

# **The Rescue Triangle**

or  
the art of being in charge of yourself  
and not controlling other people

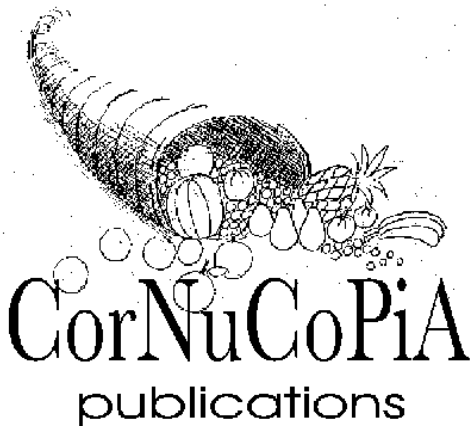
by  
JanPieter Hoogma & Teresa Tinklin

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a CornuCopia **publication**



The aim of Cornucopia Publications is to provide easy to read literature that is supportive of Co-Counselling

This publication provides an introduction to the Rescue Triangle. It forms the first two sections of a longer publication, which we are still writing. The longer version will also have chapters on socialisation, liberating yourself from the Rescue Triangle and on how to teach the Rescue Triangle. If you would like to be informed when the full publication is available, please email [teresa.tinklin@ed.ac.uk](mailto:teresa.tinklin@ed.ac.uk) or contact JanPieter Hoogma at the address below.

To receive further copies of this publication send a cheque for £1.70 made payable to CornuCopia with a stamped addressed A4 envelope to  
JanPieter Hoogma  
32-A Inverleith Place  
Edinburgh EH3 5QB  
Scotland.

Packs of 10 are available to teachers who would like to give this as a handout on Fundamentals, at a cost of £10 + £2 post and packing (UK).

Alternatively you can read it on the internet at the CornuCopia website. Its address is [www.coco-home.demon.co.uk](http://www.coco-home.demon.co.uk)

Constructive and positive feedback came from: Anne Denniss & Margaret Anderson  
Art by Anne Denniss, Lay out by JanPieter Hoogma

# Introduction

As we grow up, we naturally learn ways of controlling our environment. This includes developing patterns of behaviour that we use to control the behaviour of other people. This is not a negative process - all our patterns were developed for a positive reason, perhaps to protect us from something or to allow us to survive a particular situation. Often, however, people keep on behaving in these patterned ways when it is no longer constructive or appropriate to do so, without being aware that they are doing it. Co-Counselling helps us to become aware of our patterns so that we have more choice about how we act.

The Rescue Triangle describes common patterns that we may have learned that help us control other people's behaviour. This booklet describes those patterns and how they inter-relate with each other. Knowing about the Rescue Triangle will help you become more aware of when you or other people are acting in controlling ways. Awareness of your patterns is the first step in being able to change them.

***Knowing about the Rescue Triangle will help you become more aware of when you or other people are acting in controlling ways.***

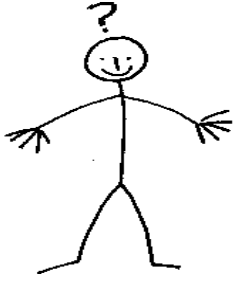
Everyone being in charge of themselves is very nice in theory but sometimes people's Rescue Triangle patterns can get in the way of this happening. Knowing about the Rescue Triangle will help you to move towards being in charge of yourself. And, as you become more in charge of yourself it is more likely that you will leave other people in charge of themselves.

***Knowing about the Rescue Triangle will help you to move towards being in charge of yourself and will help you to leave others in charge of themselves.***

## Why is the Rescue Triangle so important for Co-Counselling?

One of the basic principles of Co-Counselling is that people are responsible for themselves. If you need something, it is your responsibility to ask for it. If you don't want to do something you can say 'no'. As client you are in charge of your session: it is up to you to use your time however you want. This might mean refusing or ignoring a suggestion from your counsellor.

Everybody being responsible for themselves is very freeing: in sessions, in socialising and in relationships. If each person is in charge of themselves and you feel you can rely on them to ask for what they need and to say 'no' if they want to, you don't need to worry about how your behaviour is affecting them and you can just get on with being yourself.



