FREE WORKSHEET · THOUGHTS & FEELINGS

The Drama Triangle

Notice the roles you fall into under strain, and step out of them

In 1968 the psychiatrist Stephen Karpman described three roles people fall into when relationships get strained. He called it the drama triangle. Most of us move around it without noticing, at work, at home and with friends.

The roles are not who you are. They are positions you step into, usually with good intentions, and they tend to keep a problem going rather than solve it.

IF YOU NEED HELP NOW

If there is an immediate risk to life, call **999**. The Samaritans are available free, 24 hours a day, on **116 123**. In England, NHS 111 (option 2) connects to an urgent mental health service.

01

The three roles

ROLE	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	HOW IT CAN SOUND
Rescuer	Stepping in, fixing, covering, taking on other people's problems	"Leave it, I'll sort it." "They can't cope without me."
Persecutor	Blaming, criticising, controlling, keeping score	"Why is it always down to me?" "You never get this right."
Victim	Feeling powerless, hard done by, unable to change things	"There's nothing I can do." "Why does this always happen to me?"

The roles feed each other. A Rescuer needs someone to rescue, which keeps the other person helpless. When the Rescuer runs out, they often tip into resentment (Persecutor) or feeling overwhelmed and unappreciated (Victim). Round it goes.

02

Where do you find yourself?

How often do these happen?

0 = never, 1 = sometimes, 2 = often, 3 = most of the time

	0	1	2	3
I take on other people's problems before they ask	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel responsible for how other people feel	☐	☐	☐	☐
I end up resenting the people I help	☐	☐	☐	☐
I criticise or blame when I am under pressure	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel nothing I do will make a difference	☐	☐	☐	☐
I wait for someone else to sort things out	☐	☐	☐	☐

Think of a relationship that keeps going round in circles.

WHO	THE ROLE I USUALLY TAKE	THE ROLE THEY USUALLY TAKE	WHAT IT COSTS ME

03

Stepping out

In 1990 Acey Choy described a healthier version, the winner's triangle. Each role has an alternative that solves problems rather than keeping them going.

INSTEAD OF	TRY	FOR EXAMPLE
Rescuer	Caring: support people to solve things themselves	"What do you think would help? How can I support that?"

INSTEAD OF	TRY	FOR EXAMPLE
Persecutor	Assertive: say what you need, without blame	"This isn't working for me. Here is what I need."
Victim	Vulnerable: be honest about the struggle, and ask for help	"I'm finding this hard. Could you help me with it?"

EXERCISE

Next time

1. The situation where I most want to step out of the triangle:

2. What I will say or do instead: