

CLOSET CLEANING ■

Communication triangles are a fact of life. We all get tripped up in them, often without even knowing it. When we do become aware of them, though, it's a good idea to remember the four main rules for untangling triangles:

- 1. When in doubt, don't react.** In a triangularly-shaped world, your first impulse is usually wrong.
- 2. Maintain one-to-one relationships** with others in the triangle. Don't talk "triangularly" about a third person.
- 3. Use "I" statements.** "You" statements only beget more "you" statements—and new and improved triangles.
- 4. Don't ask "Why?"** Open-ended questions elicit more thoughtful responses and "who/what/when/where/how" questions generate more facts.



Sound workable? Good. It is.

The trick is to see a triangle coming before it sucks you in. Like other traps, communication triangles are easier to avoid than they are to get out of.

Now go clean your closets. You'll feel less hung up. ◀

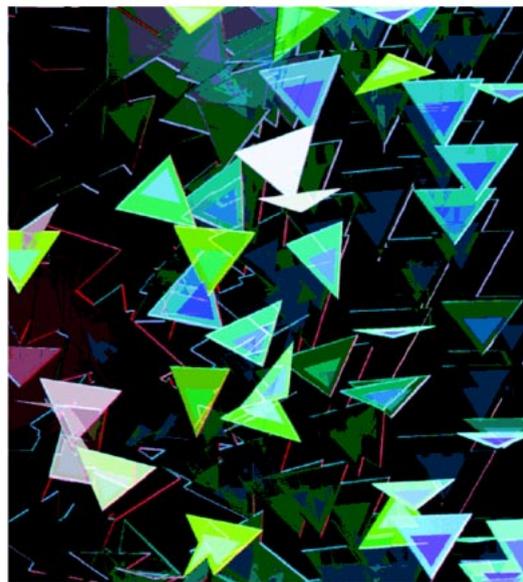


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TRIANGLE GAME



New Angles on Family Communication in Recovery

A D.I.N. Publication by Sandra Inskeep-Fox

PROBLEMS & POSSIBILITIES ■

Communication "triangles" are a fact of life, even though a lot of people have never even heard of them.

If you're one, we'll start by pointing out that the triangles we're talking about are both imaginary and as real as a stone wall.

They don't have anything to do with mathematics, but they have everything to do with the geometry of our lives.

And even though they're not related to the Bermuda Triangle, things *do* disappear around them—especially the sorts of things that hold relationships together.



Sticks & stones. We learn to hurt each other with words as kids, but we don't have to keep making childish mistakes forever.

If we had to guess about the triangles that pop up in your life, we'd bet that some are tolerable, some are terrible, and others are just a plain *pain*. But they do affect your life in far-reaching ways.

They're a *major* fact of life in families, especially those that include chemically-dependent (or recovering) members. Here, they often show up in the form of missed and mangled communications and withheld support and intimacy.

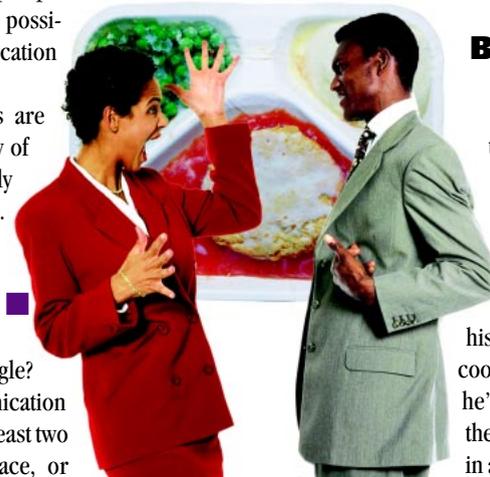
That's why we've put together this pamphlet: to point out the problems—and the possibilities for growth—that communication triangles represent.

Because the people whose lives are most affected by the weird geometry of communication triangles are usually the ones who are least aware of them.

