



# Relationships: “The Phenomenology of Helplessness”

*“Our first line of defence against unhappiness is refusing to believe that we are the victims of the bad intentions of others. The formula is: Do not blame the trigger. The world is full of triggers; in fact, life is designed like that, so that we will truly practice. We can be grateful for all these triggers, as without them we might never recognize our own unfortunate reactions.” (Ayya Khema in “Visible Here and Now”)*

*“No person is so helpless as the man in whom joy and misery sleep comfortably together. No physician can give health and happiness to the man who enjoys his affliction. For such a man health and happiness are always contradictory.” (Calvin Miller)*

## 1. The Human Experience: “By All Means, Help Yourself”

- 1.1. Triangles are the basis of stable relationships. This stability is both positive and negative (you need instability to grow and change). A husband and wife have a child (and then children). A society has a police force to capture criminals.
- 1.2. Triangles work. But in difficult families, triangles cause and maintain more problems that they solve.
- 1.3. In friendships of three people, there will tend to be two who are close (inside) and one who is distant (outside). It is difficult to maintain relationship between more than one person at a time.
- 1.4. The closeness can rotate though it is more likely that the closeness will fix on two and exclude the one. This coalition allows the two to overlook their differences and focus on the others “as the problem”.
  - 1.4.1. E.g. The elders and pastor agree that the problem is with “teenagers these days” rather than ask the more profound question of whether their church has any relevance to the unchurched.
- 1.5. Anxiety is inevitable and human. Anxiety forms when there is too much closeness (enmeshment) or distance (disengaged). If there are more people (or personified objects) around, it is thought that the anxiety can be diluted. This is how triangles are formed.
  - 1.5.1. E.g. Bertha can’t stand her sister Lamella, especially when she gets “real religious.” She tries to talk to her “fundy sister” but nothing works. So she phones her mother and “gossips” while they both take stiff drinks and “thank God” that they are not “born again types.”
- 1.6. Anxiety responses are more likely when our most important personal needs are unmet or violated. These needs are:
  - 1.6.1. Significance: power, status and importance. Significance-conscious people tend to be extroverts. This person is most comfortable in a crowd and for this reason is less affected by being triangled out.

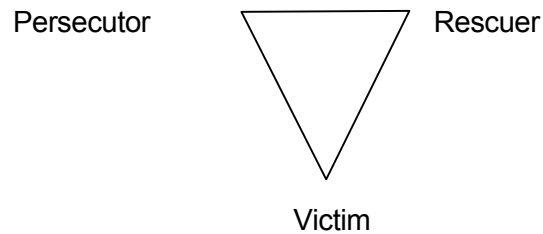
- 1.6.2. Security: life and relationships the same. Security-conscious people tend to be introverts. Their comfort is with small numbers and for this reason is more affected by the exclusive coalition. Often he will form even more exclusive coalitions to guarantee his security.
- 1.7. When anxiety is high, most people adopt an unconscious stress role; that is, they sacrifice their identity to avoid or deflect the pain produced by anxiety. The stress roles are Persecutor, Rescuer and Victim.
- 1.8. Coalitions between two points in a triangle serve two functions:
  - 1.8.1. To reduce anxiety.
  - 1.8.2. To control the third corner of the triangle.
- 1.9. People may put on different roles for different anxious occasions or with different stressful intimates. This is to control the coalition and to remain supported and strong.
- 1.10. The various stress roles tend to balance each other like a child's mobile. Each role serves as the enabler for the other pathological role. You cannot have a Persecutor without a ready-made Victim.
- 1.11. Confusion, chaos and crisis is the consequence of such stressful dramatics. While the intent is to provide stability and support, they induce a greater crisis that occasioned the triangle in the first place.
- 1.12. When things get bad, entire institutions dissolve in P-R-V roles (e.g. labour negotiations, church-eldership arguments, international disputes, staff relationships, etc.).

## 2. Triangles in Families

- 2.1. Secret coalitions can form in families. They are especially difficult to resolve because the family members are so resistant to deal with them.
  - 2.1.1. The Parent-Child triangle to exclude the other parent.
  - 2.1.2. The "Scapegoat": all the family try to solve his problems so as not to solve their own.
  - 2.1.3. The Husband or Wife-Affair to act against the other spouse.
  - 2.1.4. The Grandparent-Child triangle to exclude the second generation.
  - 2.1.5. The In-law triangle to exclude the spouse.
  - 2.1.6. The teenager-peer group coalition to eliminate the dominating father/mother.
  - 2.1.7. The burned out executive who uses his work to isolate him from family stresses.
  - 2.1.8. The "goody" church worker who avoids her home, husband and kids who "don't know the Lord".
- 2.2. Families may triangle around the "other woman," or alcohol, or religion or money or workaholism.
- 2.3. Remember: we create triangles and play roles to solve problems. Then the problem is not the problem but the solution. When the solution to one problem is the subsequent problem, then we have a problem!

