechanism that becomes part of their personality very early in life.

Those who engage in the Triangle usually grow up in families where their emotional experiences and needs are invalidated on a consistent basis.

Often, the only way to get their needs acknowledged and met within the family system is through this kind of blame and guilt-inducing manipulation. Unfortunately, this way of relating becomes the only way of relating, and these destructive interpersonal dynamics carry over into all relationships, both within and outside of the family.

## **Rescuer**

Let me start with another extract from Martha Utain’s book...

*“As any recovering co-alcoholic knows, the role of the Rescuer is a highly addictive role, because it is the position of the “Good Guy”.*

*Because of the way most people are raised, whenever they feel guilty, believing that they have been “bad” and have done something wrong, they will try to get out of the guilt by moving into the Rescuer “Good Guy” position. People do not like to be labelled “Bad Guys” so they actively seek the position of Rescuer- “Good Guy” and because it affords them some relief from the guilt, they get addicted to it” (Marsha Utain, 1989, pp. 169-170).*

We are raised to believe that we *must* be “good”, which often entails caring for others to the extent that our own needs are excluded, often neglected at the cost of our own well-being. We get relentlessly hammered with the idea that self-caring is “selfish” and that selfishness is wrong and “bad”. These ideas create in us a weak point that serves to make us prime targets for the Victim’s manipulative “hook” of guilt because we come into the relationship already believing that it is our role, or that we “*should*” take care of other people’s problems - especially if we care about them. If we don’t - we are “bad” or worthless.

*“Because we do not wish to get cast in the “Bad Guy Persecutor” role, we jump in to rescue the Victim, even when it is not in our best interest and not integral with the truth about who we are and what we want. This position of Rescuer in the Triangle fits the traditional role in the Alcoholic Family Syndrome of the enabler, the co-dependent. This is the person in the family who enables the alcoholic to continue the disease process by not insisting that the alcoholic be responsible for his actions” (Marsha Utain, 1989, p.170).*

Taking on the role of Rescuer allows one a reprieve from guilt as well as the opportunity to feel that he/she is acting in an unselfish manner entirely for the benefit of someone else. This idea that one is acting for someone else’s good is what creates the fleeting “high” that makes the Rescuer position so addictive. The Rescuer, however, is completely unaware that he/she is motivated by selfish reasons: the avoidance of feeling or appearing to be a bad person.

## Persecutor

*“The role of the Persecutor is the role of the “Bad Guy”, the villain. It is the one role that few people consciously choose as their starting place in the Triangle. In fact, it is the role that keeps the Triangle going, because people in that Triangle are attempting to avoid that position by moving into the Rescuer role or by perceiving themselves as Victims”* (Marsha Utain, 1989, p.172).

It is difficult to see oneself or to be perceived by others as the “Bad Guy”. Victims use the Persecutor role, while utilising blame, to manipulate or “manoeuvre” others into rescuing them. And here’s the clincher: **“What makes this position truly unique is the fact that once you are in the Triangle and you decide to leave it, you must leave from this (Persecutor) position. In other words, when you remove yourself from playing the Triangle, anyone still playing will perceive *you* as the Persecutor”** (Marsha Utain, 1989, p.172).

In order to step out of the chaos in our lives, to get out of the Triangle and *stay* out of the Triangle, we must tell the truth about what we are feeling and refuse to accept the guilt that others in the Triangle will try to place on us. The most difficult part for many may be in finding the willingness to feel and to sit with the fear, anxiety, anger and sadness that comes when being accused of being the Persecutor by those who are still working within the Triangle.

### How does the Drama Triangle begin?

- Usually starts from the ‘Victim’ position, by not taking responsibility for our actions and feelings and consequently blaming someone or something other than ourselves.
- It can also start from the ‘Rescuer’ position when we have an addictive dependency on being seen as the ‘good guy’ (Rescuer) or not being seen as the ‘bad guy’.

- Using critical language such as ‘you should...’ or ‘why didn’t you...’ immediately can begin the Drama Triangle from the position of the ‘Persecutor’ or the ‘bad guy’ by restimulating someone’s ‘Victim’ place.
- Everyone has a starting position which most commonly is the Rescuer or the Victim. Few people choose Persecutor as their starting position.

### **How do we get hooked into the Drama Triangle?**

- Feeling guilty is usually the experience that hooks us into the Triangle either as a ‘Rescuer’ or ‘Victim’.
- When we don’t want to be perceived as the ‘bad guy’ we move onto the Drama Triangle as the ‘Rescuer’ or ‘Victim’.
- Once hooked into the Triangle, we will end up playing all the positions, whether we like it or not, because that is the nature of the Drama Triangle.
- When we are in the Triangle, we are operating from a place of not taking responsibility for our actions or feelings whatever position we are playing.
- It is usually the ‘Victim’ position that perpetuates the Drama Triangle.
- Although anyone addicted to being the ‘Rescuer’ will usually find a ‘Victim’ to rescue.

### **How do we escape from the Drama Triangle?**

- Accepting and taking responsibility for our position in the Drama Triangle opens the escape hatch out of the Triangle.
- If we are perceived as the “Bad Guy” then escaping the Drama Triangle requires us to accept the other player’s perception of us as the ‘Bad Guy’ and then we have to work through whatever emotions surface as a result of their perception.
- If we are perceived as the “Good Guy” then escaping the Drama Triangle requires us to accept our addiction to being seen as the “Good Guy” and work through whatever emotions surface as a result of our perception.

- If we are perceived as the “Victim” then escaping requires us to take responsibility for the situation we are in and work through whatever emotions surface as a result of taking responsibility for our situation.
- The Triangle disappears when everyone takes responsibility for their actions and feelings.
- Raised in a dysfunctional family, usually means we do not need anyone else to push us into the Drama Triangle. We can play the Drama Triangle by ourselves by listening to the negative voice inside our head that beats us up, puts us down and constantly ‘shoulds’ us.

### **What to look out for?**

- If you are in a relationship with someone who lives in the Drama Triangle, then you must be wary of the hooks. It is difficult to be around people who constantly operate in the Triangle and not get hooked in yourself, especially if your personal boundaries are not clear and you have not learned to recognize the roles played in the Drama Triangle.
- Your internalized ‘should-er’ is also the voice that pushes you into the Triangle when others around you are in and attempting to hook you. It is the controlling, negative, rigid, perfectionistic and righteous part of you that without it, you would not participate in the Drama Triangle.
- Remember that telling the truth and experiencing your emotions is the only way out of the Triangle. To do that you have to learn how to know and define your boundaries and take responsibility for recognizing, experiencing, expressing and completing your emotions.