

THREESOMES

Using a Love Triangle to Ease Tension

LEARN HOW TO RECOGNIZE YOUR **HERO**, **VICTIM**, AND **VILLAIN**.

RECENTLY, MY HUSBAND AND I decided to purchase our first home together, and I set about educating myself about the market. I trolled the Internet for hours and shamelessly peeked into empty (and sometimes inhabited) properties, trying to imagine myself living there. I treated every new “house for sale” sign like a dog spotting a squirrel, so it didn’t take long to notice a pattern develop between us: Me looking through rose-colored possibility glasses, my husband seeing immediate flaws.

Me: Wow, look at this view.

He: We’re right across from the power station.

Me: Check out the kitchen in this one.

He: Your neighbors are only 10 feet away.

It soon became touchy. No matter how often I asked him to remain open while I “tried on” different houses, he couldn’t bring himself to waste his energy on an obvious “No.”

We were in what is called a “persona lock.”

Personas are an extension of the Drama Triangle (see sidebar), a system for understanding social and psychological interactions that was made popular by transactional analyst Stephen Karpman, MD. Hero, Victim, and Villain—my adaptation of Karpman’s three positions—play out in each of us to greater and lesser degrees. As I like to tell my clients, “The only way off the triangle . . . is through,” because each position holds essential wisdom. Learning to express from all of our highly subjective persona perspectives often clears

Your Favorite Role May be Your Blindest


The role of the Hero is to rescue another or seek temporary relief from a situation. The key word is *temporary*, as the Hero tends to keep a dynamic in place, not to resolve the real issue. You can Hero someone else (“Poor you, let me help you”) or yourself (“It’s all going to turn out okay.”) Heroes want to be of service, and that can be fun, but it inevitably leads to burnout and a dramatic jump to one—or both—of the other triangle positions.

The role of the Villain is to blame. There’s always an energetic finger pointing somewhere with Villains—either at *You* or *Them*, or even *Me*. Just like rescuing, though, blaming keeps a dynamic in place. Underneath the criticism and blame, the gift of Villain is truth telling that brings vitality. They see something “wrong” and want to right it, but are attempting to do so in an unhelpful manner.

The role of Victim is to be at the effect of a situation. They can withdraw, complain, and feel overwhelmed, helpless, and hopeless. While anger and blame are the fuel of the Villain, the Victim specializes in fear, sadness, and shame. Beyond their belief that there is something deficient or wrong with them, Victims can also be in touch with vulnerability, which is an essential ingredient for intimacy.

To learn to navigate the Drama Triangle, create separate Hero, Villain, and Victim signs on card stock. Then, as you speak about an issue, stand on each square as you explore your thoughts and feelings. You may notice that you have trouble maintaining a certain viewpoint. It is common to have an aversion to expressing your Villain or Victim, depending on how you are wired. Getting comfortable with acknowledging your least-preferred persona is key to getting unstuck in any relationship dynamic.



The Party (detail) 
Vivienne Strauss

the blocks and allows us to see a situation from fresh, more objective perspectives.

We all have dozens of Hero, Villain, and Victim personas that have various levels of information. Every persona has its own unique posture and physical gestures, facial expressions, vocal tonality, and sayings. Naming personas and consciously exaggerating them is the first step to obtaining some objectivity of their influence in our lives.

For example, my husband's highly discerning home-buyer—a Villain persona we dubbed "Nimby"—is an amazing troubleshooter. But in this circumstance, my "Dream Home" Hero persona was experimenting with what she liked in each house, not what it was missing. When Nimby immediately shot holes in her dream, her rose-colored glasses turned brown, and she morphed into a Victim we called "You Always." "You always spoil my fun. Why do you always see the negative?"

What's remarkable about the Drama Triangle is just how quickly roles can shift. When my husband and I first visited the house we ultimately bought, my generally cautious and contained guy strutted around the property, rhapsodizing over the view, chatting about putting a French door here, a new shed there. I finally turned and asked him, "Who are you? What have you done with my husband?" He smiled playfully and answered, "You can call me Vision."

Meanwhile, I had come under the influence of "No-No Nanette." As I actually faced one of the biggest decisions of my life, No-No Nanette was terrified. From her point of view, all I could notice was that there was no foyer, no walk-in closet, not enough counter space in the bathrooms.

It's important to note that each one of our personas is simply trying to get a need met. They all have areas of expertise and specific requirements in order for them to exist. For example, if you have a "People-Pleaser" persona, you require people to please. A "Loser" persona would require others to put you down. A "Righteous" persona requires situations where you make others wrong.

I should also add that it is futile to argue with a persona because each persona can only view life through its limited worldview. Have you ever tried convincing (aka Hero-ing) someone out of their (Victim) belief that their life sucks, only to have them tenaciously argue for their limitations? Then, when they absolutely refuse your clear and compassionate (Hero) wisdom, you find yourself either verbally or silently judging them to be losers (Villain)?

The key to working effectively with personas and triangle dynamics is to stay aware of *your* own role. If you find yourself pointing out somebody else's Hero, Victim, or Villain tendencies, chances are you need to claim your own.

—JOY HOSEY