

## The Origins of the 3 Drama Triangle Roles of Victim, Persecutor and Rescuer

Let's start at the beginning and ask: "How does our drama begin in the first place?"

The simple, yet complex, explanation is that all of us as human beings learn and develop strategies to get what we want as children. As infants and toddlers we are little beings looking up at giant and powerful adults. We all used our innate survival instincts to secure food, sleep, warmth, love and safety to the best of our ability. No one can escape the small-child experience of figuring out how to survive and deal with what the child sees as scary experiences. The creative genius of the young, developing mind adapts in amazing ways.

Psychologist Karen Horney, M.D. (*Our Inner Conflicts*; W.W. Norton and Company; 1992) studied human nature and identified 3 different strategies that children can access to respond to fears and to seek a sense of safety and security. They are:

- (1) **Moving toward** people to please, accommodate and be helpful. From a child's perspective, if I please others, they will love and care for me.
- (2) **Moving away from** others to avoid, withdraw, observe and wait. This is based upon the child's belief that if they isolate and "stay above the fray" they will be safe.
- (3) **Moving against** others by being aggressive. Here the child develops the idea that, if they use control and domination, they will manage their environment to get what they want.

In the late 1960's, Dr. Stephen Karpman developed the Karpman Drama Triangle, with its three roles of Victim, Rescuer, and Persecutor. In the TED\* work, we call these three roles the Dreaded Drama Triangle (DDT)™ because these roles can become very toxic, like a poison.

Our observation is that all three of Horney's strategies eventually lead to victim thinking that says life happens to me and I must react to life's challenges in order to gain safety and security (and success). As we grow older, our "go to" strategy can become a more exaggerated way of relating to our self and others. We then go on "autopilot," bouncing between all three roles – but relying primarily on our "go too" or default role. This is how the drama begins!

These drama roles are made-up strategies that the ego-consciousness creates to manage its anxiety about what it doesn't like or want. Many aspects of the roles are useful and help human beings cope and survive. If these drama roles are the only strategy to get through life, however, the roles become outdated and limiting over time. They are not necessarily "bad" --- they simply limit our effectiveness and interrupt more creative ways to work with life's challenges. By recognizing these patterns when they arise, we can observe them in action and choose a more empowering way to think, relate and take action.

The discovery of recurring DDT roles has meaning only if there is a possibility of liberating ourselves from the repeating drama. We can do this more easily if we recognize the patterns of thinking, feeling and our resulting behavior. Let's look at the three strategies that Horney identified and how they manifest into the DDT roles.

### **The Victim Role:**

Description and Qualities: The Victim role is at the heart of the DDT. Victims feel powerless and at the mercy of life's events and may avoid taking responsibility for their actions, finding it easier to blame others or their circumstance. The desire to be happy and live a fulfilled life is central to human nature. When challenges arise, the ego wants to minimize or manage the pain caused by not having life go as it wishes. For the person with a victim mentality wanting their situation to be different than it is causes perpetual suffering. This suffering is the heart of the victim mentality and belief that they will never have what they want. Consequently Victims have difficulty answering "What do I want?" and would rather sit on the sideline of life, criticizing and complaining.

Focus and Thoughts: The victim mentality may manifest itself in a range of different ways of thinking and talking. Internal talk may sound like: "Why me? Life is against me" or "I am not lucky like other people" or "It's not my fault. I didn't do it." It is common to hear a Victim gossip or be suspicious of others. They focus on what isn't working and anticipate – even expect – things to go wrong. In general they use avoidance and not taking responsibility for their choices as a way to manage their fear and anxiety in life. Victims represent the "flight" in the flight-fight or please mechanism.

Inner State and Feelings: It is common to feel anger and resistance from Victims. They are unhappy with life's circumstances and, because they feel powerless, they can be full of self-pity and develop a "poor me" attitude. These feelings can create a strange sense of entitlement to what they don't have. They can seek sympathy by telling exaggerated stories about their pain of bad deeds they committed toward others. Their criticism of others can turn inward and they victimize themselves by becoming their own Persecutor.

Behavior and Actions: People with a victim mentality may develop convincing and sophisticated arguments in support of their ideas that they use to convince themselves and others of their Victim status. The Victim can create a passive or aloof and defensive energy. They may make various excuses for their passivity, such as their financial situation, weight or education. They are susceptible to numbing their feelings and therefore may look for short term pleasures that could lead to addictions. The victim mentality is not about learning or growing which makes working with change or new situation very difficult.

