

The Drama Triangle – understanding the roles we play in our relationships

Most of us want relationships to feel supportive, mutual, and safe. Yet there are moments when something shifts. You may notice that:

- You feel responsible for fixing things that don't feel like yours to fix
- You end up feeling blamed, criticised, or defensive
- You feel stuck, overwhelmed, or powerless
- Conversations seem to follow a familiar script, even when the topic changes

In these moments, it can feel as though the problem is the other person, or the situation itself.

But often, what's happening is more subtle.

We are being pulled into roles that shape how we relate to each other.

The Drama Triangle is a simple model developed by Stephen Karpman. It describes three common roles that people can slip into when relationships feel tense, emotionally charged, or uncertain.

These roles are:

Victim Rescuer Persecutor

They are not labels or personality types.

They are positions we move into, often automatically, especially when something feels at stake emotionally.

People may stay in one role, or shift between roles over time, sometimes within the same interaction.

The three roles, and how they often feel

Rescuer
'let me fix it'

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Triangle

Persecutor
'it's your fault'

Victim
"I can't do this"

Victim

"I can't do this"

- Feels overwhelmed or stuck
- Struggles to see options
- Looks to others for solutions

Rescuer

"Let me help"

- Steps in quickly
- Finds it hard to say no
- Takes responsibility for others

Persecutor

"This is your fault"

- Criticises or blames
- Tries to control situations
- Reacts from emotional pressure

How these roles can keep relationships stuck

In our relationships, if one person defaults to one of the three roles of the Drama Triangle, the other will often find themselves 'pulled' into another role. For example:

- When one person feels overwhelmed or helpless, another may feel pulled to step in and fix things
- When one person criticises or blames, the other may withdraw, defend themselves, or shut down
- When one person repeatedly rescues, resentment or frustration can quietly build

Rescuer

Over time, these roles can begin to reinforce each other. Even when both people want things to be different, the dynamic can feel hard to shift.

Persecutor

'It's your fault'

Victim

'I can't do this'

The difficulty is rarely one person.

It's what happens between people when roles take over.

These roles feel familiar because many of us learned early on how to stay safe or connected in relationships. For some, that meant helping, pleasing, or taking responsibility. For others, it meant withdrawing, complying, or pushing back.

These ways of relating often made sense at the time. They helped us manage closeness, conflict, or emotional uncertainty.

The Drama Triangle helps us see how these familiar strategies can show up again in adult relationships, especially when emotions are high.

Breaking free from the Drama Triangle

Noticing the roles we play in relationships is often the first shift. You may begin to recognise moments when you feel pulled to:

- Fix or take responsibility
- Withdraw or give up
- Criticise or defend yourself

Simply noticing this does not mean you have to change it straight away. Sometimes, the most helpful step is allowing a little more space. Space to pause. Space to reflect.

Space to consider what actually feels possible for you in that moment.

The Drama Triangle

Persecutor

Stepping out of the Drama Triangle does not mean staying calm all the time, or getting things right. It may look like:

- Resisting the urge to step in or rescue
- Allowing someone else to manage their own difficulty
- Naming how something feels without blaming
- Choosing not to react immediately

These moments can feel uncomfortable.

They may go against long-held ways of staying connected or avoiding conflict.

And remember:

We often developed 'default' roles for good reasons. These roles helped us cope, belong, or stay safe in relationships. This guide is not about removing these parts of yourself. It's about understanding them, and gently loosening their hold when they no longer serve you.