

ARE YOU STUCK IN A

# drama triangle?

Feeling picked on, put upon or just madly exasperated in your work, love or friend relationships? It's high-time you busted out of that toxic cycle, says **Kara Byers**.

**E**ver found yourself in a recurring conflict – with a colleague, a mate or your partner – that seemingly goes around in circles, pushing at your pain points each time? Well, you might be stuck in a drama triangle.

Maybe you're always fighting about the same things, feel like you're putting all the work into a long-term relationship, or believe you're being unfairly 'picked on' and called out for no apparent reason in particular dynamics. Sometimes it transforms you from being a balanced adult with your emotional sh\*t together, to throwing an epic Tasmanian Devil-style tantrum, giving the silent treatment, playing the innocent party or even lashing out. These kinds of behaviours are what form said drama triangle and, whether melodramatic or quiet, they're equally as damaging as each other.

Psychologist Dr Stephen Karpman coined the term 'drama triangle' in 1968 to explain the levels of communication between the three different roles people ascribe to when in this style of conflict: the persecutor, victim and the rescuer. Dave McCann, principal at McCann Consulting (mccannconsulting.com.au), believes the three roles interact in a kind of game and relate to power, control and security. "In this game, each player tries to manipulate the others into doing what they want," he explains. "The Persecutor usually takes a more active role, the Victim a more passive role and the

Rescuer a supposedly 'neutral' role. Each player gets a certain 'pay-off' for their behaviour if they are successful in affecting the behaviour of the other players in the way that they want."

The idea might be older than your mum but it's as relevant right now as ever. "Persecutor behaviour typically involves some form of accusation or instigation. For example, 'You're so messy – why can't you tidy up after yourself?'" says McCann. "A common Victim response to this would be defensive, such as, 'You're always having a go at me!' If the potential Rescuer is within earshot, the Victim might pull them into the argument, 'Can you believe s/he is doing this again?' Or the Rescuer might just step in anyway, 'Oh, come on now (Persecutor), that's not very fair.'"

So far, so familiar, right? Don't freak out, the drama triangle might be a nasty web we find ourselves caught in from time to time but there is a way out, as McCann tells us. "The most important thing to remember is that the mind games can only continue if everyone plays their role. This means that the Victim has to take on the role of

a victim. If they refuse to do it, the game can't continue. The same is true for the other roles, very much including Rescuer."

But how do you know what role you're playing? And what does it look like?

## You can be all three

While people can be drawn to playing one character within the drama triangle, it's also common to move between all three; swapping and changing from the 'I'm right' Persecutor, to the 'I'm blameless' Victim, to the 'I'm good' Rescuer. As Melanie Schilling, eHarmony's relationship expert points out, "Each is as

dysfunctional as the next. It's a bit like a game of good cop/bad cop where drama and manipulation are key." Schilling adds, "The drama tends to obscure real issues and those involved are often seduced by the false excitement that it all offers. So, whether someone is playing the

victim, the rescuer or even the persecutor, they're avoiding responsibility and seeking to gain the upper hand."

The side you play can change by situation. You don't need three or two players; it can occur just within yourself.

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"People tend to play the role they believe gives them the very best payoff, even just within themselves," explains McCann. "For example, we might feel deflated after delivering a crappy presentation at work (Victim), give ourselves a hard time for not doing better (Persecutor), and then go home and open a bottle of wine or a box of chocolates as a relief (Rescuer)."

As McCann reiterates, Karpman emphasises that the drama in the drama triangle is generated by people switching roles and often, even without us realising it, playing those roles can become a comfortable life habit that we can't kick.

## Repetition is the problem

While it feels traumatic at the time, when issues spiral into crisis point, it can be a good thing, that is, if it serves to clear the air and give a fresh start from which to negotiate old relationships.