### 3. The Three Styles of Helplessness

- 3.1. People who insist on seeing themselves as life's Victim and adamantly refuse to grow, are probably waiting for someone else to adapt to his world.
- 3.2. People in need usually see themselves as Victims (V), hoping to be Rescued (R), worried that the other will blame (Persecute), all the while blaming (P) some other person, system or organisation for Persecuting (P) him. The confusion of this sentence is indicative of the mental chaos experienced by the role-player.



- 3.3. People will escalate the helplessness, the blaming, or the sympathy to get others to change. In other words, people will do more of the same to achieve what they did not get by less of the same, rather than change themselves.

### 4. From "Victim"... (A Caricature of Need)

- 4.1. The Victim is the most controlling/demanding role as well as being the most socially approved role.
- 4.2. The V uses qualifiers that discount his ability to be responsible for his life (if, only, just, even, etc.); the subjunctive mood tense heightens the qualification ("I would if...", "I suppose I could, but ...").
- 4.3. The V believes himself to be an accurate mind-reader but does not worry very much if his impressions are untrue ("I know what you're thinking ...", "You're trying to get rid of me, aren't you?", "Nobody liked me there.")
- 4.4. The person who rapidly alternates between V and R may be considered a "martyr" ("I'm going to save you even if it kills me!").
- 4.5. The demandingness of the V's "needs" is an evidence, not of need, but of demandingness. It is the hunger to control, not the motivation to change.
- 4.6. Many V's are in "chronic crisis." A more comprehensive response rather than simply an ever-recurring crisis response by the counsellor is important.
- 4.7. V words include: helpless, hopeless, defensive, apologetic, wheedling, playing-the-baby, passive, passive-aggressive, aggressive, sad, hurt, bitter, lazy, submissive, depressed, afraid, despairing, guilty, vulnerable.

### 5. ... "To Implementer" (Integrity and Identity are Needed)

- 5.1. Any self-chosen action based on faith, reason and desire will set the V free from waiting for others to change him. He must become a participant in change and give up complaining,

blaming and second guessing. He must give up the hope that someone more powerful, more caring and more real will come to R him.

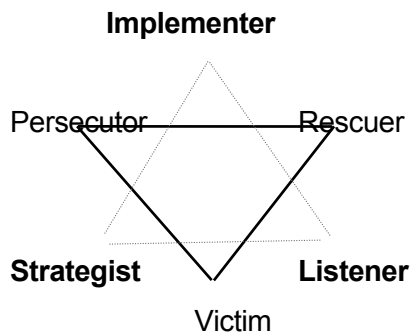
- 5.2. The process of change for the V involves:
  - 5.2.1. Letting go of childhood hopes that someone will eventually rescue his life to make him whole, able or competent.
  - 5.2.2. Giving up trying to defeat some person or system who has in the past, or is in the present, trying to make him a V.
  - 5.2.3. Charting a plan to obtain needed and specific goals based on observable reality within the context of articulated values.
  - 5.2.4. Implementing the plan, expecting reasonable failures, and re-implementing the plan.
- 5.3. The contract for change has these elements:
  - 5.3.1. "What do you want to change about yourself and your life that would enable you to live your life more effectively?"
  - 5.3.2. "How would you have to behave or relate differently to achieve this goal, stated practically, reasonably and measurably?"
  - 5.3.3. "How would you have to adjust the 168 hours of your week to achieve these gains?"
  - 5.3.4. "How will significant others" know of your changes?"
  - 5.3.5. "How might you sabotage your change plan?"

## 6. From "Rescuer" ... (A Caricature of Service)

- 6.1. The R is the careless helper, the good scapegoat ("One of the nicest people I ever met!"), doing unto other as he would have others do unto him. In the guise of being helpful he keeps others dependent on him.
- 6.2. He advises aggressively ("Why don't you?") and gets lots of "yes buts" or elaborate "explanations" from his V friends. The R's advice may make no sense in the other's context, be excessively pitying or simply irrelevant. And this is help?
- 6.3. In his attempt to be helpful, he is hurtful with his platitudes, self-sensitive sympathy and worrying put-downs.
- 6.4. The R has an inordinate desire for disciples. He wants people sitting at his feet. Inside, the R believes nobody cares for him like he cares for others, and he often concludes that there is no place for him. This loneliness and isolation can drive him into frenetic activity.
- 6.5. Typically the R is a woman (or men who are affect dominant) and occupies the position of mother, pastor, social worker, nurse, homemaker, pastor's wife, etc.
- 6.6. The R is often defines himself in relationship to someone else (someone he is helping, another more prominent person in the community, etc.) and, of the three stress roles, is more appendage-like.
- 6.7. R words include: helpful, worried, tired, giving, insensitive, sensitive, burdened, confused, strained, burned out, thoughtful, thoughtless, unaware, irrelevant, loving, supportive, pitying, nurturing, patient, careless, tolerant, ever-optimistic, aggressive, dependable, nice.

