



# Breaking Free from the Drama Triangle

## A Trauma-Informed Perspective on Relationship Roles, Survival Strategies, and Healing

### Trauma-Informed Foundation

A trauma-informed approach recognizes:

- behaviors are often adaptations, not character flaws
- nervous systems learn survival strategies
- people move into roles for protection, connection, or safety
- shame rarely creates healing
- awareness, compassion, and regulation create change

### IMPORTANT TRAUMA-INFORMED SHIFT

#### Instead of asking:

“What’s wrong with you?”

We ask:

“What happened to you?”

and

“What helped you survive?”

### Relationship Patterns

Many of the patterns we struggle with in relationships are not random.

They are often intelligent survival adaptations developed in environments where:

- emotions felt unsafe,
- needs were dismissed,

- conflict was unpredictable,
- or love felt conditional

This is not about blaming ourselves or others.

It's about recognizing how our nervous systems learned to protect us—and how some of those protections may now be keeping us stuck.

## **The Drama Triangle as Survival**

### **THE VICTIM ROLE**

#### **Trauma-Informed Understanding**

This role often develops when someone experienced:

- helplessness
- emotional invalidation
- chronic criticism
- abandonment
- unpredictable caregiving
- coercive control

The nervous system may learn:

“I have no power.”

“Nothing I do changes things.”

“I am unsafe.”

#### **Reframe**

Instead of:

“They're playing the victim.”

Consider:

“They may still be carrying unresolved helplessness.”

### **THE RESCUER ROLE**

#### **Trauma-Informed Understanding**

This role often develops in people who learned:

- love must be earned
- caregiving creates safety
- others' emotions are their responsibility
- conflict must be prevented
- self-sacrifice prevents abandonment

Often associated with:

- parentification
- emotionally immature caregivers
- chaotic homes
- hypervigilance

## **Nervous System State**

The Rescuer is often operating from:

- anxiety
- hyper-responsibility
- fear of rejection
- fear of conflict
- fear of being “bad”

## **THE PERSECUTOR ROLE**

### **Trauma-Informed Understanding**

This role often emerges when vulnerability feels unsafe.

Underneath anger is often:

- shame
- fear
- powerlessness
- humiliation
- unmet attachment needs

### **Important Clarification**

Understanding behavior is not the same as excusing harm.

Trauma explains behavior. It does not remove accountability.

## **THE NERVOUS SYSTEM CONNECTION**

**Fight • Flight • Freeze • Fawn**

### **Role Connections**

**Persecutor → Fight**

Control, criticism, aggression

**Victim → Freeze/Collapse**

Hopelessness, shutdown, helplessness

### **Rescuer → Fawn**

Over-helping, appeasing, over-functioning

When we understand the nervous system, we stop seeing these patterns as moral failures.

We begin seeing them as adaptive responses that once helped someone survive emotional pain, instability, fear, or disconnection.

## **Trauma-Informed Healing Shifts**

### **Victim → Creator**

“What small choice helps me reclaim agency?”

### **Rescuer → Supporter**

“How can I care without abandoning myself?”

### **Persecutor → Assertive Challenger**

“How can I express pain without attacking?”

## **IMPORTANT TRAUMA-INFORMED MESSAGE**

Healing does not mean:

- never getting triggered
- never overreacting
- never struggling

Healing means:

- recognizing patterns sooner
- regulating more effectively
- taking accountability more gently
- staying connected to yourself during conflict

## **Exercise:**

### **Questions**

- Which role protected you most growing up?
- What did that role help you survive?
- What is the cost of continuing it today?
- What would safety feel like now?

# CLOSING

Many of the behaviors we judge in ourselves were once attempts to stay connected, protected, or emotionally safe.

Healing begins when we stop asking:

“Why am I like this?”

and start asking:

“What happened to me...

and what do I need now?”

# **FAMILY SYSTEMS & ROLE RECREATION**

## **Childhood Roles Reappear**

### **Common Reenactments**

#### **The Peacemaker**

Becomes the adult who keeps everyone comfortable while losing themselves.

#### **The Scapegoat**

Continues attracting blame, exclusion, or invalidation in friendships/workplaces.

#### **The Parentified Child**

Feels overly responsible for everyone's emotions.

#### **The Invisible Child**

Struggles to express needs or take up space.

## **GROUP/FRIENDSHIP REENACTMENTS**

Trauma reenactment doesn't only happen romantically.

People often recreate familiar family dynamics in:

- friendships,
- workplaces,
- communities,
- therapy relationships,
- and group settings.

### **Example**

Someone raised in emotionally unpredictable systems may:

- over-accommodate groups,
- fear exclusion,
- tolerate disrespect,
- work excessively for belonging,
- or remain loyal long after reciprocity disappears.

Because the nervous system learned: connection must be earned.

## **THE "TRY HARDER" TRAP**

## The Wound Keeps Negotiating

### Common Internal Beliefs

- “If I explain myself better...”
- “If I love harder...”
- “If I accommodate more...”
- “If I prove my value...”

...then maybe the relationship will finally feel safe.

### Important Insight

Present relationships often activate older emotional memory networks.

The reaction may feel “too big” because:  
the nervous system is responding to both:

- the present,
- and unresolved past experiences simultaneously.

## SOMATIC AWARENESS EXERCISE

### Exercise:

“Think about a relationship pattern that keeps repeating.

Notice:

- What emotions arise?
- What sensations appear in your body?
- Tightness?
- Urgency?
- Fear?
- Shame?
- Hopefulness mixed with anxiety?

Often the body reveals the age of the wound before the mind fully understands it.

## WHY HEALING CAN FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE

### Healthy Can Feel Unfamiliar

As healing occurs:

- chaos may feel less attractive
- intensity may stop feeling like love
- peace may initially feel uncomfortable
- boundaries may create guilt

- reciprocity may feel unfamiliar

Healing often requires grieving:

- what we normalized,
- what we tolerated,
- and what we hoped would eventually change.

## **MOVING TOWARD HEALING**

### **Awareness Interrupts Repetition**

### **Healing Questions**

- What feels familiar to me?
- What role do I repeatedly play?
- What am I still trying to earn?
- What would mutuality feel like?
- What does safety feel like in my body?

## **TRAUMA-INFORMED CLOSING**

People often recreate emotionally familiar dynamics not because they are broken...

but because unresolved pain quietly searches for resolution.

Healing begins when awareness replaces automatic reenactment.

## **FINAL QUOTE**

Sometimes the hardest realization is this:

You were never asking for too much.

You were trying to receive from emotionally limited people  
what should have been freely given all along.