Key Challenge (Unmet Need) for Victims: Victims must learn to take full responsibility for their response to life's events. If they do not know their values, or what they care about or really want, they are at risk of slipping back into blame or feelings of powerlessness. Learning to go deeper and discover what is driving their wants and desires is essential to remain strong and true to their values and dreams and avoid slipping into victimhood. Emotional healing of trauma or other psychological wounds may be essential if the victim mentality over-shadows the other areas of goodness in their life. The Victim's unmet need is to be loved, seen and heard for who they are. Above all, they must learn to love themselves as whole, complete, deserving and divine human beings.

Recommendations: A Victim wants to feel that they matter, thus acknowledging them without reinforcing their victimhood is important. They want to be seen, heard and loved. Taking the time for reflection, values clarification and what they really love will cultivate the Victim's ability to simplify their desires and feel safe enough to choose what they want. Learn to ask: "And what if it were possible?" Support them in confronting their "whatever" mentality and learning to trust they will find their own answers if they persist. Since life constantly changes, help them to ask: "What do I want in this stage of my life?" or "How do I feel safe while exploring my dreams?" or "Where must I take responsibility in order to create my dreams?" "What is mine and only mine to do?" It may be useful, at times, to mirror back to them when they complain and see the situation as negative. It is also good to remind them of their progress because they tend to only see what's wrong.

Useful Aspects: A person with a Victim mentality is naturally skeptical and risk adverse. This trait may serve them and co-workers well because they are slow to change, look for what could go wrong and not jump at the first suggestion. This slow-to-change approach and looking for what could go wrong can balance others who are overly optimistic and do not see the dangers that may lie ahead.

## **The Persecutor Role:**

**Description and Qualities:** The Persecutor is the “problem” to the Victim and someone (or something) to be dealt with by the Rescuer. Persecutors fear their own victimization and have, therefore, adopted various methods to control, protect and defend themselves in order to avoid feeling powerless. They must win and convince others that they are right. They have little compassion for another perspective or way of doing things. Often, their universe has been a chaotic or insecure place at some time in their early life, so they developed controlling life strategies to survive. Their unmet need is to feel secure and in control.

**Focus and Thoughts:** A Persecutor’s identify and sense of self is on the line and they are compelled to fight for it. Hence the Persecutor represents the “fighter” in the fight-or-flight mechanism. They focus on a sense of personal survival by using control and domination.

**Inner State and Feelings:** There is a strong need to exert control over others or the situation in order to feel safe, gain self-worth or validity. Using fear to control others and be unforgiving of mistakes can be a common trait.

**Behavior and Actions:** Persecutors, at their best, focus on getting things done efficiently and therefore require that it is done their way. Their world is made up of winners and losers, right or wrong, take charge or be run over. Their behavior may range from being critical and blaming, to using silence as a control mechanism, or cynical humor to condemn and judge. They may also use a sweet and charming personality to mask their influence and control.

**Key Challenge (Unmet Need) for Persecutors:** The Persecutor must let go of their ego, need to be right and/or strong sense of self to shift into the Challenger role. Persecutors fear they will be a Victim and have, therefore, adopted various strategies to control, protect and defend themselves in order to avoid their own victimhood. Believing that their way of thinking is best, they often over-estimate their competencies and expertise. Therefore, Persecutors must cultivate an ability to be comfortable with creative chaos, insecurity and feeling the universe is a safe place and become open to considering other perspectives.

**Recommendations:** Whether they say so or not, every Persecutor wants to be heard, seen and loved. Practicing being comfortable in new situations that call for creative and diverse responses, while learning to be calm in the face of uncertainty, will assist the Persecutor-to-Challenger shift. Supporting the Persecutor to feel and express different points of view will help them let go of their right/wrong thinking. Finally, self-compassion and love for themselves will allow them to listen more deeply to others which will support them in their journey.

**Useful Aspects:** The Persecutors use of “control and command” can be quite useful in getting things done. They are focused on doing things their way and this can be efficient and direct.

