

The Three Faces of Victim

An Overview of the Drama Triangle

June 26, 2008 By Lynne Forrest

Whether we know it, or not, most of us react to life as victims. Whenever we refuse to take responsibility for ourselves, we are unconsciously choosing to react as victim. This inevitably creates feelings of anger, fear, guilt or inadequacy and leaves us feeling betrayed, or taken advantage of by others.

Victim-hood can be defined by the three positions beautifully outlined in a diagram developed by a well-respected psychiatrist, and teacher of Transactional Analysis, named Stephen Karpman. He calls it the “drama triangle,” I refer to it as the victim triangle. Having discovered this resource some thirty years ago, it has become one of the more important tools in my personal and professional life. The more I teach and apply the victim triangle to relationship the deeper my appreciation grows for this simple, powerfully accurate instrument.

I’ve sometimes referred to the victim triangle as a “shame generator” because through it we unconsciously re-enact painful life themes that create shame. This has the effect of reinforcing old, painful beliefs that keep us stuck in a limited version of reality.

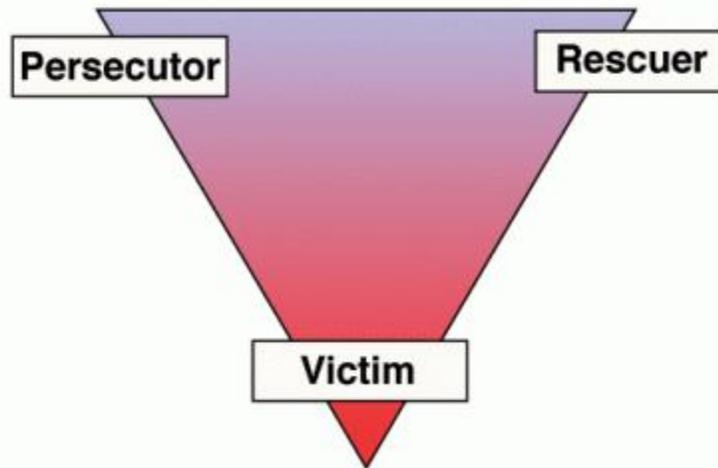
I believe that every dysfunctional interaction, in relationship with other or self, takes place on the victim triangle. But until we become conscious of these dynamics, we cannot transform them. And unless we transform them, we cannot move forward on our journey towards re-claiming emotional, mental and spiritual well-being.

The three roles on the victim triangle are Persecutor, Rescuer and Victim. Karpman placed these three roles on an inverted triangle and described them as being the three aspects, or faces of victim. No matter where we may start out on the triangle, victim is where we end up, therefore no matter what role we’re in on the triangle, we’re in victimhood. If we’re on the triangle we’re living as victims, plain and simple!

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Each person has a primary or most familiar role – what I call their “starting gate” position. This is the place from which we generally enter, or “get hooked” onto, the triangle. We first learn our starting gate position in our family of origin. Although we each have a role with which we most identify, once we’re on the triangle, we automatically rotate through all the positions, going completely around the triangle, sometimes in a matter of minutes, or even seconds, many times every day.

Starting gate Rescuers (SGR) see themselves as “helpers” and “caretakers.” They need someone to rescue (victim) in order to feel vital and important. It’s difficult for SGR’s to recognize themselves as ever being in a victim position – they’re the ones with the answers after all.

Starting Gate Persecutors (SGP), on the other hand, identify themselves primarily as victims. They are usually in complete denial about their blaming tactics. When it is pointed out to them, they argue that attack is warranted and necessary for self-protection. These two – the Rescuer and the Persecutor – are

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the two opposite extremes of Victim. But again, regardless of where we start out on the triangle, all roles eventually end up in victim. It's inevitable.

You may notice that both the Persecutor and Rescuer are on the upper end of the triangle. These roles assume a "one-up" position over others, meaning they relate as though they are better, stronger, smarter, or more-together than the victim. Sooner or later the victim, who is in the one-down position at the bottom of the triangle, develops a metaphorical "crick in the neck" from always looking up. Feeling "looked down upon" or "worth-less than" the others, the Victim builds resentment and sooner or later, retaliation follows. A natural progression from victim to persecutor follows. This generally moves the persecutor or rescuer into victim. 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 and Junior engaged in battle. "Clean up your room or else," mom threatens. Dad immediately comes to the rescue. "Mom," he might say, "give the boy a break. He's been at school all day."

Any one of several possibilities might follow. Perhaps Mom, feeling victimized by Dad, will turn her wrath on him. In that case, dad is moved from Rescuer to Victim. They then 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, or then again, maybe Junior will turn on Dad, rescuing Mom, with, "Mind your own business, Dad. I don't need your help!" So it goes, with endless variation, but nonetheless, pinging from corner to corner on the triangle. For many families, it's the only way they know to interact.

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Our starting-gate position on the victim triangle is not only where we most often enter the triangle, it is also the role through which we actually define ourselves. It becomes a strong part of our identity. Each starting-gate position has its own particular way of seeing and reacting to the world. We all have unconscious core beliefs acquired in childhood, derived from our interpretation of early family encounters. These become “life themes” that predispose us towards the unconscious selection of a particular starting gate position on the triangle. Sally’s mother was physically disabled and addicted to prescription drugs. From Sally’s earliest memory she reported feeling ultimately responsible for her mother. Instead of getting appropriate care from a parent who was concerned for her well-being, she became the “little parent” of a mother who played the part of a helpless child. This childhood scenario set Sally up with a “life script” that predisposed her towards becoming a Starting Gate Rescuer (SGR). Care-taking others became her primary way of relating to others.

SGR’s, like Sally, have an unconscious core belief that might go something like this; “My needs are not important ... I am only valued for what I can do for others.” Of course, believing these ideas requires her to have someone in her life who she can rescue (a victim). How else will someone like Sally get to feel valuable and worthwhile?

Sally would never admit to being a victim because in her mind she is the one who must have the answers. Nonetheless, she does, in fact, rotate through victim on the triangle on a regular basis. A SGR in the victim role becomes a martyr, complaining loudly, “After all I’ve done for you ... this is the thanks I get!”

Starting Gate Persecutors (SGP’s), on the other hand, see themselves as victims in need of protection. This is how they can so easily justify their vengeful behavior ... “They asked for it and they got what they deserved.” That’s the way they see it. Their core belief might go something like this; “The world is

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dangerous, people can't be trusted so I need to get them before they hurt me." This attitude sets them up to think that they must strike out in order to defend against inevitable attack.

Whereas a SGR may move into the role of persecutor by withdrawing their care-taking, ("That's it – I'm not doing anything else for you!") a SGP rescues in a way that is almost as painful as when they persecute.

Bob is a doctor who often justified hurting others. Attack was his primary way of dealing with inconvenience, frustration or pain. Once, for instance, he mentioned running into a patient of his on the golf course. Our dialogue went something like this;

"Lynne, can you believe that patient had the nerve to ask me to treat his bad knee, right then and there, on my only day off?"

"Yeah," I replied, "some people just don't have appropriate boundaries. How did you handle it?"

"Oh, I gave him a treatment, all right," he chuckled, "I took him to my office and gave him a steroid shot he'll never forget!"

In other words Bob rescued his inconsiderate patient but in a way that "punished" him for daring to be so bold. To Bob, his action seemed rational, even justified. His patient had infringed on his free time, therefore, he believed, his patient deserved the rough treatment he got. This is a prime example of SGP thinking. Bob didn't realize that he could have just said no to his patients request for treatment. He did not have to feel victimized by, nor did he need to rescue his patient. Setting boundaries never occurred to Bob as an option. In his mind he had been treated unjustly and therefore he had the right, even the obligation, to get even.

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Victims also have core beliefs that set them up for their starting gate position on the triangle. Starting Gate Victim's (SGV's) believe they cannot take care of themselves. They see themselves as consistently unable to handle life. They even rescue from a one-down position, saying things to their potential rescuer like "You're the only one who can help me." These are words that any SGR longs to hear!

Starting gate positions are generally set-up in childhood. For instance, if a parent does not ask their children to take age-appropriate responsibility for themselves, they may grow up either to become adults who feel inadequate at taking care of themselves (starting gate victim) or become resentful adults who blame others when they don't get taken care of in the way they think they should be. (a persecutor role). Either way, they are set up for a lifetime on the victim triangle.

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 we also play out the victim triangle internally. We move around the triangle as rapidly inside our own minds as we do out in the world. We ensnare ourselves on the triangle with dishonest and dysfunctional internal dialogue. For example, we may come down hard on ourselves for not completing a project. Perhaps we lambast ourselves as being lazy, inadequate or defective (P), causing us to spiral into feelings of anger and self-worthlessness. Inwardly, we cower to this persecutory voice, fearing it may be right (V). Finally when we can't bear it anymore, we take ourselves off the hook by justifying, minimizing or indulging in some form of escape. This is how we rescue ourselves. This could go on for minutes, hours or days.

Sometimes we rescue ourselves and others by denying what we know – sort of like; "If I look the other way and pretend not to notice, it will go away". Denial or inner drama of any kind perpetuates a vicious cycle of shame and self loathing.

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Moving around the triangle keeps the self-disparaging messages running. The victim triangle becomes our very own shame-making machine. It's up to us to learn how to turn this noisy mental machine off.

We can't get off the triangle until we recognize we're on it. Once we make it conscious, we observe our interactions with others as a way to identify our own starting gate position. We ask questions, like, "What hooks me? From where do I enter the triangle once I've been hooked?" We begin to train our Internal Observer to notice, without judgment, our conversations with loved ones, especially those more "sticky" moments (where we walk on eggshells).

It's helpful to learn what the costs and trade-offs are for each of the three roles. Each role has its own language, beliefs and behavior – it's beneficial to know them. This helps us to identify when we're on the triangle. Studying the roles also promotes a quicker recognition of when we're being baited to play. With all that in mind, let's examine each role more carefully.

Rescuer

The Rescuer might be described as a shadow aspect of the mother principle. Instead of an appropriate expression of support and nurturing, the Rescuer tends to "smother", control and manipulate others – "for their own good," of course. There is a misguided understanding of what it is to encourage, empower and protect.

A Starting Gate Rescuer is the classic, co-dependent. The SGR tends to be enabling, overly protective – the one who wants to "fix it." Rescuing is an addiction that comes from an unconscious need to feel valued. There's no better way to feel important than to be a savior! Taking care of others may be the Rescuers best game plan for getting to feel worthwhile.

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SGR's usually grow up in families where their dependency needs are not acknowledged. It's a psychological fact that we treat ourselves the way we were treated as children. The budding Rescuer grows up in an environment where their needs are negated and so tend to treat themselves with the same degree of negligence that they experienced as children. Without permission to take care of themselves, their needs go underground and they turn instead to taking care of others.

A SGR often gains great satisfaction by identifying with their care-taking role. They are generally proud of what "helpers" and "fixers" they are. Often they are socially acclaimed, even rewarded, for what can be seen as "selfless acts" of caring. They believe in their goodness as chief caretakers and see themselves as heroes.

Behind it all is a magical belief that, said out loud, might sound like, "If I take care of them long enough, then, sooner or later, they will take care of me too." But, as we've already learned, this rarely happens. When we rescue the needy, we can't expect anything back. They can't even take care of themselves – much less be there for us!

Often the resulting disappointment sends the SGR spiraling into depression. They fail to see that they, themselves are heading straight for victim through their enabling and disabling responses. Having denied the ill-begotten consequences of rescuing, these "do-gooders" find it very hard to hear themselves referred to as a victim even while they complain about how mistreated they are! Martyr is what a SGR turns into once they've moved into the victim position on the triangle.

