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UNIVERSAL
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Issue 181 AUS \$12.00*
NZ \$12.00 (Both incl GST)



ISSN: 0812 - 8220
9 770812 822008

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The drama triangle

A triad of roles — the Persecutor, the Rescuer and the Victim — dominates many human interactions. Identify which role you follow and discover how to change your archetypal dynamic.

Words SONIA ZADRO

When you think back to your younger years, what were they like? Was there a role you fell into in your family of origin without even realising it?

Were you the quiet shy one, the lost child who kept in the background, the trophy child always winning awards, the clown making everyone laugh, the peacemaker resolving conflicts, the responsible one forced to care for your siblings or a parent, or the black sheep always seen as a disappointment?

As adults we can unconsciously fall into our childhood roles — not because they were helpful at the time but simply because they are familiar to us. If you always had to care for others growing up, you might find yourself prone to rescuing others as an adult or drawn to a caring career such as nursing. If you were the peacemaker, perhaps as an adult you find yourself behaving this way with your children or in your work with colleagues.

Three roles that have become well known in psychology and popular culture are those of Persecutor, Rescuer and Victim. These roles make up a pattern of interaction known as the drama triangle, which is incredibly pervasive in our culture.

In fact, in their book *How to Break Free of the Drama Triangle and Victim Consciousness*, developmental psychologists Barry Weinhold and Janae Weinhold discuss how this pattern of interaction pervades our soap operas, sitcoms, crime shows, politics and daily interactions. They even open their first chapter with this: "The Drama Triangle

is an interpersonal communication dynamic so embedded in human consciousness and social interactions that we call it the only game in town."

If the role of persecutor, rescuer or victim is dominating your life it's important you don't judge yourself. Rather, take ownership and simply ask the question, "How is this role unhelpful for me in my life?" All three roles can be manipulative, are largely unconscious and, most importantly, all three roles keep you in a victim consciousness.

What this means is that when you are caught up in a drama triangle dynamic you feel at the mercy of external people and circumstances. It's important to recognise nearly all of us take on these roles at times, though one may dominate your life.

The Persecutor

A Persecutor is someone who wants to dominate, control, win, be right, get their own way, intimidate, get one up and always put their needs before yours.

Persecutor pitfalls

The role of persecutor is unhelpful because it damages relationships. Serial persecutors live in a world of conflict and/or loneliness. Most people don't want to be treated aggressively, told what to do and be pushed around. They will retaliate and so conflict results.

Their relationships are poor in quality and definitely not equal. Persecutors may also feel angry and powerless because even though they are demanding they often don't get their needs met. Why?

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Because not many people want to listen to and accommodate a controlling, aggressive person, unless perhaps they are a victim.

Alternative: the Assertive Person

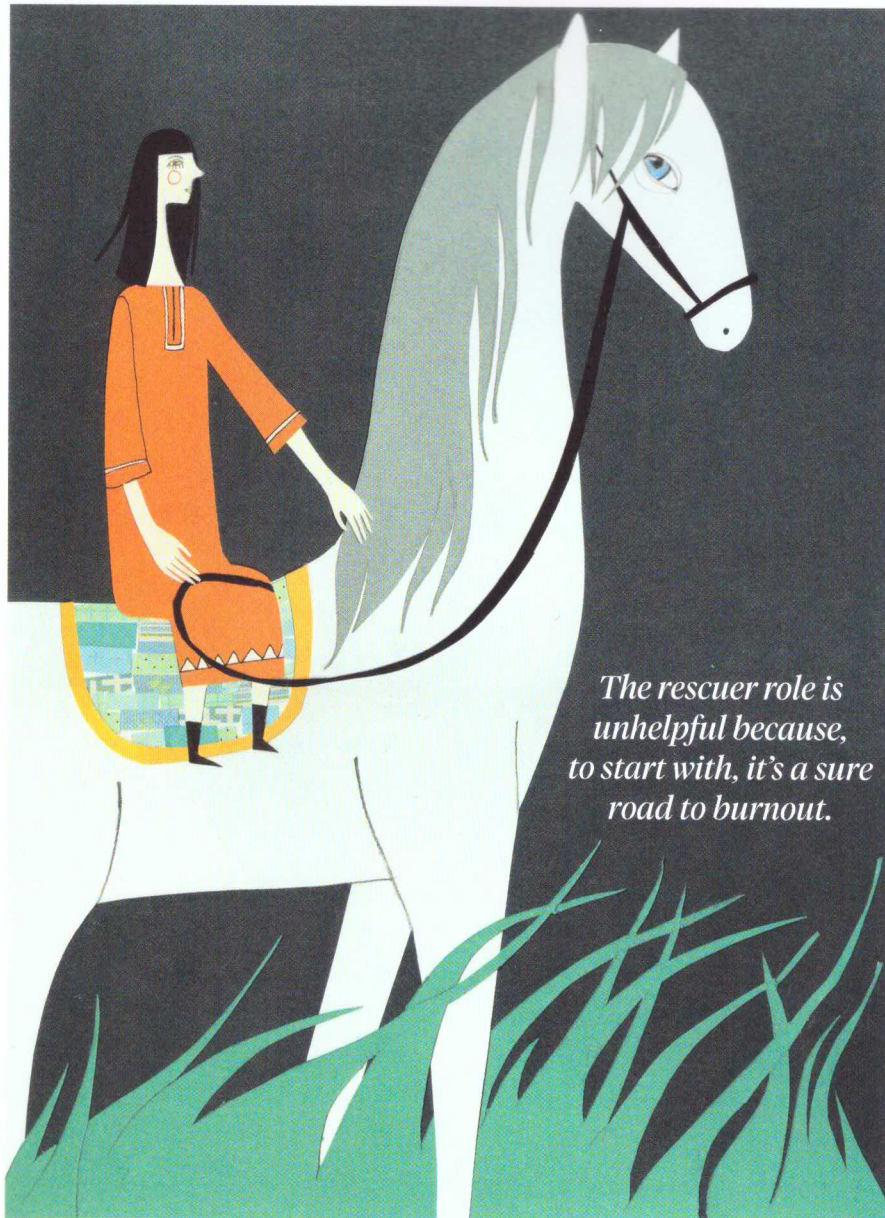
Aggressive people can learn to become assertive. This means expressing their needs respectfully, clearly and calmly, listening to others and trying to accommodate their needs as well as their own.