TALKING TRIANGLES ■

So what's a communication triangle?

It's a way of describing communication by reducing it to its key elements: at least two people, and one other person, place, or thing. The elements are represented by points and the points are connected with lines which represent emotional bonds.



Pain geometry. Talking in triangles can distort the shape of our intimate relationships.

Triangles aren't good or bad. They're just one way that communication takes place.

Note that triangles, themselves, aren't good or bad—they're simply one way that communication takes place.

They help us set emotional distances from others. They stabilize our relationships and allow for varying degrees of intimacy.

Take the people we bump into in the course of everyday life—bank tellers, convenience store clerks, delivery people. We're not interested in getting to know them all personally, and triangular conversations are often all that time allows, anyway.

Examples: I might ask the person who fills my gas tank, "Hot enough for you?" Or wonder aloud to a bank teller (when I spot a child's drawing taped to her window): "Who's the artist?"

This is chit-chat, small talk, social pleasantries that let us establish contact without intimacy—useful for taking the stiffness out of ordinary encounters and easing the isolation of everyday existence.

BONDS & BONDAGE ■

Triangles become a lot less useful, though, when we use them to avoid or prevent one-to-one emotional contact in our "real" relationships.

If my husband mentions that we need to fix the fan in the vent over the stove and I rip into him about his mother ("You always expect me to cook like your mother!") because I think he's making a covert comment about the TV dinners we've had for three nights in a row, I've created a triangle to avoid dealing with his concerns.

The triangle here is made up of him, me, and my mother-in-law.

The fan *isn't* part of the triangle (it's circular, anyway)—unless, of course, he really *is* talking about the TV dinners. In that case, we suddenly have *two* communication triangles loose in the house, duelling for supremacy, like alley cats fighting over garbage.

If he wants to tell me how he feels about something I said to him yesterday, and I bring up the diet he swears he's always about to start (but never quite gets around to), I've created another triangle to dodge his issue.

In both instances I've attempted to confuse the issue to avoid even dealing with his feelings—by creating a triangle: me, him, and whatever I throw up at him.

When triangles tangle, issues become more and more confused and real communication less and less possible. As intensity soars, communication can deteriorate into emotional combat so unrelenting that you can almost hear the roar of a crowd and a ring announcer booming: ***“Are you ready to rumble?”***

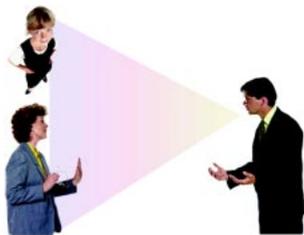
SAMPLE TRIANGLES ■

In some homes, relationships deteriorate so much that family members stop trying altogether to talk honestly about feelings or things that really matter to them.

Such families communicate almost entirely in *avoidance* triangles.

Even on “peaceful days,” they may stick to safe topics like the weather or the evening’s TV line-up. To avoid conflict, each becomes verbally isolated and only talks to other family members about *other* people, places, or things.

Here’s how an avoidance triangle in a chemically-dependent family might shape up and sort itself out:



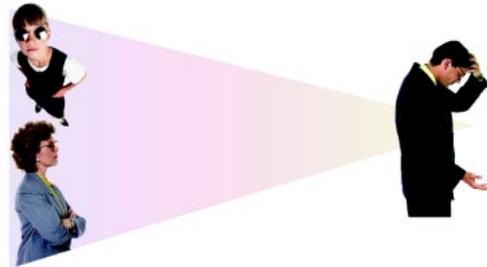
At this point, the triangles are all equilateral triangles, meaning that all sides are equal in length. The emotional distances between individual family members aren't under major stress, and things are more or less stable.

Often the best thing to do when you're feeling “triangular” is to do nothing. Don't say what you were about to say, rethink the way you were about to react, and just chill—and create some breathing room for yourself.



Suppose that in this triangle (an alcoholic husband, wife, and daughter) an issue comes up and the wife sides with the daughter.