Feeling used, at the mercy of, betrayed, and hopeless are trademark feelings of the victim phase of a Rescuer's dance around the triangle. Common phrases for the martyred SGR are; "After all I've done for you, this is the thanks I get?" or "No

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matter how much I do, it's never enough"; or, "If you loved me, you wouldn't treat me like this!"

A SGR's greatest fear is that they will end up alone. They believe that their total value comes from how much they do for others. It's difficult for them to see their worth beyond what they have to offer in the way of "stuff" or "service." SGR's unconsciously encourage dependency because they believe, "If you need me, you won't leave me." They scramble to make themselves indispensable in order to avoid abandonment.

SGR's are oblivious to the crippling dependency they foster. They are unaware of the disabling messages they send through their enabling interaction with others. The more they rescue, the less self responsibility is taken by the ones they care-take ... The less responsibility their charges takes, the more they rescue ... it's a downward spiral that often ends in disaster.

A SGR mother of two out-of-control, teenage sons described it well. She said, "I thought my role as a good mother was to make sure my sons toed the line – I thought I was supposed to make sure they did the right thing. Because I believed that I was responsible for the choices they made, I told them what to do and constantly attempted to control their behavior."

Should she be surprised then that her sons blame everyone around them for the painful consequences they experience as a result of their own poor choices? Like her, they have learned to think that their behavior is her responsibility, not their own. Her incessant and futile attempts to control them causes constant battle between them, making it easy for the boys to blame their mother for the problems created by their own irresponsibility. Out of her own need to be seen as a "good mom", this co-dependent mother unwittingly taught her sons to see themselves as hapless victims whose unhappiness was always somebody else's fault.

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There's a good possibility that at least one of these boys will become a Starting Gate Persecutor. Certainly the set up is in place for that to happen.

This mother, as is often the case, was convinced that her sons were incapable of making good choices. She had a long list of evidence to back up her concerns. This accumulated evidence justified her "obligation" to control her sons choices. But because they were teenagers, she could no longer force their compliance like she could when they were younger. Inevitably she would end up feeling helpless, inadequate and like a failure as a mother (victim position). She would either give in to their demands or "persecute" them for not obeying. Either way, she (and they) felt bad. Then would come the guilt or remorse which would motivate her to try to "fix it" once again. And she finds herself back in her original Starting Gate Rescuer position for the cycle to start anew.

We met Sally earlier, who grew up seeing her mother as weak, helpless and ineffectual. From an early age, she felt a huge responsibility to take care of her frail, drug dependent parent. Her own well-being depended on 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 SGR, 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 her other relationships as well. By the time we met, she was emotionally, physically and spiritually exhausted from having spent her life taking care of one sick and dependent person after another.

It becomes the job of the Rescuer to keep the other propped up – "for their own good," of course. Having a Victim is essential in order for the SGR to maintain the illusion of being one-up and needless. This means then, that there will always

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be at least one person in every SGR's life who is troubled, sick, fragile, inept and therefore dependent upon them. If the SGR's primary victim starts taking responsibility for themselves, the Rescuer will either have to find a new victim or address their own shadow needs.

Regardless of the circumstances of the one a SGR feels compelled to rescue – no matter how “badly” the victim may need help, rescuing can lead only one place – victim. If you are a primary Rescuer, this does not mean you cannot be loving, generous and kind. It is certainly possible to be helpful and supportive without being a Rescuer. There is a distinct difference between being truly helpful and rescuing.

Authentic helpers act without expectations for reciprocation. They empower rather than disable those they serve. What they do will be done to encourage self-responsibility, rather than promote dependency. True Supporters believe that the other can handle their own business. They believe that everyone has the right to make mistakes and learn through sometimes hard consequences. They trust the other has what it takes to see themselves through times of difficulty without they, as Rescuers, needing to “save” them.

Starting Gate Rescuers, on the other hand, don't take responsibility for themselves. Instead, they do for others in an attempt to get validation or feel important or as a way to foster dependency. Victim is just round the bend.

Persecutor

Like the other roles, the Starting Gate Persecutor is shame based. This role is most often taken on by someone who received overt mental and/or physical abuse during their childhood. As a result, they are often secretly seething inside from a shame based wrath that ends up running their lives. SGPs, for survival sake, repress deep-seated feelings of worthlessness; they hide their pain behind

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a facade of indignant wrath and uncaring detachment. They may choose to emulate their primary childhood abuser(s), preferring to identify with those they see as having power and strength – rather than become the “picked on loser” at the bottom of life’s pile. SGP’s tend to adopt an attitude that says; “The world is hard and mean ... only the ruthless survive. I’ll be one of those.” In other words, they become perpetrators. They “protect” themselves using authoritarian, controlling and downright punishing methods.

In the same way that the SGR is the shadow mother principle, the SGP is the “shadow father principle.” A healthy father’s job is to protect and provide for his family. Rather than providing nurturing direction, the SGP attempts to “reform” and discipline those around him using manipulation and brute force.

The SGP overcomes feelings of helplessness and shame by over-powering others. Domination becomes their most prevalent style of interaction. This means they must always be right! Their methods include bullying, preaching, threatening, blaming, lecturing, interrogating and outright attack. They believe in getting even, very often through aggressive acts. Just like the Rescuer needs someone to fix, the Persecutor needs someone to blame. SGP’s deny their vulnerability in the same way Rescuers deny their needs. Their greatest fear is powerlessness. Because they judge and deny their own inadequacy, fear and vulnerability, they will need some place else to project these disowned feelings. In other words, they need a victim. They need someone they perceive as weak to prove to themselves that their own destructively painful story about the world is true. Both Rescuers and Persecutors unconsciously “need” a Victim in order to sustain their idea of who they are and what the world is like.

SGP’s also tend to compensate for inner feelings of worthlessness by putting on grandiose airs. Grandiosity inevitably comes from shame. It is a compensation

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and cover-up for deep inferiority. Superiority is the attempt to swing hard to the other side of “less than” in order to come across as “better than.”

It is most difficult for someone in Persecutor 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 constantly fight for survival. There is a constant struggle to protect themselves in what they perceive as a hostile world.