## **The Rescuer Role:**

**Description and Qualities:** By fixing and saving others, a Rescuer believes others will appreciate and value them for their good deeds. Rescuers look for Victims to save and often are quick to jump in and save the day even when others are responsible. Rescuers feel an obligation to create change, fix or alter the current situation as their primary focus and have a sense of urgency or need to immediately jump-in to “save the day.” They take on more work or duties, even when others are responsible. They often attract others who seem incapable of helping themselves. There is always someone in a crisis needing your help. Similar to Victims, they focus on what isn’t working so they always have a job to do or something/someone to fix.

**Focus and Thoughts:** Rescuers have a sixth sense about who needs help. If there’s a needy person in the room or team, the Rescuer, like a search light, focuses on who needs help and what they can do to assist. Resisting conflict like the plague, they think about ways to make everyone happy. They are accommodating and pleasing so they think about ways to be useful and helpful. Rescuers represent the “please” in the fight-flight or please mechanism.

**Inner State and Feelings:** By fixing and saving others, a Rescuer believes others will appreciate and value them for their good deeds. Rescuers look for Victims to save and often are quick to jump in and save the day even when others are responsible. They visualize or dream about how grateful others will be when their good deed is discovered---even have a boost of energy because they feel so good about being helpful as they wait for the accolades. If others don’t give them positive feedback, they feel unappreciated. Their need to feel indispensable can be addictive or intoxicating and, at the same time, they may also feel unimportant and unable to meet your own needs. Eventually exhaustion and burn-out is common because there is always someone, or something, that needs their help.

**Behavior and Actions:** Rescuers are quick to have a recommendation. They see what needs to be done, so why wait for anyone else. If something needs to get done to make everyone happy then it’s their job to do it. They sense a strong urgency to help and do something, often with rapid fire ideas about how to be helpful. They constantly strive to produce different results in a relationship, wanting things to feel good and be happy. Consequently they may be on the short end of love relationships, confused about why things didn’t work out.

**Key Challenge (Unmet Need) for Rescuers:** Rescuers must face their deep need for external acceptance and love. By fixing and saving others, a Rescuer believes others will appreciate and value them for their good deeds. They really get off on saving the day. Through rescuing, they hope to receive from others the love and acceptance they crave. When they don’t, they experience a pain of separation both spiritually and psychologically. Even if they become aware of their external need to feel loved, they must also become aware of their internal rescuing

behavior (through addictions or other pain-relieving or numbing tendencies). Until they do so, Rescuers may have difficulty redeeming their constant focus on external acceptance.

**Recommendations:** Gentle self-care is essential for people who are recurring Rescuers. Developing body awareness and somatic practices, self-love, self-compassion and radical forgiveness will assist them to become aware of when they are triggered and slipping into the helping role. Reflecting on the many gifts others bring to the table will help them to see others as whole and complete, and not needing their fixing and saving behavior. Until they genuinely see that others have gifts to offer, they will tend to interfere rather than empower. It may also be important to limit their time with fellow Rescuers, as well as the Victims who trigger their rescuing strategies. Slowing down, learning to pause, and knowing the world will go on even if they are not rescuing it, is required for Rescuers to heal their obsession with fixing others. This can be very difficult because Rescuers have spent their life thinking about the needs of others rather than their own needs.

**Useful Aspects:** Rescuers are very helpful people and are often excellent team and family members. Their willingness to participate and be useful means they are first to volunteer. They are accommodating, helpful and care about the people and the world.

### **Summary Thoughts:**

What's the difference between a Rescuer who appears controlling because they want others to take their advice and the Persecutor who uses control and domination? The Rescuer may eventually be seen by others as the Persecutor if their "helpfulness" becomes controlling and dictatorial. "Well I am just trying to help" may become "Do it my way." Rescuers need is to feel helpful in order to receive love and appreciation, hoping their actions will get them more love. The Persecutor's primary need is to manage their fear of uncertainty. They do this by using control and domination. By keeping others "one down" and doing what they can to control situations, they are hoping to feel more security and comfort and thus manage their fear of the unknown. Outwardly both roles may appear controlling but their unmet needs differ.

Victims are also all about control, only they use blame and lack of personal responsibility to manage their fear and anxiety. Their focus on what they don't want and don't like can dominate any office, family or relationship. They may not appear controlling when they say, "Whatever, it doesn't matter to me. We won't get what we want anyway." But anyone who lives or works with someone who has adopted a Victim mentality knows very well how controlling this role can be. All three DDT roles, at their core are about managing their fear and anxiety. They simply differ in the ingenious strategies they employ to react to life's challenges.