They can also learn to express their feelings when they first feel them rather than keeping them bottled up and then exploding. This pattern of suppressing their feelings and exploding is common; someone often in the role of persecutor.

A good place to start is to calmly state what they would like: for example "Excuse me, I'd like to finish my statement." Or they might try stating how another person's behaviour makes them feel and what they would like: for example, "I feel frustrated when you don't put the bins out. Can you please put them out Tuesday nights or perhaps you'd like to swap chores?"

Communicating in a clearer, respectful way makes it more likely others will listen, respond and that their needs will be met.





The rescuer role is unhelpful because, to start with, it's a sure road to burnout.

The Rescuer

A Rescuer is someone who "needs" to rescue. The word need is important here because people who rescue compulsively don't do it just because they care; rather, their self-esteem depends on it.

Rescuing makes them feel kind, helpful, strong and needed. If they can't take over and rescue they feel left out, undervalued, put out for not being asked to help, or simply at a loss.

This need makes them controlling in their desire to help. It might be the mother who painted your living room green without asking because she knew your house badly needed painting. It might be a friend who insists on helping you move house and then suggests you arrange your furniture their way because they believe you don't know how to do this properly yourself.

Then there's the word "no". Many people find it hard to say no to demands or requests they can't meet. For a rescuer, this word is almost impossible because they feel indispensable.

The role of the Martyr takes this one step further and, after insisting on doing everything, they will complain about how hard their life is running around after everyone else and doing everything for them when no one asked them for help in the first place. The martyr would also complain that no one appreciated them.

Rescuer pitfalls

The rescuer role is unhelpful because, to start with, it's a sure road to burnout. No one can sustain a constant state of giving and doing if they don't attend to their own emotional and physical needs. We all need balance.

Rescuing can also create conflict in relationships. When a rescuer takes over when others haven't asked for help it can make those others feel disrespected as their wishes aren't being considered. Rescuing also discounts the ability of others to think for themselves and sends the message to those they are rescuing that they are not capable of doing things themselves.

This can be a problem in parenting. Obviously, if your young child is crossing the road you need to rescue them. However, as your child grows into an adult you need to allow them a greater sense of autonomy and independence. In this way your child gets the message, "We believe in and trust your abilities and judgement." The child then internalises the belief "I'm capable" and "I can trust myself."

Alternative: the Caring Person

Being a naturally caring person is a wonderful quality. Kindness is so often lacking and needed in our world. But being caring means that we can say "no" as well as "yes", we don't do things we don't want to do and we help only when we are asked. Essentially, we do things because we genuinely care, not because we need to.

The Victim

A Victim is someone who wallows in self-pity and gets stuck there. It's important to acknowledge that there are legitimate victims. Violence, rape, and abuse of all kinds result in trauma and acknowledging you have been victimised allows you to grieve the losses that come from your experience and move on. But sometimes a person can't move on — they get stuck in their loss, anger and helplessness until it dominates their entire lives.