Joseph was from a prominent, wealthy family. His parents divorced and his father was angry, remote and used his money to control others. His mother was an alcoholic who brought home men who abused her and Joseph throughout his pre-adolescent and adolescent years. He, early on, learned that his only chance for survival was to fight. Joseph plowed through life with his head down the way a bull rages across a bullfighters pen. He constructed his life so that there was always an enemy that had to be fought.

On the outside, Joseph exhibited a swash-buckling, “I don’t give a damn” persona – he was ever ready to gamble or take careless risks with his health. But on the inside, he was bitter and unhappy. He shared with me how exhausted he felt from a belief that he needed to maintain constant vigilance; he felt a desperate need to keep a watchful eye out for those who wanted to hurt him or his loved ones.

Joseph was constantly involved in court battles and even out and out, physical brawls. He was always having to get himself out of one “scrape” after another. To his way of thinking these occurrences were always somebody else’s fault. He could not resist what he felt was justifiable retaliation. “I can’t let them get away with it!” was his most common response.

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Joseph saw himself as someone who did not get the protection he deserved. This belief justified taking matters into his own hands. At least that's how he saw it. He trusted no-one. Not even his parents had been reliable, so who could he depend on? This attitude prompted him to be in constant defense mode. He had to be ready for the next attack!

Joseph is an example of a classic Starting Gate Persecutor. It is easy to think that Persecutors are "bad" people. They are not. They are simply wounded individuals who see the world as dangerous. This requires that they be ever ready to strike back. They live in constant defensive reaction.

It is always difficult for SGP's to perceive themselves as persecutors. It is much easier to justify the necessity for persecution (thereby identifying with victim) than to own the oppressor role. The SGP cycle looks something like: "I was just trying to help (rescuer), and they turned on me (victim), so I had to defend myself by striking back (persecutor)."

It can feel very threatening for someone stuck in Persecutor consciousness to get really honest with themselves. To do so feels like blaming themselves, which only intensifies their internal condemnation. SGP's need to have a situation or person they can blame so they can stay angry. Anger, for a SGP, can act as a fuel within the psyche to energize them. It may be the only way they have of dealing with chronic depression. SGP's often need a jolt of rage the same way other people depend on a shot of caffeine. It jump-starts their day and provides them with the energy needed to keep them on their feet.

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

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Ironically, a main exit way off the triangle is through the persecutor position. This does not mean we become persecutors. It does mean however, that once we decide to get off the triangle, there most likely will be those who see us as persecutors. ("How can you do this to me?") Once we decide to take self-responsibility and tell our truth, those still on the triangle 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?" a primary enabler storms when their 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.

Victim

The role of Starting Gate Victim is also a shadow aspect. It is the wounded shadow of our inner child; that part of us that is innocent, vulnerable AND needy. This child-self does need support on occasion – that's natural. It's only when we become convinced that we can't take care of ourselves, that we move into Victim. Believing that we are frail, powerless or defective keeps us needing rescue. This relegates us to a lifetime of crippling dependency on our primary relationships.

A SGV has accepted a definition of themselves that says they are intrinsically damaged and incapable. SGV's project an attitude of being weak, fragile or not smart enough; basically, "I can't do it by myself." Their greatest fear is that they won't make it. That anxiety forces them to be always on the lookout for someone stronger or more capable to take care of them.

SGV's deny both their problem solving abilities and their potential for self-generated power. Instead they tend to see themselves as inept at handling life. Feeling done in by, at the mercy of, mistreated, intrinsically defective or "wrong," they see themselves as broken and unfixable. This doesn't prevent them from

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feeling highly resentful towards those on who they depend. As much as they insist on being taken care of by their primary rescuers ... they nonetheless do not appreciate being reminded of their inadequacy.

The very thing a Rescuer seeks (validation and appreciation) is the thing Victims most resent giving because it is a reminder to them of their own deficiencies. Instead they resent the help that is given. SGV's eventually get tired of being in the one-down position and begin to find ways to feel equal. Unfortunately this usually involves some form of "getting even."

For a SGV, a move to persecutor on the triangle usually means sabotaging the efforts made to rescue them, often through passive-aggressive behavior. For example, they are skilled at playing a game called, "Yes, but"

It works like this...

The SGV's rescuer offers a helpful suggestion to some complaint or problem voiced by the Victim. The SGV immediately turns the suggestion on its ear with a response like; "Yes, but that won't work because ...". The SGV then proceeds to "yes, but" any and all suggestions, as the Rescuer tries, in vain, to come up with a solution. The SGV is determined to prove that their problem is unsolvable, thus stumping the Rescuer, leaving them to feel as impotent as the SGV innately feels. They may also resort to the persecutor role as a way to blame or manipulate others into taking care of them.

Convinced of their intrinsic incompetence, SGV's live in a perpetual shame spiral, often leading to self abuse. Abuse of drugs, alcohol and food, as well as gambling and out of control spending are just a few of the self defeating behaviors practiced by SGV's. SGV's walk around much like the Charlie Brown character, Pig-Pen in his whirlwind of dust, except Victims live in a vortex of

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shame of their own making. This cloud of defectiveness 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. Convinced of Linda's ineptitude and thinking she was being helpful, Stella bailed Linda out every time she got into trouble. By constantly alleviating the natural consequences of Linda's choices, Stella's earnest enabling deprived Linda of the opportunity to learn from her mistakes. As a result, Linda came to see herself as increasingly incompetent and grew more dependent on others. Her mother's well-intentioned rescuing sent a crippling message that promoted a life long Victim stance for Linda.

Since SGV's are often the identified problem in their family, it's natural for them to seek outside professional help first. Often they are dragged to their first counseling session by distressed family members. SGV's tend to be ever on the look out for yet another Rescuer, and SGR's abound among helping professionals. In this case, the professional may find themselves inadvertently hooked on the triangle with a practiced, and very convincing, victim. This means the real issue never gets addressed.