## 7. ... To "Strategist" (Illumination is Needed)

- 7.1. The strategist functions as a "coach" not as a "guru." He believes in the other's ability to think for himself, decide for himself and implement for himself. He also believes this for himself - that is why he can no longer R others.
- 7.2. The R will need to think, plan, assess, study, case conference, strategically implement; in other words, help responsibly (this is called "work").
- 7.3. The work and the wisdom of the strategist will feel unnatural and even unspiritual to the R who ever-feels, over-ventilates and under-thinks.
- 7.4. The strategist appreciates and exercises the intuitive but disciplines his hope for the speculative by corrective self-discipline.



## 8. From "Persecutor" ... (A Caricature of Power)

- 8.1. The P is afraid ("wimp-phobia"). He "overcompensates" by being too strong, too smart, too quick, too black-and-white, all in the service of "settling the matter." He is someone who sets unnecessarily strict limits.
- 8.2. He becomes the accuser because pain in himself is too hard to bear. He stuffs down his own feelings (repression) as well as those he sees as V (suppression).
- 8.3. Except for anger and "fine", feelings are often off-limits. In growing up he probably learned that feelings didn't help anyone and were usually a terrible bother.
- 8.4. The P neither listens to himself nor others, though he may collect data that reinforces his accusing/persecuting stance.
- 8.5. He uses words that disagree ("This is all well and fine but ..."), his body blames, and inside he feels misunderstood and unsuccessful. He speaks in universal qualifiers (all, every, any, etc.) and asks negative questions ("Why don't you just ...?"). He thinks being a fault-finder helps people.
- 8.6. Typically the P is the more resourceful member of a family and may be the husband or wife in the marriage, a rebellious teen or a defiant infant in a chronic family. In many traditional Christian homes, this position is saved for the husband-father, whereas in many typical Western families the role is reserved for the "hassled housewife."
- 8.7. Typical professions are labourer, border guard, car salesman, prophet, bank manager head deacon, Tough Love advocates, pastors of hierarchy churches, harried homemakers, oldest and most responsible children, librarians, brownie pack leaders, executive secretaries, etc.

- 8.8. P words include: anger, critical spirit, fault-finder, judgmental, blamer, aggressive, authoritarian, powerful, sarcastic, righteous, never-loving, certain, cold, accuser of the brethren, demanding, domineering, hostile, rigid, perfectionist, attacking, brittle, business-like, etc.

## 9. ... To "Listener" (Inspiration is Needed)

- 9.1. People usually try to change themselves by viewing the parts of their life (or others they dislike) as an enemy, thereby running or fighting. Instead, view the problem as a friend, look for the unconscious positive payoff that the problem has provided. Look for the gift in the midst of the pain. Ps need to grow up.
- 9.2. The P needs to discipline himself to listen to and share his feelings and spiritual insights. He needs to hold truth with an open hand not a closed fist. The graces of trust, love and forgiveness are promised to him who softens and lets go of his fears.
- 9.3. Journals help. Regular exercise (non-combative) and a wholesome diet help as well. But nothing helps more than talking with feeling, praying with pathos, listening to the other's heart and listening to his own heart as well.
- 9.4. The P should try one of the "listening crutches":  
 "You feel \_\_\_\_\_ (feeling) because \_\_\_\_\_ (thought)."  
 "Tell me about it."  
 "You are feeling like \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in with a word picture)."  
 A "feeling list" helps as well.
- 9.5. Resolution for the P involves:
- 9.5.1. Disowning the responsibility to correct and otherwise coerce the V.
- 9.5.2. Accepting his own failure in his closest relationship.
- 9.5.3. Accepting, appreciating and sharing his deeper feelings.
- 9.5.4. Empathising with the feelings of others.

## 10. Counsellor Questions for Clients

- 10.1. "What are you doing to create your own hell?"
- 10.2. "How can I help you see how active you are in creating/constructing your own problems?"
- 10.3. "What do you keep doing over and over to make things go no place?"
- 10.4. "What are the positive payoffs for things going poorly?"
- 10.5. "What is the request or demand you are making of me with that statement?"
- 10.6. "Do you know what kids want when they blow it?"

## 11. Questions for Future Ministers and Missionaries and Other Helpers

- 11.1. What role are you most likely to play when life becomes stressful?
- 11.2. What is the most socially approved role in your ministry culture?
- 11.3. How does what we talked about with PRV relate to ministry burnout?
- 11.4. What 3 changes will you have to make to avoid relating as a PRV?
- 11.5. What roles did your parents play in your growing up years?
- 11.6. What roles did your ministers and other church leaders play?
- 11.7. Were any disguised as prophet or pastor when in fact they were more Persecutor and Rescuer?