Some may not have been victimised at all but had the role of victim modelled to them growing up and learned to repeat it. For others again, they may attain some secondary gain from being in the role of victim such as love or attention.

A red flag for someone stuck in the victim role is when the person keeps complaining about their situation but refuses to seek professional help, or if they do seek help they don't actually want to change and only want to blame. They resist deeply processing their pain or looking at areas of themselves they may need to address.

Victim pitfalls

The victim lives a life of dependency, powerlessness and discontent. They often feel worthless and unlovable; they never take charge of their circumstances, believe in themselves, pursue their dreams or express their unique potential. They live a life of fear, dependency and helplessness.

The Alternative: the Vulnerable Person

If you are feeling vulnerable or have been victimised, it's essential to deeply process your feelings. If you feel stuck, however, it's important to think about how you may find solutions to your situation. This might require professional help. It's important if you do seek help that it be the kind of help that encourages a measure of healthy emotional processing, self-responsibility and tools to be your own therapist so you don't just become dependent on the therapist. Victims also need to learn assertiveness skills to identify their needs and ask for what they need.



Codependency

Of the three roles described above, which two do you think might attract each other, fall in love and enter into a long-term relationship?

The first combination is that of the Rescuer and Victim. These two meet each other's needs perfectly. The victim has someone to rescue them. They can depend on their rescuer who will in turn reinforce the victim's belief that they are helpless. Here the rescuer also gets to feel constantly needed.

The second pairing is that of the Victim and Persecutor: again, a perfect match. The persecutor gets someone to bully and make themselves feel powerful while the victim has someone to reinforce their belief that they are helpless and a victim.

The Drama Triangle in action

The above descriptions paint quite a dysfunctional picture. You might be thinking, "Thank goodness none of them describes me." However, think again. Even if none of these roles dominates your life you may still be acting them out without realising it if you are involved in a drama triangle. This often occurs in the space of just one conversation. Take the following example between long-term friends Simone and Beth.

Simone needs to get to a health retreat on the weekend but recently had to put her car in for service. What's normally a half-hour drive will now take 90 minutes on public transport so she asks Beth for help.

As you read each sentence, notice whether Simone and Beth are in the roles of Persecutor (P), Rescuer (R), Victim (V)

The first combination is that of the Rescuer and Victim. These two meet each other's needs perfectly. The victim has someone to rescue them. They can depend on their rescuer who will in turn reinforce the victim's belief that they are helpless. Here the rescuer also gets to feel constantly needed.

or nothing (N). Tone of voice can greatly influence this.

Simone: Hi Beth. Can you give me a lift on Saturday morning to my health retreat? My car's in for a service. (N)

Beth: Sorry, Simone. I've organised something for Saturday morning (N).

Simone: Oh, no! [*almost teary*] I'm stuck. I so want to go to this retreat but may as well forget it if you can't help me out. (V)

Beth: OK. I'll shuffle some things around and take you. What time should I pick you up? (R) Beth drives Simone to her health retreat.

Simone: Thanks for taking me. (N)

Beth: [*annoyed*] Yeah, right. (P)

Simone: Is something the matter? (N)

Beth: [*angrily*] I missed seeing my friends today. It was all because of you! (P)

Simone: I'm so sorry. You should have said something. (R)

Beth: [*angrily*] I tried to! Just forget it now! (P) Simone starts crying. (V)

Beth: [*feeling guilty*] Don't cry, Simone. (R) Simone keeps crying. (V)

Beth: I'm sorry. I've just got a lot on right now. (R)

Simone: [*angrily*] Well, don't take your anger out on me, OK? (P)

Beth: I'm sorry. I won't do it again. (R)

So where did this conversation start going pear-shaped? After Beth said she was unable to give Simone a lift, Simone went into the role of victim. Here Beth should have stood her ground and simply said although she would love to help she was simply unable to.

If she liked, she could have offered an alternate suggestion for Simone to get to the retreat. Instead, she got drawn into Simone's role of victim, felt guilty and came to her rescue. This led to her feeling resentful. She later repeated this rescuing pattern when Simone played the victim again by crying.

When you are able to recognise these unhelpful patterns in your present relationships and how they relate to your childhood roles and patterns of behaviour, you can make new choices. You can step out of the drama triangle into a life where you are respectful of others, take responsibility for your choices, are able to experience authentic intimacy and no longer identify as a victim. 🌟

Sonia Zadro is a clinical psychologist with 20 years' experience and a freelance writer. She is interested in helping heal and opening minds through science. To find out more, visit soniazadro.com.