Those in primary Victim roles must learn to assume responsibility for themselves and initiate self-care, rather than look outside themselves for a savior. They must challenge the ingrained belief that they can't take care of themselves if they are to escape the triangle. Instead of seeing themselves as powerless, they must acknowledge their problem solving as well as their leadership capabilities.

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For it is true that no matter who may try to “save us,” as a SGV – no matter how much money they give or how sincere our intentions to “do better” may be, playing the part of victim always leads to only one place – straight back to Victim. It’s an endless cycle of feeling defeated and worthless. There is no escape except to take total responsibility for our own feelings, thoughts and reactions.

Starting Gate Beliefs

Each starting gate position has a “script” made to order for their particular dance around the triangle. These “scripts” consist of a particular set of beliefs through which the world and ourselves are seen.

The Rescuer Story

Rescuers believe that their needs are unimportant and irrelevant. This means that the only way they can legitimately connect with others, feel valued and have their needs met is through the back door of care-taking. Rescuers chastise themselves when they aren’t care-taking others. Their starting gate story is; “If I take care of others well enough and long enough, then I will be fulfilled. It’s the only way to be loved.” Unfortunately, Rescuers are involved with life-time Victims who have no idea of how to be there for them. This reinforces the SG Rescuer’s story that says they shouldn’t be needy, which then produces more shame and deeper denial surrounding their own needs.

The Victim Story

Guilt and shame are the driving forces for the perpetuation of the Triangle. Guilt is often used by Victims in an effort to manipulate their Rescuers into taking care of them: “If you don’t do it, who will?” The Victims’ story says they can’t make it on their own and they prove it to themselves over and over on the triangle. They believe that they are innately defective and incapable and so spend their lives on

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the look-out for someone to “save” them. Though this is what they feel they must have, i.e., a savior, they are simultaneously angry at their rescuers because they feel put down by and looked down on by their caretakers.

The Persecutor Story

Persecutors who believe the world is dangerous, use fear and intimidation as tools for keeping others in their place. What they don't see is how their methods for providing “safety” end up proving to them that life is indeed as dangerous as they believe it to be. Their story says that they are innocent bystanders in a dangerous world where others are always out to hurt them. It's survival of the fittest and their only chance is to strike first. This story keeps them in perpetual defense/offense modus operandi.

Shadows of Victim-hood

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, or shadow aspects, of victim-hood.

Persecutor — VICTIM — Rescuer

All three roles are distorted expressions of positive powers that we, as humans possess, but deny or repress when living on the triangle. Identifying what our starting gate position is on the triangle can help us recognize the aspects of ourselves we deny.

For instance, when we see ourselves primarily as mediators and caretakers, we deny our own power by setting inappropriate boundaries. We occupy the Rescuer position.

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SGR's have a natural capacity for organizing, as well as a wonderful nurturing ability. But when a SGR denies herself the benefit of these abilities – when she refuses to nurture or set priorities for herself ... then she will find herself obsessing about and intervening (or interfering) in the lives of others – most often in unhealthy ways. She becomes someone who takes responsibility for everyone but herself.

These characteristics are commonly thought of as being primarily feminine characteristics – so the SGR can be seen as a distorted expression of the feminine aspect.

The Persecutor, on the other hand, has a deep-seated sense of justice. He believes in the use of power and assertiveness. There is nothing innately wrong with these abilities; they are in fact, important in self care. Yet a SGP will exercise these gifts in twisted ways. When these essentially male qualities of protection, guidance and boundary setting are not fully acknowledged and claimed – when they are denied, they end up being expressed in unconscious and irresponsible ways – thus a SGP can be seen as a distorted expression of the masculine aspect.

Attack, for the SGP, becomes the accepted way to express these powers and is then justified as a necessary defense. Simultaneously, a SGP will see themselves only as the innocent victim ... “They hurt me – I had to protect myself by retaliating.” It's hard for any of us to admit we mistreat people. Persecutors justify their hurtful behavior with “good reasons” (“... because they did something to me” or “took something from me”) and this makes it okay, in their minds, to hurt “back.” This is typical Persecutor mentality. SGP's have suppressed their caring, nurturing qualities, and instead, tend to problem solve through anger, abuse and control.

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Here's a typical example, that might easily show up in relationship ...

Don came home late for dinner. Ann, his wife, was angry. She had prepared a good meal and it was still sitting, uneaten and cold, an hour later. Like many SGP's, Ann's tendency is to assume the worse ("He did this to me") and attack. So instead of checking in with her husband, she immediately launches into; "You told me you would be here on time. You lied! I can never trust you to tell me the truth." When Don tries to explain that he got stuck in traffic, Ann is not listening. Instead she justifies her reaction, "You always have excuses! You expect me to believe you. You're a liar ... " She continues to hurl insults, even resorting to name calling. Later, she explained that he had hurt her and therefore deserved the way she treated him. This is classic Persecutor reasoning.

Because Ann sees herself as a victim who doesn't have the right to take care of herself or set boundaries. Instead of saying something like, "Hi Sweetheart, I had dinner ready on time; when you didn't get here, I went ahead and ate mine and left yours warming on the stove," she resorts to retaliation. Her belief that she is at the mercy of someone who is trying to hurt her keeps her striking out in a distorted and unnecessary effort to protect herself.

When we have suppressed both sides ... denying both our innate ability to take care of ourselves through healthy nurturing and the right to take protective, assertive action, we are left in Victim. As a matter of fact, a good definition for a SGV might be; someone who does not know how to set priorities or boundaries, nor nurtures and protects themselves.

As individuals grow in awareness and begin to alter their behavior, they often change their starting-gate positions. Becoming aware of a primary position, they may commit to getting off the triangle but often merely switch roles instead. Although they may be operating from a different starting gate, they are

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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.

