

# What Do We Mean by “Drama?”

Art Maines, LCSW

*“She’s such a drama queen!”*

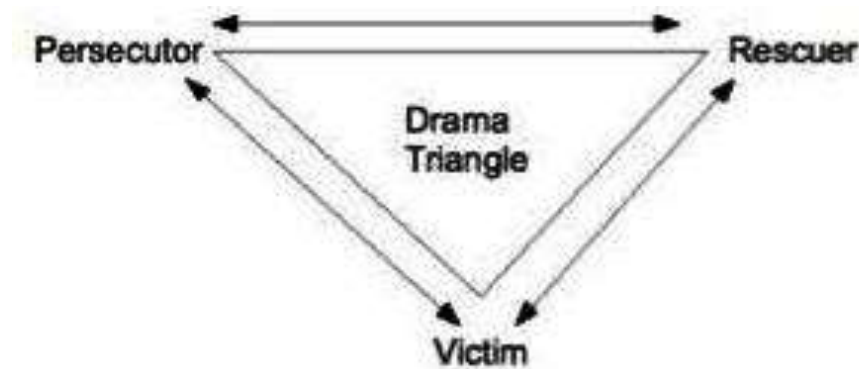
*“He brings so much drama to every meeting!”*

The concept of “drama” in interpersonal relationships has been getting more airplay lately in everyday conversations and pop culture. It causes a lot of frustrated eye-rolling and avoidance of those we label as “drama queens” (or kings), and can definitely make relating to others harder. Most of us probably have at least a vague idea of what drama in this context means, but did you know there is actually a psychological definition of drama?

The best definition I’ve heard in my training comes from Greg Lester, PhD, who gives fantastic seminars on handling difficult people. His definition of drama is: “Emotionally escalated, non-problem solving behaviors.”

Drama has gobs of emotion swirling around situations that often have an easy solution, and which would bring a fairly good outcome. The problem is that the person furthering the turmoil can’t or won’t move toward problem solving, which is the antidote to drama. They’re stuck in one of three dysfunctional roles, and we can get hooked by their high emotion into one of those three roles, too.

These unhealthy roles are:



The arrows on the diagram show how both people start out in one corner of the triangle and then move to a different but still unhelpful position. For instance, the drama source may start out in the victim corner over some small setback, but their use of emotions such as guilt, shame, and blame against the other can move them into the persecutor role. Meanwhile, the non-dramatic person may enter the dance at rescuer because of a sincere desire to help, but then find themselves in the victim position if they get sucked into the guilt and shame.

Different situations call for different solutions—the goal is flexible adaptability. For instance, in our little scenario above, the target for the drama could gently and persistently keep redirecting the conversation with the dramatic one back toward defining the problem, employing

compassion and empathy for the emotional upset, and then firmly and kindly setting boundaries to stay with solving the problem. There's more to fully explaining this than space permits, but I hope you get a flavor of it here.

As we approach the end of the year holidays, I hear more people expressing dread over having to deal with certain relatives' drama at dinners and gatherings. We've all run drama in our lives at some time or another, and may again in the face of certain trying times. It's part of being imperfect together to recognize when someone else, or we ourselves, are caught in drama, and then thoughtfully and skillfully employ problem solving to move on with life as it's unfolding.

*Art Maines, LCSW is a graduate of Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi and the George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis. He has over 15 years of experience as a counselor and psychotherapist. One of his specialties is relationship improvement and communication coaching.*