## **Introducing Questabel**

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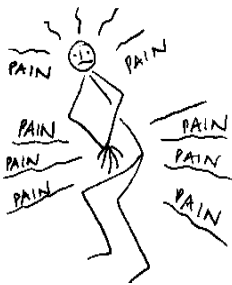
At this point, we would like to introduce you to a friend of ours, Questabel. Questabel likes to understand things so she asks lots of questions. When we think we have explained something, Questabel will come up with a question which really makes us think. Sometimes trying to answer Questabel's questions or doubts helps us to clarify for ourselves what we mean. We really like Questabel's questions, so we have included some of them in the booklet.

# What is the Rescue Triangle?

There are three roles in the Rescue Triangle. These are:

- rescuer
- aggressor
- victim

We will explain the roles first, then describe how they interact with each other. Each role may be expressed in different ways.



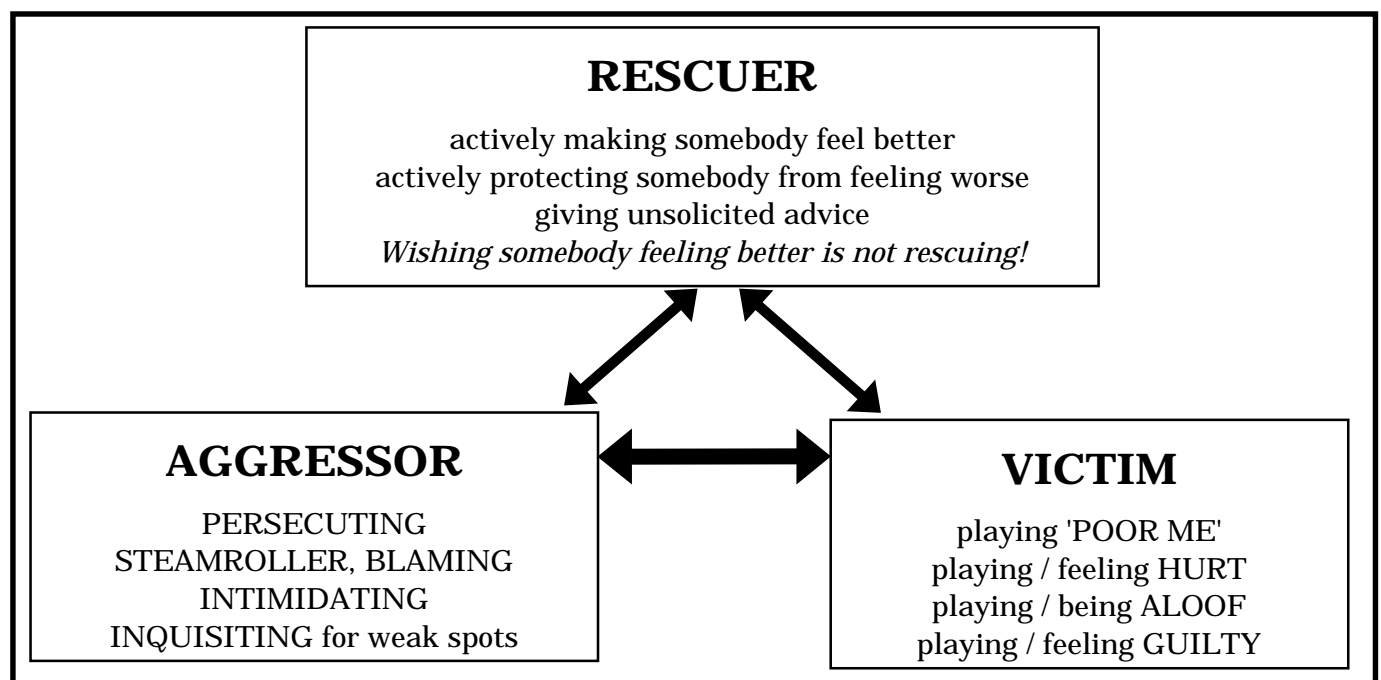
## Victim role

Someone in the victim role generally feels bad inside and powerless, although some people actively play the victim role with relish.

- Someone in the victim role feels like a victim of what is happening around them. They feel at the mercy of the situation they find themselves in. They feel hurt by things that happen and not in control of themselves and their lives. They feel sorry for themselves and think '**poor me**'.
- Or they feel **guilty** because they feel it is their fault that someone else is feeling bad or that something has gone wrong.
- Or they may act **aloof**. They act as if they are OK when in fact they don't feel OK inside. This is to avoid giving anyone information that could be used against them.

