

The Three Faces of Victim

by Lynne Forrest

Most of us unconsciously react to life from a position of victim-hood. Anytime we refuse to take responsibility for ourselves, we are opting to play victim. This leaves us feeling at the mercy of, done in by and un-faired against; no matter what our situation might be.

Victim-hood consists of three positions outlined by Stephen Karpman, a teacher of Transactional Analysis, on what he called the "Drama Triangle". Having learned of it some thirty years ago, it has been one of the most important tools in my personal, as well as professional life. As my understanding of the Drama Triangle has expanded, so has my appreciation for this simple, but powerfully accurate instrument. I call it the "shame machine" because through it we unconsciously re-enact our vicious cycles, thereby creating shame. Every dysfunctional interaction takes place on the Drama Triangle! Until we make these dynamics conscious, we cannot transform them. Unless we transform them, we cannot move forward on our journey towards re-claiming our spiritual heritage.

Karpman named the three roles on the Drama Triangle Persecutor, Rescuer and Victim and placed them on an upside down triangle representing the three faces of victim. Even though only one is called Victim, all three originate out of and end up back there. Therefore they are all stopping places on the road to victim-hood. We each have a most familiar, or what I call, starting gate position.

We first learn our primary position from within our family. Although we each have a role we most identify with, we will also rotate through the other positions, going completely around the triangle, sometimes in a matter of minutes, or even seconds, many times every day.

It's difficult to see ourselves (or others) as victims when we are in a care-taking or blaming role. Nonetheless these two, Rescuer and Persecutor, are the two opposite extremes of Victim. This is simply because all roles eventually lead back to victim. It's inevitable.

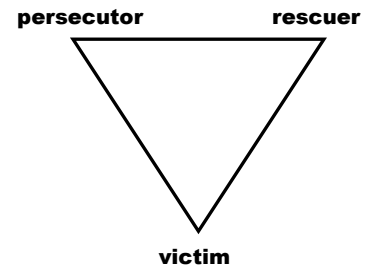
You might notice that both the Persecutor and Rescuer are on the upper end of the triangle. Whenever we assume either of those stances, we come across as one-up. From either position we are relating as though we are better, stronger, smarter, or more-together than the victim. Sooner or later the victim, who is in a one-down position, develops a metaphorical "crick in the neck" from looking up. Feeling "looked down upon", resentment builds and some form of retaliation inevitably follows. At that point the victim moves into a persecutor role. Reminiscent of a not-so-musical game of musical chairs, all players sooner or later rotate positions.

Here's an example. Dad comes home from work to find mom coming down hard on Junior with, "Clean up your room or else" threats. He immediately comes to the rescue, "Mom" he might say, "give the boy a break". Any one of several possibilities might occur next. Perhaps Mom, feeling victimized by dad, turns on him, automatically moving him into a victim position. They might do a few quick trips around the triangle with Junior on the sidelines. Or maybe Junior joins dad in a persecutory "Let's gang up on mom" approach, and they could play it from that angle. Or Junior could turn-coat on dad, rescuing mom, with; "Mind your own business, dad . . . I don't need your help!" So it goes, with endless variations perhaps, but nonetheless, round and round the triangle. For many families, it's the only way they know how to communicate.

Everyone has a starting-gate position on the Drama Triangle. This is not only the place we most often get hooked, but also the role through which we actually define ourselves; a strong part of our identity. Each starting-gate position has its own particular way of seeing and reacting to the world. Each primary position originates out of a particular life theme and moves around the triangle in its own distinct way.

For instance, although we all eventually end up in the victim position on the triangle, the starting-gate position of Rescuer (*from here forward Starting-gate positions will be capitalized to differentiate them from the movement through a particular role) moves through victim and persecutor in a very different way than do either a primary Persecutor or Victim.

The Rescuer moves into victim wearing the cloak of martyrdom ("After all I've done for you ..."), whereas a Persecutor claims victim as a way to justify vengeance (If it weren't for you, I wouldn't have had to"). Whereas a Rescuer may persecute by withdrawing their care-taking, a Persecutor's rescuing is liable to be almost as painful as when they are in attack-mode. And a starting-gate Victim is perpetually pitiful and incapable. They even rescue from a one-down position! ("You're the only one who can help me, because you're so talented, or smart, or whatever!")



