

Understanding the Karpman Drama Triangle

A self-help worksheet from Wellness Counselling and Psychotherapy

The **Karpman Drama Triangle** is a model that helps us understand unhelpful relationship dynamics that can develop during conflict or emotional distress. It describes three roles that people may unconsciously move between in relationships.

People can switch between these roles quickly — sometimes within the same conversation — or may find themselves adopting one role more often than the others.

The three roles

1. Victim

"Please help me."

The Victim feels powerless, overwhelmed, or unable to solve their problems. They may believe that things happen to them and rely on others to rescue them.

Common characteristics

- Feels helpless or stuck
- Believes others are responsible for solving the problem
- May avoid taking responsibility
- Can unintentionally invite others into the Rescuer role

2. Rescuer

"I'll fix this for you."

The Rescuer takes on excessive responsibility for others' feelings or problems. Although often well-intentioned, rescuing can prevent others from learning, growing, or taking responsibility for themselves.

Common characteristics

- Over-responsible
- Reliable and dependable
- Finds it difficult to say no
- May enable unhealthy behaviours
- Often feels exhausted or resentful

3. Persecutor

"This is your fault."

The Persecutor criticises, blames, controls, or intimidates others. They may believe they are justified or superior, but their behaviour often creates fear, shame, or defensiveness.

Common characteristics

- Critical or blaming
- Controlling or authoritarian
- Quick to judge
- May use anger to regain control

How the triangle works

The Drama Triangle is dynamic. People frequently move between roles. For example:

- A person starts as the **Victim** and seeks help.
- Another person steps in as the **Rescuer**.
- If the Victim feels unsupported or disappointed, they may become the **Persecutor**, blaming the Rescuer.
- The Rescuer may then feel hurt and become the **Victim**.

These patterns can continue unless someone consciously chooses to respond differently.

Breaking free: moving towards the Winner's Triangle

Healthy relationships require each person to take responsibility for their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviour. As relationship expert Barry Winhold states:

"Successful relationships require us to take 100 percent responsibility for our 50 percent of the interaction."

The goal is not to change another person, but to recognise and change your own patterns.

1. Increase your awareness

Pause and observe what is happening. Ask yourself:

- Which role am I playing?
- What am I feeling?
- What triggered me?
- How might I be contributing to this pattern?

Once you recognise the pattern, choose a different response instead of repeating old habits.

2. Stay calm rather than defensive

Conflict often invites us into the Drama Triangle. Instead: pause before reacting, keep your tone calm and neutral, and avoid escalating the situation. Helpful phrases include:

- “Perhaps you're right.”
- “That could be.”
- “That's an interesting point.”
- “I'll think about that.”

These responses can prevent you from being pulled into unnecessary conflict.

3. If you notice the Victim role...

- Focus on what you *can* control.
- Take responsibility for your own choices.
- Turn feelings of helplessness into determination.
- Practise solving problems independently where possible.
- Ask for support rather than expecting someone else to rescue you.

Building self-compassion and confidence strengthens your personal power.

4. If you notice the Rescuer role...

Ask yourself whether you are taking responsibility for something that belongs to someone else. Practise:

- Stepping back.
- Allowing others to solve their own problems.
- Accepting that people sometimes need to experience natural consequences.
- Saying “no” when appropriate.
- Trusting others' ability to cope.

Rescuing can unintentionally communicate that someone is not capable of managing on their own. **Supporting is different from rescuing.**

5. If you notice the Persecutor role...

Try replacing criticism with curiosity. Instead of blaming, lecturing, threatening, monitoring, accusing, scolding or overreacting, aim to:

- Stay calm.
- Listen.
- Be respectful.
- Express your needs clearly.

- Remove yourself from the situation if emotions are too heightened.

Healthy boundaries are often more effective than arguments.

6. Recognise the limits of your influence

If someone is living with active addiction or abusive behaviour, or is unwilling to take responsibility for themselves, a healthy relationship may not be possible until they are engaged in genuine recovery. In these situations:

- Focus on your own wellbeing.
- Strengthen your own emotional health.
- Maintain healthy boundaries.
- Accept that you cannot change another person.

Moving to the Winner's Triangle

The Winner's Triangle replaces unhealthy roles with healthier alternatives.

From Victim to Vulnerable

- Taking responsibility for your thoughts, feelings and behaviour.
- Asking for support rather than expecting rescue.
- Seeing setbacks as opportunities to learn.
- Developing self-compassion.
- Believing in your ability to solve problems.

From Rescuer to Caring

- Supporting without taking over.
- Listening before offering advice.
- Respecting other people's choices.
- Allowing others to learn through experience.
- Setting healthy boundaries.
- Saying "no" when necessary.

From Persecutor to Assertive

- Expressing your needs respectfully.
- Speaking honestly without blaming.
- Using empathy alongside clear communication.
- Replacing accusations with "I" statements.

For example, instead of “Why are you so forgetful?” try “When I didn't hear from you, I felt worried.” Assertiveness allows you to be clear, respectful and compassionate at the same time.

A final thought

Changing your role within the Drama Triangle can feel uncomfortable — not only for you, but also for those around you. Others may initially feel confused, become defensive, feel disappointed, or resist the change.

This is a normal part of changing long-established relationship patterns. Over time, healthier boundaries, greater self-awareness and personal responsibility can lead to more respectful, balanced and fulfilling relationships.

You cannot control another person's behaviour — but you can always choose your own response.

This worksheet is for general self-help and is not a substitute for therapy. To arrange a free 15-minute enquiry call, visit www.wellnesscp.co.uk or email miriam@wellnesscp.co.uk.