***QUESTABEL:** But you're not trying to control anyone when you feel like a victim, how does being in the victim role control or manipulate someone else's behaviour?*

Victims can be very powerful figures. People around them may feel guilty or responsible in some way for the victim's suffering and try to make them feel better or at least avoid adding to their suffering. They may act to try to keep the Victim quiet or happy which may involve denying their own needs and wishes.





## Aggressor role

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There are three versions of the aggressor role.

- The **Persecutor** harasses or oppresses others in order to control them.
- The **Intimidator** behaves in a threatening or violent way towards other people. The Intimidator uses the threat of emotional or physical violence to control the behaviour of others.
- The **Steamroller** talks loudly, is brash, insistent and intimidating, and contradicts or ignores virtually everything you say. Their overriding aim is to get their own way. They ask a lot of questions, but they are not interested in answers. Their blaming behaviour is just designed to break their victim down. If they keep on the attack maybe no-one will notice how insecure and exposed they feel.
- The **Inquisitor** also asks lots of questions, but is very interested in the answers. Inquisitors want to get information out of other people which they can use against them later. They are good at gaining trust and they use this to discover other people's weak spots.



## Rescuer role

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The Rescuer acts to stop people from feeling bad, to rescue people from some perceived harm or to prevent a situation from becoming worse. Those acting in a rescuing pattern try to make people feel better or at least prevent them from feeling worse. They try to avoid hurting other people's feelings. They try to solve other people's problems for them and often do that by giving unsolicited advice.

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## How do the roles interact with each other?

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As we have already explained, there are three roles in the Rescue Triangle - the victim, aggressor and rescuer. It's called a 'triangle' because the roles interact with each other and once you get into one role it is easy to move around the triangle into other roles. In fact, if two people both start acting in the Rescue Triangle with each other they may dance together around the triangle, each switching from one role to another and back again. Once in, especially if you are both in, it's hard to get out.

An example. Jenny gets distressed during an exercise on Fundamentals. Another course member, Rita, thinks she can see the answer to Jenny's problem and tells her what she thinks she ought to do. Jenny gets angry and tells Rita to mind her own business. Rita gets upset then and feels attacked and starts crying. Jenny then feels bad and tries to say she's really sorry and that she really likes Rita and thinks she's a great person ... They are dancing together around the triangle. The dance continues until one person 'wins' the energy of the other.

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## 'Rewards' of the Rescue Triangle

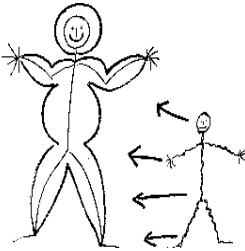
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It can be rewarding acting in the Rescue Triangle. You may actually get someone to behave in the way you want them to by bullying them or acting like you are their victim. You can also get a kick out of getting what you want from someone else. However, there is usually also a cost to getting what you want using the Rescue Triangle. For example, if you bully someone into doing the washing-up, you may get the washing-up done and feel good because you got what you wanted. The person doing it, however, will probably do it with some resentment. The risk is that they store this up and 'get you back later' or sabotage the job in some way. So getting what you want from other people using the Rescue Triangle may be rewarding in the short-term, but in the long-term there is usually a cost.

Working things out through the Rescue Triangle usually gives you a dysfunctional solution. For example, in the workplace if a manager tries to get a task done by bullying an employee, the focus of both their energies becomes the power struggle, rather than the task itself. Even worse, the task itself can become a tool in frustrating each other.

### The energy exchange

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When someone controls another person's behaviour through the Rescue Triangle, they strengthen their own energy in some way while the other person feels depleted. Have you ever felt an energy boost or a 'high' when you feel you have solved someone else's problem? Have you ever felt more secure and stronger in your relationship because you have coerced your partner into doing something for you to 'prove' their love for you? Have you ever got people's attention by acting distant or aloof? If so, then you have used the Rescue Triangle to get other people's energy flowing towards you.

In the Oxford-Cambridge boat race, both teams expend about the same amount of physical energy in order to cross the line. But the winners are energised, triumphant, the losers depleted and exhausted. It's the same kind of thing in the Rescue Triangle. One person feels energised, the other feels depleted. In any Rescue Triangle exchange, there is a 'winner' and a 'loser'.