Our primary positions are generally set-up in childhood. For instance, if a parent is overly protective, doing everything for a child, then that child may grow up to feel incapable of taking care of themselves. This sets them up for a life-time role of Victim. Or, the opposite; they might come to feel angry and vindictive if others don't take care of them, thereby adopting a primary Persecutor stance.

There are many variations, and each case needs to be individually considered.

We not only act out these triangular distortions in our everyday relations with others, but also internally. We move around the triangle as rapidly inside our minds as we do out in the world. We trap ourselves with dishonest and dysfunctional internal dialogue. For example, we may come down hard on ourselves for not completing a project. Perhaps we lambaste ourselves as being lazy, inadequate or defective, causing us to spiral into feelings of anger and self-worthlessness. Inwardly, we bow to this persecutory voice, fearing it may be right. Can you see the persecutor/victim exchange happening here? As soon as we begin to blame or insult, a victim is created. And in this case, we're it! This could go on for minutes, hours or days, but sooner or later, there will be a voice in us that comes to the rescue. Because we're feeling lousy and need relief, we start to make excuses, "Well, I would have finished that project if it hadn't been for ..." we might say. Now we have moved into rescuer.

Sometimes we rescue ourselves (and others) by denying what we know, "If I look the other way and pretend not to notice, it will go away" sort of tactic. These inner dramas perpetuate a vicious cycle of shame spirals and self loathing.

Similar to the way a generator produces electricity, the Drama Triangle generates shame. Whether through internal interaction or external communication, moving around the triangle keeps the self-disparaging messages going. The Drama Triangle becomes our own personal shame machine. The good news is that we can do something about it. All we have to do is learn to turn off the shame machine in order to get off the triangle. It's a simple, although not easy, remedy.

Before we can get off the triangle we have to recognize and be willing to let go of the drama produced therein. We must first become intimately acquainted with the costs and trade-offs of each stopping place on the path of victimhood. This allows us not only to recognize the various roles, but to realistically evaluate the consequences of being there as well.

Identifying the language and moves of each role further helps us to apprehend when we are being invited by others to join them on the triangle. With this awareness, we can choose whether or not we want to dance to the shame generating tune of victim. With that end in mind, let's examine each role carefully.

Rescuer

The Rescuer role is the shadow mother principle. It's the typically co-dependent response we think of as "smothering". It's a twisted version of the feminine aspect that desires to nurture and protect. The Rescuer is the enabler, protector, mediator; the one who wants to "fix" the problem. Of course, before a Rescuer can remedy a problem there needs to be one.

Part of the problem of rescuing is that it comes from an unconscious need to feel important or establish oneself as the savior. Taking care of others is the only way a Rescuer knows how to connect or feel worthwhile. Rescuers usually grow up in families where they were put down or shamed for having needs. They therefore learn to deny those needs, turning instead to taking care of others. This makes having someone who needs them essential.

Very often, Rescuers operate out of the hope that if they just take care of others well enough they will get their turn, too. Unfortunately this rarely happens. Often the resulting disappointment sends them spiraling into depression. Martyrdom and depression earmark the victim phase of a Rescuer's dance around the triangle. This is when you hear them say things such as, "This is what I get, after all I've done for you" or, "No matter how much I do, it's never enough", or "If you loved me, you would be more supportive."

A Rescuer's greatest fear is that there will be nobody there for them. They compensate for that anxiety by making it a point to be there for others, thus encouraging dependency. Making themselves indispensable becomes a primary way of avoiding abandonment and it provides the validation they long for, as well.

Rescuers are oblivious to the crippling dependency they foster when they enable or take care of those they are fixated on. Through these tactics, they send disabling messages. Everyone involved becomes convinced that the Victim is incapable, inadequate or defective, thus reinforcing the need for constant rescue. It becomes the job of the Rescuer to keep the other propped up, "for their own good", of course.

Having a Victim to care-take is essential in order for the Rescuer to maintain an illusion of being one-up and needless. This means then, that there will always be at least one person in every core Rescuers life who is sick, fragile, inept and in need of their care.