As the wife moves emotionally closer to the daughter, this pushes the husband further away. As a result, the family triangle changes shape, morphing into something more like this:



This graphic also demonstrates a basic law of triangles. As two points move closer together, the third is pushed out.

What happens in the family we just described?

The husband probably feels left out and may try to turn things around and draw closer to his wife or daughter through manipulation or by creating a new triangle. He could pout and withdraw, or he might even get drunk or high.

In families that continually lurch from crisis to crisis and emotional meltdown to emotional meltdown, the next crisis is typically initiated by the person in the triangle who is distanced out.

The possibilities for triangles in any family are endless. Sometimes, they get twisted together, like hangers piled on a closet floor.

And even though families who live with communication triangles may *feel* as twisted as tangled coat-hangers, they need to keep in mind that they *don't* have to stay that way.

All they have to do is untangle the triangles.



UNTANGLING TRIANGLES ■

So how do you untangle—or even know if you're stuck in a triangle? Easy: Your feelings will tell you.

If you find yourself taking sides with someone or feel the need to “rescue” someone, or you're angry or confused or sad about your involvement with the family (a group of feelings we'll call “triangular” feelings), or you find yourself telling others how to feel or act, then you're probably in a triangle.

Suppose my son and I are having a serious discussion about his grades—and the after-school detention he got today because he forgot a homework assignment.

I'm in the middle of disciplining him for a clear infraction of our family rules. He tells me that his sister didn't do her homework, either. And besides, she didn't clean her iguana's cage like I told her to.

At this point, I may feel any—or all—the feelings described above. Maybe I'm angry *and* confused. I may want to come to my daughter's defense because he's tattling on her. More likely, I'll probably want to check the iguana cage to find out the truth.

Regardless, I'm hooked and the original issue is suddenly sidetracked. In short, I'm “triangled.”

The trick is getting “de-triangled.” And this is where the basic rules of triangles come into play.

UNTANGLING TIPS ■

First, it's important to point out that often the best thing to do when you become aware that you're starting to feel “triangular” is to do nothing.

Stop what you were about to say, rethink the way you were about to react, and just chill—and create some breathing room for yourself.



You may need to temporarily stop a conversation. That's okay. One more step into the triangle and the closet of hangers will come crashing down.

At this point, you may need to talk the situation over with someone outside the family. Or it may help to sit down and draw your particular triangle—or your *closetful* of triangles—and fill in the people, places and things involved.

But to have any chance of breaking out of a communication triangle, you first have to refuse to participate. You begin to do this by forming a one-to-one relationship with the other member(s) of the triangle. Refuse to talk to anybody *about* anyone else.

In our current example (Let's call it The Case of the Missing Homework and the Iguana from Hell), I could tell my son that his sister isn't the issue, but his grades and missing homework are. I'd also tell his sister (if she were around—and not suddenly busy with the iguana cage) that we'd have our discussion later.

Next, I'd base my communication on statements about *me* rather than about *him*. This means starting sentences with “I” rather than “you.”

I might say: “I feel angry when I try to talk with you about your homework and you bring your sister into the conversation. But I won't let it distract me.”

We all have a tendency to fall back on “you” statements. ***“You always try to change the subject!” “You never listen!” “What's the matter with you?”***

The problem with “you” statements is that they don't work—at least not at ending triangles. “You” statements only put the other person on the defensive, which encourages the triangle to continue and beget more triangles.

A fourth triangle-breaking rule is to never ask “Why?” If you do, you *will* get an answer—but rarely a helpful one and usually only a rationalization.

Instead, try to ask questions that begin with “what,” “who,” “when,” “where” and “how.”

In this instance, instead of asking my son, “Why do you always do that?” I might get a more thoughtful response if I asked: “What would you do if your son didn't do his homework?” Or “How can you make sure that you won't forget about your homework from here on out?”

If I did, I might get more communication and less “triangulation.”