Playing the Rescue Triangle can be potentially **addictive**. People using the different roles can give themselves a rush of adrenaline or feel good about themselves because they have made somebody else do or feel what they wanted them to. This can be used as a habit to avoid bad feelings about themselves.

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## How do people learn the roles?

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People act in different roles at different times. Generally, however, we each favour one of the roles and tend to act in that one more often than in the others.. Each person has one role as a 'home base'. Each of our parents will have had a tendency to act in one of the roles more often than the others. As children, if we were exposed to a parental figure acting in one role repeatedly, the chances are we developed a tendency for a matching role. These are the most common matches.

### **Interrogating parent - Aloof child**

The child withdraws and becomes aloof to defend him or herself against the intrusive questions of the parent.

### **Aloof parent - Interrogating child**

The child tries to get the parent's attention and energy flowing towards him or her by asking questions.

### **Intimidating parent - 'Poor me' child**

The child learns the role of victim in response to the parent's intimidation. As victim they try to get the parent's energy flowing towards them by eliciting sympathy. The child develops the victim role to try to avoid being intimidated.

### **Victim parent - Rescuing child**

The child acts to try to prevent the parent suffering more than they seem to be already. The child tries to keep the victim parent happy, usually at the expense of his or her own needs and wishes.

### **Rescuing parent - Rescuing child**

The parent may choose to always put the child's needs first at the expense of their own needs. But at times the parent collapses and the child feels guilty about this. The child may then be in the position of looking after the parent, which usually involves denying his or her own needs and wishes.

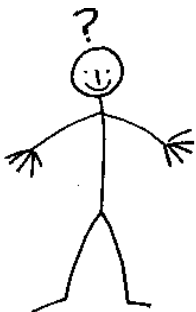
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## **What's the alternative?**

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The alternative is relationships in which people are not trying to control each other. If people give up trying to control each other, they are left with trying to find ways to co-operate with each other and trying to negotiate openly with each other to find solutions to problems.

Energy gets tied up in the Rescue Triangle, so getting out of it frees up energy. People who are not trying to control each other are more likely to enjoy each other's company in a way which feels clearer and more balanced.



### ***QUESTABEL: So you're saying it's wrong to be in the Rescue Triangle?***

We are not saying that it is right or wrong to behave in any of these ways. That would lead us into a complex philosophical debate about right and wrong. A lot of it depends on the situation. For example, most people would probably be grateful to be rescued if they were drowning in a pond or stranded in the top floor of a burning house. Our aim is to raise awareness of these patterns so that people have more choice about how they behave and to support people to be in charge of themselves.



## **So what is healthy support?**

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Healthy support:

- is negotiated. It's OK for the other person to say 'no', or to ask for something different
- leaves people in charge of themselves even when this means they will have to live through their own struggles (they will grow from them!)
- supports people to develop their own skills
- is given with attention free of restimulations, preoccupations or other distractions
- means nobody gains energy from each other

## **The positive side of Rescue Triangle roles**

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There is a positive side to the Rescue Triangle. The skills we learn in Rescue Triangle roles may prove useful to us in our lives in other ways. That is, if we stop using them manipulatively. It is not necessary to discard or reject skills that we have used manipulatively in the past. It is the manipulation that is unhealthy. In fact the skill involved may prove to be useful if used in a non-controlling way. If you have learned to be an Inquisitor, for example, you will be good at asking questions and eliciting information from other people. An Inquisitor may make a good journalist, because these skills are useful in that job. Someone who has learned to take on the Victim role may have learned compassion which he or she can use in positive and non-controlling ways.

The challenge is to how you could use your Rescue Triangle skills in a positive and non-controlling way.



# The Rescue Triangle in sessions

In the outside world it is quite common for one person to try to control the behaviour of another, for example, think of some of the ways a parent might try to get her child to do his homework. Because of this, controlling patterns could quite easily slip into the client-counsellor relationship. There are, however, several measures in place in Co-Counselling to prevent this from happening. In this way Co-Counselling provides, in its session structure, a good opportunity for people to become familiar with non-controlling, healthy patterns of support and people taking responsibility for their own needs. Here are the ways in which Co-Counselling models healthy support.