Beatrice grew up seeing her mother as helpless and impotent. From an early age, she felt a huge responsibility to take care of her frail parent. Her own well-being depended on it! Else how was she, a small child, going to make it? As the years went by, however, she could scarcely contain the inner rage she felt towards her mother for being so needy and weak. As a starting-gate Rescuer, she would do all she could to bolster her mother, only to come away again and again, feeling defeated (victim) because nothing she tried worked. Inevitably the resentment would take over leading her to resort to treating her mother with scorn (persecutor). This became her primary interactive pattern, not only with her mother, but in all of her relationships. By the time I met her she was emotionally, physically and spiritually exhausted from having spent her life taking care of one sick and dependent person after another.

Persecutor

Like the other roles, the Persecutor is shame based. It's the sort of shame-drenched-anger that results from growing up overloaded with scorn. Persecutors have long ago repressed their convictions of worthlessness, covering them instead with indignant wrath and an attitude of uncaring.

In the same way that the Rescuer is the shadow mother principle, this role is the shadow father principle. The beneficent father's job is to protect and provide for his family. The Persecutor role is a perversion of that energy, instead attempting to "reform" through force. This role is taken on by someone who has learned to meet their needs through authoritarian, controlling and often punishing methods. The Persecutor overcomes feelings of shame by over-powering others. Domination becomes their most prevalent style of interaction. This means they must always be right! Techniques include preaching, blaming, lecturing, interrogating and attack. They believe in getting even, very often through passive aggressive acts.

Just like the Rescuer needs someone to fix, the Persecutor needs someone to blame! Persecutors deny their weaknesses in the same way Rescuers deny their needs. Their greatest fear is powerlessness. Denying their own infirmities, they are in constant need of someone on whom they can project their own unclaimed inadequacies. Both Rescuers and Persecutors therefore need a Victim in order to sustain their place on the triangle.

Persecutors also tend to compensate for inner feelings of worthlessness by putting on grandiose airs. Grandiosity inevitably comes from shame. It provides compensation and a cover-up for a deep internal inferiority. Superiority is about swinging hard to the other side of "less than" in order to come across as "better than".

I recall a client, a doctor who exemplified Persecutor mentality. He truly thought hurting others was justified as a compensation for his own pain. He told me once in session about running into a patient of his on the golf course, who "had the nerve" to ask for on-the-spot treatment.

"Can you believe he asked me to treat his injury on my one day off?" he railed.

"That does seem pretty bold" I replied, "how did you handle it?"

"Oh, I took him to my office, alright . . . and he got a steroid shot, too" the doctor chuckled, "but I bet he'll never ask me to do that again."

"What do you mean?" I asked, not quite following.

"Because that shot was one he'll never forget!"

To the doctor, his action was totally justifiable. His patient had infringed on him and thereby deserved whatever pain he got. This is a prime example of Persecutor thinking. It never occurred to my client that he could've said no; that he did not have to feel victimized by, or have to rescue this patient. In his mind he had been treated unjustly and therefore had the right, even the obligation, to get even.

It is most difficult for someone in this stance to take responsibility for the way they hurt others. In their mind, others deserve what they get! These warring individuals tend to see themselves as having to fight the world for survival! Their battle cry might well be, "I've been treated unfairly and somebody's going to pay!" Theirs is a constant struggle to regain that which they perceive has been taken from them.

Victim

The Victim is a life role most often taken on by someone who was raised by a dedicated Rescuer. It is the shadow of the precious child within; that part in each of us that is innocent, vulnerable and needy. This child-self does need support and "care taken" on occasion but when an individual becomes convinced that they can never take care of themselves they can easily take on a primary Victim stance. Buying into the idea that they are intrinsically defective, Victims adopt an attitude of "I can't make it". This becomes their greatest fear, forcing them to be ever on the lookout for someone "more capable" to carry them.

Victims deny both their problem solving abilities and their potential for self-generated power. Instead they tend to see themselves as too fragile to handle life. Feeling done in by, at the mercy of, mistreated, intrinsically bad and wrong, they see themselves as the "un-fixable problem".

This doesn't stop them, however from feeling highly resentful for their dependency. Victims eventually get fed up with being in the one-down position and find ways to get even. A move to persecutor usually means sabotaging the efforts made to rescue them, as well as other passive-aggressive behaviors. They are very apt players of the game called, "Yes, but". Any time a helpful suggestion is offered, a Victim response might be, "Yes, but that won't work because ..." They may also resort to the persecutor role as a way to blame or manipulate others into taking care of them.