Consequences of Triangular Living

Living on the victim triangle creates misery and suffering no matter what your primary starting gate position may be. The cost is tremendous for all three roles and leads to emotional, mental and even physical pain. Efforts to avoid pain, by blaming or looking for someone to take care of us, only ends up generating greater pain in the end. When we try to shield others from the truth, (rescue) we discount their abilities and this creates more pain. Everyone involved in triangular dynamics ends up hurt and angry at some point; no-one wins. There are characteristics of and consequences to being on the triangle that all three roles bear in common. Let's talk about a few of them.

Lack of Personal Responsibility

Whenever we fail to take responsibility for ourselves, we end up on the triangle. Not even Rescuers, who pride themselves on being responsible, take responsibility for themselves. They take care of everyone else, but have no idea of how to do it for themselves. Not taking responsibility is a key identifying factor in recognizing when we are on the triangle. Persecutors shift responsibility by blaming others for their misery. Victims look for someone else to take responsibility for them. Not one of the three roles take responsibility for themselves.

As long as we chase ourselves and others around the triangle, we relegate ourselves to living in reaction. Rather than living spontaneously and free through self-responsibility and personal choice, we settle into dull and painful lives ruled by the agendas of others and our own unconscious beliefs. To experience a

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fulfilling life requires a conscious willingness to get off the triangle and extend grace to those still encumbered by their drama.

Painful Beliefs Rule

Unhealthy beliefs about ourselves and the world, instilled in childhood, become rigid rules that may 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,” are some of the old beliefs that have ruled us and must be challenged if we are to find inner peace. We can expect, and even celebrate, uncomfortable feelings when they come up for us, learning to see them as opportunities for freeing ourselves of the painful beliefs that keep us trapped on the triangle.

Sometimes we simply need to sit with an uncomfortable feeling – such as guilt, without acting on it. Guilt does not necessarily imply that we have behaved wrong or unethically. Guilt is often a learned response. Sometimes guilt just means that we’ve broken a dysfunctional family

I’m reminded of a story that has circulated among therapeutic circles for years about the way to cook a ham. Perhaps you remember it too. It goes like this:

A little girl noticed her mother cutting the butt end off the ham to cook it for the family holiday dinner and asked, “Why do you cut off the end to cook it?” The mother without giving it a moment’s thought, replied, “Why, this is the way my mother always cooked a ham, so I know it’s the right way to do it!” Well, the little girl’s grandmother happened to live close by, so she visited her and asked her the same question, “Grandma, why do you cut the butt end off the ham before you cook it?” Her grandmother replied that her mother had taught her to cook a ham like that. Great granny happened to be visiting for the holiday so the little girl went to her and asked the same question – and this time she got the “real” answer – “Child, when I was cooking hams back then, I only owned one baking

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pan and it was too small to hold a whole ham so I would cut the butt end off the ham to make it fit!"

This is how it works. We follow, without question, family dictums and internalized beliefs that generate nothing but misery.

Painful Feelings

Frequently we get on the triangle through the port of painful feelings. It seems that many of us tend to let painful feelings rule us. We think a thought and it triggers guilt or fear, which prompts us to react in a way that puts us back on the triangle. Our reaction is usually a misguided attempt to control or get rid of the painful feeling so that we can "feel better."

For instance, we may rescue others as a way of both keeping ourselves and them from feeling bad. We tell ourselves things like, "She can't handle it" or, "It will hurt his feelings", so we "handle it" for them. We may notice that we feel better when we are fixing someone else – it gives us a false sense of being in control which feels temporarily empowering. We may fail to recognize that our increased sense of power is often at the expense of the other, leaving them feeling disempowered and "less than."

An Example

Sam believed his son, Paul to be inept. The words he actually used to describe him were, "He's stupid. He will never make it in the world." As a result, Sam's primary relating pattern with his son was as his primary Rescuer. Believing Paul was stupid brought feelings of guilt, apprehension and duty towards his son. "He's my son and I must provide for him ... I must guide and advise him and bail him out of all the scrapes he gets himself into because he's too stupid to run his own life. I will just have to do it for him." These were some of Sam's thoughts.

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And so he did.

Meanwhile, Paul had bought into the story too. He shared his father's perception that said he couldn't make it on his own. Believing that he was basically lacking in fundamental life skills created feelings of inadequacy and failure for Paul. The whole relationship between this father and son was based on the severely limited definition that they shared about Paul's lack of ability to do well in life.

So, how do you think someone like Paul, who believes he's truly inept, will live his life? What sorts of choices would you expect someone to make who sees himself as incapable and lacking? With such painful beliefs about himself, how could Paul make anything but "foolish" choices! And every time he does, he ends up verifying his father's story about Paul.

As long as these two share such a painfully limiting story about Paul, their relationship will remain on the triangle – Paul "screwing up" and Sam fixing it for him.

I can hear some of you asking, "But Lynne, what if it's true? What if Paul is totally incompetent?"

I only know this... it is our beliefs that make it so. We treat others according to what we believe about them. When we challenge these assumptions, our interaction with that person changes.

For instance, the whole dynamic between Sam and Paul changed as Sam began to examine his beliefs about his son. He began to treat his son with new respect once he was able to get honest with himself about his previously denied need to keep Paul dependent. He began to let his son experience the natural consequences of his own choices instead of rescuing and then berating him for making "dumb decisions." As a result Paul began to learn from his mistakes.

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Sam's relationship with Paul completely transformed simply because Sam chose to take responsibility for his own feelings and beliefs. By giving up playing Rescuer Sam was able to move off the triangle into a more satisfying and authentic daily exchange with his son.

We may attempt to manage the emotional affairs of others by keeping our opinions, feelings and thoughts hidden, even from ourselves at times. This can end up costing us our own well-being and inevitably creates distance between ourselves and the other. It is just one more way we continue the dance around the triangle.

What made Sam's move off the triangle possible was his recognition that his feelings were created by his own beliefs. He came to understand that his behavior was always determined by whatever thoughts he was believing at the time.