**The Client is Always in Charge.** *This means that he or she can refuse the counsellor's suggestions and do whatever she needs to do to maximise the benefit of the session for herself. This removes the counsellor's automatic authority.*

Co-Counselling training is primarily **Client Training**, *This prepares the client for being in charge of their process and their session. Although this approach is not always taken on Fundamentals courses in different places.*

**The Free Attention Contract** *also assumes that the client is in charge and is able to run their session on their own behalf.*

**'Equal Time'** for sessions. *This means that there is no chance that one person can rescue another by 'giving' them more time.*

Counsellor gives **Suggestions**, which means that the client can ignore them. (Although in some parts of the world the word 'Intervention' is used).

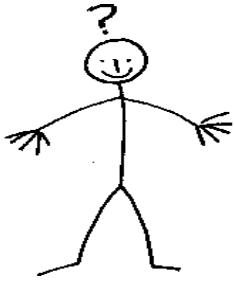
Despite these measures, controlling patterns can still slip into the client-counsellor relationship. Hence the rest of this chapter, which raises awareness of how to deal with those patterns once you perceive them.

## You in the counsellor role

### 1. How to recognise that you are in the rescue triangle as counsellor?

#### *Symptoms of you RESCUING your client*

- feeling very involved in the client's session
- leaning forward
- feeling responsible for the client's work, 'success' or 'failure' in the session
- trying to say the right thing or trying not to 'get it wrong' as counsellor
- trying to solve the client's problem; giving advice
- trying to stop the client from feeling distressed



*Questabel: At risk of repeating myself, I need to ask again: What is wrong with wanting to help my client?*

There is nothing wrong with wanting to help your client per se. It is a healthy-enough attitude to want to make a difference in the lives of other people, as long as you are not unawarely doing it *to feel better about yourself* or to give yourself an energy boost.

There are different ways of helping your client. Rescuing them may give them a short-term solution, but Co-Counselling focuses on long-term changes. In the long term, it is more helpful for people to rely on their own resources to solve their problems. Being there for someone and witnessing their process as they develop their own truth will contribute to a far more fundamental change in their lives in the long-run.

### ***Symptoms of you PERSECUTING your client***

It is unlikely that you will openly behave in a persecuting way towards your client, but feeling irritated or angry with him or her for no apparent reason is a sign that you are in.

**Sometimes people don't realise that they are rescuing until they move to the persecuting role.**

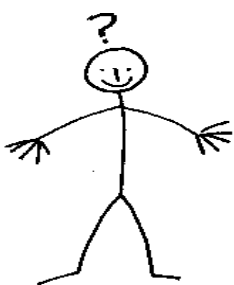
Some symptoms of persecuting are:

- feeling irritated about how the client is using the session or thinking they are not doing the right thing e.g. thinking “the client ought to be discharging now”, “the client is dodging the point”.
- repeating the same suggestion several times even though the client has ignored it, in the hope that he or she will be ‘wise’ enough to pick it up
- becoming impatient with the client
- feeling judgmental towards the client in some way, for example, accepting them as a person, but not accepting their behaviour or needs

### ***Symptoms of feeling a ‘VICTIM’ of your client***

We believe that feeling a victim of your client actually happens quite rarely. However, here are some examples of how this might happen.

- Feeling upset when your client seems to ignore all your suggestions or seems to put your counselling down in some way e.g. “I don't want those kind of interventions”.
- Your client puts you on a free attention contract, then uses the session to tell you they are angry about something you did. You feel upset and don't do anything to stop them.



*Questabel: I can see that the first one is a situation in which you as counsellor have interpreted your client's actions as against you. But in the second one it seems that the client is actually abusing the set-up of having a session. How can I know the difference between sensing a ‘real’ abuse by the client and a simple invitation to join the rescue triangle?*

This is a really important point. Yes, sometimes, very rarely, a client may actually abuse the situation of having a session and this may not be clear in the beginning. I heard the following story from a Co-Counsellor: During a session where the client had asked for and agreed on a contract of light massage, it

became clear that the client had an ulterior motive. He allowed himself to become aroused during the session, at which point I stopped it. Later on the client more openly expressed his sexual wishes and it became clear that he had used the session as a leading in.

There's no clear answer to this. If you start to feel suspicious that your client is abusing the situation, this can stem from your own restimulation or it may be an accurate sensing of the situation. Either way, you as counsellor are distracted away from being fully there for your client and this in itself is a good enough reason to stop the session. So you don't need to understand on the spot exactly what is going on.