The Victim eats a daily venue of shame. Convinced of their intrinsic incompetence, they live in a perpetual shame spiral, often leading to self abuse. Perpetual Victims walk around much like the Charlie Brown character, Pig-pen in his whirlwind of dust, except Victims are surrounded in a shame vortex of their own making. This cloud of shame becomes their total identity.

Linda was the second-born in her family. Almost from birth, she had problems. Linda was a child who was forever in trouble of one sort or another. She struggled academically, was perpetually disruptive and often sick. It came as no surprise to anyone when she got into drugs as a teenager. Her mother, Stella, was a die-hard Rescuer. Thinking she was being helpful, Stella bailed Linda out every time she got in trouble. By alleviating the natural consequences, Stella's earnest enabling deprived Linda of the opportunity to learn from her poor choices. As a result, Linda came to see herself as incapable, becoming dependent on someone besides herself to fix things for her. Her mother's well-intentioned rescuing sent a crippling message which promoted a life long Victim stance, keeping Linda needy and ever vigilant for a potential rescuer

Projection and Shadow of Victim-hood

As individuals grow in awareness and change, they often change their starting-gate positions. Becoming aware of a primary position, they may commit to change but often merely switch roles instead. Although they may be operating from a different place, they are nonetheless still on the triangle. This happens frequently and may even be an essential part of learning the full impact of living on the triangle.

Placing the three positions on a straight line with Victim in the middle is a way of demonstrating that Persecutor and Rescuer are simply the two extremes of victim-hood.

Persecutor ----- VICTIM ----- Rescuer

All three roles are merely the perverted expression of positive powers we each hold in potential, but deny. The primary face we take on determines which of these powers is being denied.

The Rescuer part of us contains the gift for mediation and problem solving. It might be deemed a feminine aspect. The Persecutor, on the other hand, is the part of us that knows about the use of power and assertiveness. It might be considered a masculine attribute. When these essential qualities are not fully acknowledged and claimed, they get repressed into the unconscious, where they then come out in the perverted expression we see on the Drama Triangle. In other words, because these aspects are denied, they get acted out in unconscious and irresponsible ways.

When we suppress both our problem solving ability and our power for assertive action, we take on a posture of Victim. When we see ourselves as primary mediators and caretakers, but deny our need to stand ground for ourselves by setting appropriate boundaries, we occupy the Rescuer position. Persecutors on the other hand, have hidden their caring, nurturing qualities, and therefore tend to problem solve through anger, abuse and control. In essence, the victim's dance is a constant, unconscious surfacing of unclaimed aspects of personality that produces perpetual drama in our lives.

We live in a Victim based society. In the United States, we like to think of ourselves as Rescuers. For many years we identified Russia as the Persecutor with third world countries being the identified under-dog, or Victim. Several years ago, USSR's President Gorbachev was said to tell President Bush, "I'm about to do the worst thing imaginable, I'm going to take away your enemy!" Here was a man who innately understood our country's need to have a scapegoat, providing us the chance to say, "It's those bad communists again". Otherwise, we, as Americans might be forced to take responsibility for our own perpetrator tendencies. Of course, Russia does perpetrate, as witnessed by the doings of their KGB, but haven't our own CIA shown similar tendencies? Our very history is built on persecution. Within a few years of arriving in America, our forefathers began to systematically oppress and subjugate the Native Americans who had lived here for centuries! It seems a wearisome task for this country to get willing to be accountable for the ways we have persecuted. Instead, we seem bound and determined to hold onto the idea of being the world's "good guy". It is always difficult for Persecutors to perceive themselves as such, however. It is much easier to justify persecutor behavior than it is to own the oppressor role.

The cycle goes like this; "I was just trying to help (rescuer), and they turned on me (victim), so I had to defend myself" (persecutor). Persecution is almost always justified as a necessary defense. It is the role most often denied. After all, who wants to admit that they ill-use people?

