CONFLICT & COMMUNICATION

The Drama Triangle

Understand the cycle. Find a healthier way to respond.

Stephen Karpman described three recurring interaction roles: Victim, Rescuer and Persecutor. The model can help us notice stuck conflict cycles, but the roles describe a pattern, not a person's identity or a mental health diagnosis.

INSIDE THIS GUIDE

- Spot familiar rescuing, blaming and helplessness patterns
- Understand how people can move between roles
- Practise a safer, more responsible conversation

Take your time

You can read this guide in one sitting or return to the exercises whenever you need them. No worksheet needs to be completed perfectly.

UNDERSTAND

What this can look like

Victim role: “I have no options”

In this pattern, a person may feel powerless, overwhelmed or unable to act, even where some choices exist. This is not the same as being a genuine victim of abuse, discrimination or harm.

Rescuer role: “I must fix it”

A rescuer may take responsibility for others without being asked, over-function, or ignore their own needs. Support becomes unhelpful when it removes another person’s agency.

Persecutor role: “It is your fault”

Blame, threats, harsh criticism or controlling responses may temporarily reduce uncertainty but usually undermine trust and problem-solving. Harmful or abusive conduct remains the actor’s responsibility.

Roles can change quickly

A rescuer who feels unappreciated may blame; someone who feels criticised may retreat into helplessness. Noticing the shift creates space to choose a different response.

Notice with curiosity

These are explanations, not labels or tests. You do not need to recognise yourself in every example for the guide to be useful.

PRACTICAL TOOLKIT

Three things to try

Move from helplessness toward agency

Ask: “What is happening? What is within my influence? What support could I request?” These questions are about choices, not blaming someone who has been harmed.

Move from rescuing toward consent

Ask: “Would you like me to listen, help think through options, or take a specific action?” Let the other person choose.

Move from blame toward a clear request

Describe an observable event, its impact and your need. Replace character judgments with specific, respectful communication.

An important reminder

Critical safety distinction: the Drama Triangle must never be used to tell someone experiencing abuse that they are “playing the victim”. Coercive control and violence require a safety-focused response, not shared blame.

IN REAL LIFE

Words and actions to practise

Rescuing without permission

Instead of taking over: “I can see this is hard. Would support be useful, and what kind?”

Feeling stuck

“I do not know how to change this yet. One step I can take is to ask for information.”

Blame after disappointment

“I felt let down when the arrangement changed. Can we agree on how to communicate changes next time?”

Start smaller than you think

Choose one example that feels safe, doable and relevant. Practising a small change consistently can be more useful than attempting everything at once.

REFLECTION & PRACTICE

A few gentle questions

1. Which role do I slip into under pressure?

2. What feeling appears just before I shift into that role?

3. What would a responsible, non-blaming response sound like?

Permission to pause

You can reflect privately, talk through a question with someone safe, or leave it unanswered. There is no “correct” response.

BRING IT TOGETHER

Small steps are still progress

Helplessness

Over-rescuing

Blame

Notice a response pattern, then choose a different action.

TRY THIS WEEK

1. Notice one repeating conflict without assigning labels.
2. Pause to identify the feeling underneath it.
3. Ask before helping, or name one clear request.
4. Reflect on whether the conversation felt more respectful.

Keep safety in view

Critical safety distinction: the Drama Triangle must never be used to tell someone experiencing abuse that they are “playing the victim”. Coercive control and violence require a safety-focused response, not shared blame.

FURTHER READING & REFERENCES

Karpman, original Drama Triangle writing
https://www.karpmandramatriangle.com/dt_article_only.html

Centre for Clinical Interventions, Assertiveness
https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/Resources/Looking-After-Yourself/Assertiveness