## **2. How to step out of the Rescue Triangle?**

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We've explained how to **notice** when you as counsellor are in the rescue triangle. However, noticing you are in it is only part of the story. The next two sections are about how to get out of it and how to avoid getting into it in the first place.

### ***How to get out of the rescue triangle when you notice you are involved in it.***

Whichever role you are in there are a few simple things that you can do to get out of it.

**Sit back** and try to find a position where your body feels physically balanced by making small movements forwards, backwards and sideways.

The reason for this is that when people get involved in the rescue triangle they lose a sense of physical balance in their bodies. So by re-balancing you can switch out of the rescue triangle.

**Stop giving interventions temporarily.** Put yourself internally on a 'free attention' contract and start to witness your client's process more as an outsider. This will lessen your involvement with your client's session.

### **Stopping the session as counsellor**

If the suggestions above don't work, remember you always have the right as counsellor to stop a contract and re-negotiate if it doesn't feel right any more. This is particularly important if you are no longer able to offer free attention or if it is a real struggle to be non-judgemental. This is about looking after yourself, but it is also about being honest with your client. If you are not able to give them free attention or regain your free attention for whatever reason, it is best to stop the session. If the client carries on in spite of what you have said, you have the right to simply walk away.

### ***Asking safely for feedback after the session***

**Questabel:** *Sometimes I keep worrying that I did something inappropriate as counsellor in spite of doing all the things that you have suggested above. Does that mean I am still in the rescue triangle?*

You probably are in the rescue triangle, but at the same time it could be that you simply need to check something out with your client. Here are the steps for asking for feedback safely after a session.

1. Check with your client that it is OK to ask for feedback about something specific that you did in your counselling. When you are doing this, it is important to talk about your counselling and not the material that your client



worked on. If the client agrees to give feedback, he or she is accepting the possibility of being restimulated by the discussion.

2. Be specific about which of your actions you would like feedback on and make sure your client recognises the event you are talking about.
3. Ask the client what was good about the specific thing that you wanted feedback on. If the client is unable to give positive feedback, it is better to stop the procedure, because it is very likely that the client is restimulated. In this situation you are unlikely to get the information you need.
4. You then ask your client what else they would like to say about the intervention.
5. Avoid getting into a discussion. When your question has been answered stop there.

### **3. How to avoid 'invitations' to get involved in the Rescue Triangle**

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We have talked about what to do if you notice you are *already in* the rescue triangle. But you may become aware at some point that you are *on the verge* of getting into the rescue triangle. Something the client is doing may provide a trigger for you, or an 'invitation', if you like, to join in. Here are some examples of these kind of 'invitations'.

You perceive that the client is starting to criticise your counselling, saying 'that's a crap suggestion, you're not helping', you may be tempted to get into the victim role ('Oh no, I'm getting it wrong') or to persecute the client ('it's your own fault, you're not working on this properly').

In some Co-Counselling cultures, where people are trained to discharge anger keeping eye contact with the counsellor, you may as counsellor start taking this personally as if it is directed at you. (We acknowledge of course that there is a good side to keeping eye contact: as long as the counsellor can stay unrestimulated, the client can see that he or she is still accepted even when angry).

This section is about how you can decline 'invitations', or in other words how you can avoid getting involved in the rescue triangle.

#### ***Directing anger away from you***

If you feel that you are at risk of getting involved in your client's anger when they are directing it towards you, you can ask the client to direct it away from you towards a cushion.

#### ***Prompting the client to look at the restimulation***

If you perceive that the client is becoming personal with you, blaming you or feeling a victim of you, chances are that this is a projection. If this happens, ask your client

'Who do I remind you of?' or

'What situation in the past does our client-counsellor relationship remind you of?' Only do this when you feel totally calm and unrestimulated yourself, because otherwise there is a risk that your suggestion will fuel your client's anger still further. On the other hand, experienced clients will take up this suggestion very easily.

## *Sitting back and switching internally to free attention*

As we explained above, sitting back, balancing yourself physically and temporarily stopping making suggestions is also a good way to avoid 'invitations' into the rescue triangle.

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## **You in the client role**

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### **1. How to recognise that you are in the rescue triangle as client**

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#### *Symptoms of you RESCUING your counsellor*

Here are some real examples that people told us about.