The Rescuer, on the other hand, has no trouble identifying with the helper role. They are generally proud of their position as caretakers and fixers. They are socially acclaimed and rewarded for "selfless acts" of rescuing. They believe in the goodness of being caretakers, seeing themselves as ever helpful. What they deny is the ill-begotten consequences of their enabling/disabling acts. But what these "do-gooders" have most difficulty seeing is how they, themselves end up as victims. It's very hard for a Rescuer to hear themselves referred to as victims even when they get caught red-handed complaining about how mistreated they are!

Triangular Pain

Living life on the Drama Triangle creates misery in many ways. The primary commonality is that none of the players are willing (or even know how) to take responsibility for themselves. The price paid is tremendous for all three roles lead to emotional, mental and even physical pain.

Evading responsibility and/or attempting to protect oneself or others doesn't work, and yet it is the primary goal of those caught up on the triangle. The simple truth is that the greatest pain is the anguish created in trying to avoid it. When we try to shield others from the truth, we discount their abilities. This is disabling and leads to negative reactions all around. Everyone involved ends up hurt and angry. No-one wins.

As long as we chase ourselves and others around the Triangle, we relegate ourselves to living in robot-like, knee-jerk reaction. Rather than living vibrant lives of spontaneity and choice, we settle for a sort of pseudo aliveness. Experiencing a full life requires the ability to interact as free agents. This is impossible as long as we are involved in the Drama Triangle.

Denied Feelings

Frequently we find entry onto the triangle through the port of denied feelings. Whenever we deny our own or another's feelings we inevitably end up playing a role on the triangle. We rescue others anytime we attempt to keep them from feeling bad. ("I can't tell Jim what I think because it'll hurt his feelings"). So we keep our opinions, feelings and thoughts secret which inevitably creates distance.

Parents who grew up without permission to acknowledge or express feelings often deny their children the same right. Repressed, these denied emotions become secret shame pockets, alienating us from others and sentencing us to life on the triangle. Feelings may be intangible, but they are nonetheless real.

Anytime we deny access to our feeling experience we set ourselves up for a victim perspective. We cannot take responsibility for feelings we have not allowed ourselves to acknowledge, therefore we end up on the triangle.

Shame and Core Beliefs

Triangular interaction is the primary way that shame is generated. Each role moves around the triangle in their own distinct way. This is because each starting gate position has a set of core beliefs that tends to set them up for that particular role. These unconscious attitudes are what creates feelings of worthlessness, inadequacy and or defectiveness. The triangle is the way we reinforce and perpetuate those shame producing beliefs.

Rescuers, for instance, believe that their needs are unimportant and irrelevant and therefore do not deserve to be met. The only way they can legitimately connect with others (in order to meet the need to belong and feel important), is by taking care of someone else. Rescuers guilt themselves when they aren't care-taking others.

Their primary myth is; "If I take care of others well enough ... long enough, then I will get my turn." Unfortunately, on the triangle, Rescuers are taking care of life-time Victims who have no idea of how to be there for others. This reinforces the Caretaker's core belief ("my needs don't count"), which in turn produces more shame around needing.

Guilt and shame are powerful driving forces for the perpetuation of the Triangle. Guilt is often used by Victims in an effort to hook their Rescuer into taking care of them ("If you don't do it, who will?). The Victims shame producing belief of not being able to make it on their own leaves them feeling powerless and needy.

Persecutors, believing the world is dangerous, use shame as a primary tool for keeping others in their place. Their primary goal is to feel safe by putting others down. "Get them before they get me!" is their primary agenda. What better way of accomplishing that, then to judge, moralize or denigrate their victims?

Dishonesty

Of course, it follows suit that once we learn to deny our feeling reality, honesty becomes impossible. Telling our truth first requires knowing it. When we react out of denied feelings and unconscious programming, we cannot possibly know our personal truth. This means there will be hidden agendas and dishonesty. This is another primary trait of all players on the triangle. Only by knowing our truth, can we begin to speak from a place of personal honesty. Then getting off the triangle becomes possible.

Failed Intimacy

Although we all long for a sense of connection with others, many people are secretly terrified of intimacy. Letting someone really know us can be a frightening experience. Intimacy requires vulnerability and honest disclosure. Believing that we are at heart unlovable, defective or "less than", makes it difficult to reveal ourselves. We want to feel unconditionally accepted, but when we haven't accepted ourselves, it's impossible to believe that anyone else could embrace us. Thinking we need to hide our unworthiness makes keeping a distance imperative. As long as we maintain hidden agendas and deny our truth, intimacy is impossible. Victim-hood is designed to insure alienation, not only from others, but also from ourselves.