This is key to moving off the triangle. When we believe painful stories about who we are, like, "I'm only loved for what I do for others" or, "I don't matter," or when we hold distorted beliefs about those around us, like, "They're trying to hurt me" or "They can't take care of themselves," these personal convictions will prompt us to act as if they are true. Our painful feelings originate out of our limited ideas about ourselves and others. They cause us to react in ways that end up proving that what we believe is true. This is the vicious cycle of life on the triangle.

Denial

Anytime we deny our feelings we set ourselves up for a victim perspective. Feelings are real. They are "energy-in-motion." When we discount or undermine our emotions we end up overtaken by them, becoming impulsive reactors. We can't take responsibility for ourselves when we refuse to acknowledge our

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feelings, which means that these disavowed “inner tyrants” will go on driving our behavior from behind the scenes.

Although it is true that our feelings are generated by what we believe, feelings are nonetheless important. They alert us when we are thinking unhappy thoughts; feeling “bad,” for instance, lets us know we are thinking a most unhappy, possibly distorted, belief. Instead of denying the feeling, we learn to follow the feeling in to the belief behind it. This is where true intervention is possible. The feeling dissipates once the belief behind it is made conscious and addressed. We learn to recognize that our feelings are what point us to the limiting beliefs that are keeping us stuck on the triangle.

Parents who never learned that feelings follow thought and who grew up without permission to acknowledge or express feelings often deny their children the same right. They may have decided early in life that certain feelings are wrong or bad, so they deny and repress them without examining the ruling thoughts behind the feelings.

Telling ourselves that our feelings are unacceptable does not make them go away. As long as we continue to attach belief to painful stories about ourselves and others we will go on generating these same negative feelings. When suppressed, these denied emotions become secret pockets of shame within the psyche. They only serve to alienate us from others and sentence us to a life on the triangle.

Sometimes we deny feelings in an ill-fated attempt to avoid feeling bad. Perhaps we tell ourselves that we can't handle our feelings, that they are too much for us. We may think we are at the mercy of our own misery because we don't know from where these feelings come or what to do with, or about them. Maybe it is better to stay away from these messy inner states under such circumstances.

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But when we know that it's our thoughts that produce painful feelings; that indeed our unhappy feelings act as gateways into greater understanding of ourselves – then we no longer have the need to suppress uncomfortable feelings. Until we are able recognize and grasp the implications of these simple truths however, we may go on trying to escape pain using various suppression tactics. These attempts at avoidance only keep us on the triangle where the guaranteed outcome is suffering and misery.

Dishonesty

Getting honest with ourselves is the most basic requirement for getting off the triangle. Getting off the triangle is impossible without self-honesty. Telling our truth is a key way of taking responsibility. We then must be willing to take necessary action for whatever that truth reveals.

Of course, when feelings are denied, honesty is impossible. Remember that denial comes out of negative self judgment. If we have decided on some level that we cannot accept our thoughts, behavior or feelings than, chances are, we will not be able to admit we have them. It's too painful to admit something about ourselves that we have judged as unacceptable. We must practice self acceptance if we are truly going to be able to be honest with ourselves and others.

In order for a SG Rescuer to get honest, for instance, they have to be willing to confess their previously unconscious need to keep others dependent on them. This means acknowledging that being a rescuer is what they do to get their own need for self-worth met. As long as the Rescuer continues to see the other as a weak, ineffectual and inept victim, they will continue to deceive themselves into believing that they must be the fixer and caretaker. Their own needs will not be recognized or met.

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In the same way, a SG Persecutor is being dishonest when they insist on blaming others for their misery and suffering. There is no way off the triangle for a Persecutor as long as they insist on seeing themselves as blameless, innocent bystanders who have been unjustly treated.

In order for a SG Victim to get off the triangle, they must confess their investment in staying “little,” i.e. dependent and needy. This means getting honest about how they manipulate others, using a self-deprecating story of ineptness, in order to get taken care of. Otherwise they will fall deeper and deeper into a downward spiral of despair and unworthiness.

Living in reality requires truth. To tell the truth, we first must first know what it is. When we react out of denied feelings and unconscious programming, we cannot possibly know our personal truth. This means we will not be in touch with reality. 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 integrity. Then exiting the triangle becomes possible.

Projection

We tend to deny feelings and beliefs that we have judged as negative or unacceptable. As previously mentioned, we rescue ourselves by pushing these unacceptable parts into the dark unconscious. They don't necessarily stay there, however. Whatever thoughts and feelings we don't own, i.e., take responsibility for, will end up being projected out into our world, usually on someone we “love.” As soon as we judge some thought or feeling within us as unacceptable, we will unconsciously look around and find someone who has these same traits and hate them for it. This is called projection and it is a propelling force on the triangle. Projection ensures that the victim dance continues.

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Lisa and Ted came in for couples counseling. In gathering their history, I learned that Lisa had a father who raged often throughout her childhood. She was afraid of anger as a result and did not allow herself to feel or express her own ill-humor. She judged anger as “bad” and denied that she had any. It’s probably no surprise then that Lisa’s biggest complaint about her husband was his “short fuse.” “He’s so angry all the time,” she said. “He just wants to argue about everything!”

Her husband, Ted came across as upfront, open, and communicative. He reported that he had not felt heard in his family growing up and expressed frustration with Lisa because, “Any time I disagree with her, no matter how calmly I express it, she accuses me of being angry and refuses to discuss it. It ends up that the only way I can get heard is to blow up!”

Can you place these two on the triangle? Let’s take a look:

Let’s start with Lisa, who was on the triangle before a single word was spoken out loud between her and her husband. She started out by judging her own anger (persecuting herself) and then denying it (rescuing herself). Lisa is on the triangle with herself. She rescues herself through denial. Denial is always an attempt to rescue ourselves. Lisa has learned to shut her anger down so quickly that she does not even register it consciously. But that angry energy has got to go somewhere.

That’s where Ted enters the picture. Lisa needs someplace to project her disowned anger. Ted is the perfect fit. Lisa sees in Ted the angry self that she has denied. This is why she is so quick to label the slightest dissent from him as “bad” anger. She then castigates Ted for the “bad” feelings that she has projected and proceeds to criticize him harshly (persecutor) in the same way she has unconsciously judged herself.