- A classic one for me is to try and 'educate' my counsellor by my work or my way of working on some issue I may perceive as helpful to him. Or more subtly, I may choose not to do some work as it would 'not be good for my counsellor' (My decision without checking that out)
- Not asking for touch because I think the counsellor can't cope.
- Asking for free attention to prevent the counsellor from feeling embarrassed because they don't know what interventions to give.
- Accepting interventions when they don't feel right so that the counsellor does not feel upset.
- Not looking the counsellor in the eyes to prevent them from feeling checked up on (i.e. whether they are doing the job well)
- Letting the counsellor 'take over' the direction of the session so that I don't upset her.
- Not working on an issue because it is too close to the bone of the counsellor's stuff. Not negotiating this or checking it out with the counsellor.

#### *Symptoms of you feeling a VICTIM of your counsellor*

Some Co-Counsellors told us their experience with feeling a victim as client.

- "Feeling disappointed because your counsellor has not given you the 'right' suggestions to get at your stuff (and sometimes silently blaming the counsellor for not doing more to help)"
- "Feeling out of control because of all the stuff that's come up through the counsellor's suggestions"
- "I felt very much a victim of my counsellor, when it was difficult for me to refuse the suggestions of my counsellor, because I was already in the space of not being able to speak up. (Freeing contract helped me very much with this.)"
- "When I am faced with a very charismatic counsellor or one with plenty of personal power, or holding a lot of anger in his or her system, I shut down and I don't run my session anymore."

- “As client you misunderstand a suggestion from your counsellor e.g. you feel they are rejecting you or want you to shut up.”

### ***Symptoms of you PERSECUTING your counsellor***

Correcting the counsellor - reminding the counsellor of how to behave, instead of asking for what you need

Blaming the counsellor for ‘bringing up’ more stuff than you bargained for

## **2. How to step out of the rescue triangle**

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Here are some suggestions for how to get out of the rescue triangle, once you notice you are in it.

- Switch to a free attention contract
- Ask for some attention switches to switch your attention into present time
- Remind yourself that you are in charge of your session and that you can ignore your counsellor’s suggestions if they are not helpful to you
- Ask yourself: “What do I need at the moment?” Or, “How could I get more out my session at the moment?”
- Ask for what you need e.g. “I would like a free attention contract now.”, “I need to stop for a moment and just breathe.”
- If necessary, stop the session and seek a session with someone else
- If your counsellor is doing something that is distracting you or restimulating you, ask them to stop it e.g. “Could you sit back a bit please?”, “Please stop making that suggestion.”
- Consider working on what’s come up for you (see the next section).

## **3. How to ‘exploit’ ‘invitations’ to get involved in the rescue triangle**

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Being in the rescue triangle or noticing that you are on the verge of getting into it mean that you are restimulated in some way. If this happens during your session it is likely that this restimulation will become ‘what’s on top’ and will demand that you shift your attention away from whatever it was you were working on. If you feel safe enough, you could continue with the session and use this as an opportunity to work on what’s come up for you.

For example, you may perceive that your counsellor is trying to control you, or rescue you but this may not actually be the case. He/she may remind you of somebody else who tried to manipulate you in the past and now you are interpreting your counsellor’s behaviour as being the same type of behaviour.



### ***What you can do.***

Without referring to what's happened between you (because this may reduce the level of your counsellor's free attention), go straight to techniques of the 'Identity Check' like:

"Who does this person remind me of?" Or "What event in the past does this remind me of?",

"What would I like to say to that person?"

"What would I most like to say to that person?"

"What could I actually say to that person (in reality)?"

For safety put the person from the past on a cushion, rather than embodying them as your counsellor. This helps to separate the two in your mind.

If this feels too unsafe, try asking for attention switches, or if necessary, stop the session altogether.

## **Literature**

**Muriel James & Dorothy Jongeward (1971) "Borne to win"**

ISBN 0-451-16521-7

The chapter "The drama of life scripts" describes extensively the > Transactional Analysis approach and how the Rescue triangle fits into > that.

**James Redfield (1993) "The Celestine Prophecy"**

Chapter 6.

## **Postscript**

This publication provides an introduction to the Rescue Triangle. It forms the first three sections of a longer publication, which we are still writing. The longer version will also have chapters on the Rescue Triangle in daily life and on how to teach the Rescue Triangle. For more information see page 2.

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