The real problems arise when people get endemically stuck in the same drama triangle script, ceaselessly playing out the fairytale narrative of dragon, damsel in distress and knight in shining-armour. It's the repetition of the same old scenes that tells you that people are being driven more by the pay-offs of the game than the desire to move on or make amends.

Identifying the role you're playing is apparently also related to energy. "If the energy is aggressive or accusing (even in a subtle way), the role is more likely to be persecuting. If it's submissive or defeated, it's more likely to be victim-based," says McCann. "The interesting role for me here is rescuing. It can feel good, but has the effect of disempowering – particularly the person playing the victim. It usually has the effect of perpetuating the triangle."

The best way out of this big mess is to step outside of it and the role you are unconsciously playing. As Karpman stated, "With knowledge, when one then senses an invitation to a new drama beginning, they can say 'no'."

## Responsibility is the only option for escape

Saying no is one exit-strategy, but for the deeply entrenched, breaking free may mean adopting new, healthier ways to communicate. The starting point? Looking within. Sounds cliché, but it's true.

"It will take a lot of self-awareness, personal insight, emotional maturity and also humility to move through this tricky dynamic," Schilling tells us. "You need to take a good, hard, honest look at yourself, take responsibility for your own behaviours (some of which might be a little unattractive) and make a real commitment to changing your ways."

McCann agrees, saying that in order to set ourselves on a path to creating something different, we need to stop

## PERSECUTOR, VICTIM OR RESCUER... – which Lannister are you?



### PERSECUTORS ARE blaming/critical/rigid

#### They have:

- Ignorance of their power over people.
- An internal perception that they're being persecuted.
- A tendency to antagonise and attack those they see as sources of their frustration.

#### They need:

- To dominate any/all situations.
- Vent their frustration, anger and resentment of others.
- Be recognised as the person who is always 'right'.



### VICTIMS ARE downtrodden/helpless/hopeless

#### They have:

- No responsibility, power or control.
- Strong feelings that

prevent them making bold action (could be fear, depression or anxiety).

- An internal anger (strong negative feelings aimed at themselves).

#### They need:

- Constant attention. They sometimes suck the life out of others.



### RESCUERS ARE avoiders/nosey/thoughtful

#### They have:

- Discomfort of facing life honestly.
- A sense of self based

on being 'unselfish' or 'good'.

- A tendency to ignore their own true feelings and thoughts.
- Trouble dealing with emotions.

#### They need:

- To be needed.
- Regular validation that they're kind.

## MAKING THE RIGHT SWITCH

Break free by trading toxic PVR behaviours to healthier ones.

CREATING ISSUES AND CHAOS	vs	SOLVING PROBLEMS
Letting confrontation rule.	VS	Letting integrity/character rule.
Ignoring damage and pretending it has nothing to do with you.	VS	Making amends and recognising the consequences.
Trying to have it both ways.	VS	Facing sacrifice.
Maintaining your illusions at all costs.	VS	Having the courage to become self-aware.
Dodging, deflecting and blaming others.	VS	Taking responsibility.
Taking the easy way out.	VS	Knowing the right thing to do is the hard thing to do.

playing games and take responsibility for the situations we create. "There are lots of different approaches to doing this but they generally lead back to the question of where the power for change sits – with us or with other people? Any time we look at other people as the cause of, or solution to, a scenario that we don't like, there's a big chance we are in the triangle," he says. "As soon as we take responsibility for our experience, and encourage other people to do the same, we're on our way out of it. Each of us can create our own experience through the choices we make in what we do and how

we respond to the world around us. It's not up to other people – it's up to us. If I want to change an experience I don't really like, I always start with the same question: 'How have I created this?'"

Of course, breaking free of a drama triangle doesn't mean we won't ever experience difficulties in future or have to deal with others intent on staying stuck in playing the game. By identifying and stopping our own destructive role-playing patterns, we can minimise tension and tame our sad, inner-tormented toddler, opening the door to much more fulfilling relationships all round. Oh, snap! 🐉