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Ted, just as when he was a child, feels misunderstood and unheard at first. He is in victim. But before long his anger arises and he moves into persecutor by “blowing up” at Lisa. This moves Lisa into victim, prompting her to remember the “angry dad” of her childhood. Both Ted and Lisa are unconsciously validating their own childhood dramas by projecting their painful beliefs and judgments about themselves onto one another. These sorts of interactions are why I call the victim triangle the “playing field” for all dysfunction.

You may wonder where the rescuer is in all this melee. Sometimes a role is played “beneath the surface.” It may not be externally evident as in the case described above. Because Lisa cannot take responsibility for her own anger (because to see herself as being “bad like dad” would be too painful) she rescues herself through denial. She takes herself off the hook by projecting her unwanted feelings onto her husband. This allows her to pretend she’s not angry (he’s the angry one, not her). On one level it feels better to believe that she’s not mean and angry like her dad was. The shadow consequences, however are that it sets her up to blame and persecute Ted and allows her to stay unconscious about her own personal anger. This is the nature of projection on the triangle.

Ego and The Story of Who We Are

We interact with others through old, unconsciously held and limiting beliefs that generate shame. Each starting gate position has a distinct type of core belief that drives their particular dance around the triangle. These core beliefs combine into unconscious stories. We believe these descriptions of ourselves and others without ever questioning them. Left to run unabated in the mind, they generate all sorts of painful feelings, including worthlessness, inadequacy and defectiveness. We reinforce and perpetuate these beliefs by moving around the triangle.

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The ego is that part of us that manufactures and believes these limiting stories. The ego is totally identified with the stories it tells and wants to keep us identified with them as well. The ego uses the triangle to strengthen these painfully, limited identities of who we are. When I think of our relationship with ego I often think of the nursery rhyme that goes:

“Peter, Peter Pumpkin Eater, had a wife and couldn’t keep her. So he put her in a pumpkin shell and there he kept her very well.”

This is a great metaphor for our relationship with the ego. Peter Pumpkin Eater is the ego and the wife he couldn’t keep is our own Inner Feminine. She is that part of us who remembers who we really are. The only way Ego can control this Authentic Essence is to keep it confined in the “pumpkin shell” of a limiting story. We are each held within the confines of such a story. The victim triangle is the playing field that ego uses for the purpose of reinforcing this dysfunctional story.

We certainly can see this with Ted and Lisa. They each were entrapped within a very painful story; Ted believing that he will not be heard and therefore expecting to have his feelings judged and discounted. He is in the role of a SG Victim who inadvertently acts in ways that guarantee he will come away feeling ashamed and worthless. Lisa is the SG Persecutor who sees herself as a victim. She believes Ted is trying to hurt her with his anger which justifies her attempts to control him. Lisa punishes Ted by ignoring him until he finally strikes out, thus verifying her story about him as being “angry and cruel, just like dad.” Both have egos that are much more interested in verifying a limiting story than in feeling harmony between them.

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Failed Intimacy

Although most of us long for a sense of connection with others, many people are secretly terrified of intimacy. Allowing someone to really know us can be frightening. Intimacy requires vulnerability and honesty. Believing at heart that we are unlovable, defective or “less than,” makes it difficult to reveal ourselves. We want unconditional acceptance, but when we haven’t accepted ourselves, it’s impossible to believe that anyone else could love us. Needing to hide our unworthiness makes 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. Intimacy is not possible on the triangle.

In Summary

When we are ready to be accountable, we begin to sort through our genuine motives and feelings regarding our present situation. We become willing to experience our own uncomfortable feelings and we allow others their uncomfortable feelings too, without rescuing them.

If our loved ones or associates are also willing to participate in this process of self-realization we can cultivate a healthier relationship together. As a result there is less and less interaction based on guilt, fear or shame.

The good news is that whether or not our loved ones choose to get off the triangle, we can make that choice for ourselves! And that will change the whole dynamic between you and them. We are never victims, except by choice.

Getting off means knowing where you stand right now and being willing to negotiate boundaries when necessary. Setting boundaries is not about being in control or manipulating outcomes. We sometimes confuse the two. We learn to

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look closely at our motives with an attitude of curiosity and the desire for deeper self-understanding. And then whatever we do, when done from a connected space, even if it is to walk away, will have a better chance of being based in truth rather than drama.

Remember there will be times when we may be seen as the persecutor. Our challenge is to stay in touch with our truth and allow others the right (and they do have the right) to have their story. The two versions; your story and their story, do not have to match for you to be happy. That's a common, but mistaken, idea.

In reality, how others see us is not our concern. How we see ourselves is what can bring us transformation. We learn to focus on what we are believing. We notice the impact in own lives of believing those particular, and often painful, thoughts – beliefs like, “I’m only as important as what I can do for others,” or “They’re trying to hurt me,” or “I’m a total failure.” These are just a few of the stories with which we torture ourselves.

Remember that just because we believe these stories does not make them true. But when we do believe them, we will act in ways that make them true! This is a profound and simple dawning of consciousness that holds a key to the door off the triangle. Used with sincere desire and rigorous, self-loving truth, these steps are the process that takes us all the way, straight through to the “Off” exit. As we liberate ourselves through self-responsibility and truth telling, we transform our lives. We actualize our higher, “Observer Self,” thus realizing the possibility that lies within each of us to live, not out of an victim-ego story, but to expand into a much bigger and more wonderful experience of life.

Getting off the triangle is not something we do once and for all. We get on and off all the time. Understanding tools like Stephen Karpman’s victim triangle brings us a map. It shows us where we are in our relational life and where we’re headed.

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Studying this map helps us find the best route for getting off the triangle. Again, it's a process, not a final destination. I invite you to relax into the role of curious, creative explorer, and willing student.

May your thoughts and feelings be teachers for you as you travel the route to freedom from the triangle.”