Getting Off the Triangle

In order to get off the Triangle, we must first decide to take responsibility for ourselves. We then begin to allow ourselves to acknowledge and express our true feelings, even when doing so is uncomfortable. As we explore our core beliefs and starting gate positions, we become better able to recognize when someone is attempting to hook us, and refuse to allow it.

Learning how to sit with guilty feelings without acting on them is a big part of resisting the Victim game. Feeling guilt does not necessarily imply that we are out of integrity with ourselves. Guilt is a learned response. Sometimes guilt indicates that we've broken a dysfunctional family rule. Growth prohibitive beliefs about ourselves and the world, instilled early on, become rigid rules that need to be violated. Family dictums such as; "Don't talk about it", "Don't share feelings", or "It's selfish to take care of yourself", must be overcome if we are to grow. We can expect, and even celebrate the guilt when we defy these deeply entrenched unwritten laws.

Getting honest with ourselves and others is a primary way to get off the triangle. Telling our truth is a key way of taking responsibility. We then must be willing to take necessary action for whatever that truth reveals.

In order for a Rescuer to get honest, for instance, they have to confess their investment in keeping others dependent. This means acknowledging that being a rescuer fills their need for self-worth. In this way, Rescuers learn to recognize and address their own needs.

It can feel very threatening for someone stuck in Persecutor consciousness to get bare-bones honest with themselves. To them, to do so feels like blaming themselves, which only intensifies their internal condemnation. Persecutors need to have a situation or person they can blame so they can stay angry. Anger energizes them by acting like fuel in the psyche that keeps them going. It may be the only way they have of dealing with chronic depression. Persecutors need a jolt of rage the same way some people need a shot of caffeine. It jump-starts their day.

Just as with the other roles, self-accountability is the only way off the victim grid for the Persecutor. There has to be some kind of breakthrough for them to get willing to own their part. Unfortunately, because of their great reluctance to do so, it may have to come in the form of a crisis.

Ironically, the doorway off the triangle for all players is through the persecutor position. This is because when we decide to get off the triangle, we are often seen as persecutors by those still on it. Once we decide to take self-responsibility and tell our truth, those still aboard are likely to accuse us of victimizing them. "How dare you refuse to take care of me!" a Victim might cry. Or "What do you mean you don't need my help?" says a primary enabler when a victim decides to become accountable. In other words, to escape the victim grid, we must be willing to be perceived as the "bad guy". This doesn't make it so, but we must be willing to sit with the discomfort of being perceived as such.

When you are ready to be accountable, you begin by sorting through your real motives and feelings regarding your present situation. You become willing to experience your own uncomfortable feelings and to allow others theirs without rescue. If your loved ones and associates are also willing to participate in this process of self-realization, it speeds the halt of triangular interaction. If you're ready to get off, but they aren't, then you may have to draw some hard-fast boundaries, or even walk away. Again, this puts you at risk of being perceived as a persecutor.

Since starting-gate Victims are the identified problem in their family, it's natural for them to seek outside professional help. Often, however they are unconsciously looking for another Rescuer (which abounds among helping professionals, by the way). Those in primary Victim roles must challenge the ingrained belief that they can't do for themselves. If they are to get off the triangle, they have to initiate self-care, rather than look outside themselves for a savior. Instead of seeing themselves as totally powerless, they must begin to acknowledge their problem solving as well as their leadership capabilities.

In conclusion, we must first become conscious of how it is we play out the Drama Triangle. For where ever there is dysfunction, the Drama Triangle is found. Making ourselves aware of our starting-gate positions is the first step to moving out of destructive patterns. As we begin the process of liberating ourselves from our stuck-ness through self-responsibility and truth telling, we transform our lives. In other words, we actualize our Higher Selves, thus realizing the blueprint of possibility that lies dormant within each of us.

Drama Triangle/Shame Machine

How to get out of the cycle

1. Become conscious of what's going on
2. Recognize your starting position
3. Change the dynamics of the triangle/cycle
 - A. Take responsibility for yourself/not others
 - B. Let go of the drama
 - c. Allow people to face consequences (great teachers!)
 - D. Feel your feelings