

HOW TO BE ME IN MY FAMILY TREE



part of the inner healing soul care series

DR. GARY R. SWEETEN

How To Be Me In My Family Tree
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Scripture taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version
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The stories and anecdotes are a combination of real events and creative interpretations with names and places changed to keep the information private.

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Table of Contents

Dedication.....	1
Preface	3
Chapter 1 Biblical Foundations: Creation Ordinances and Fallen Nature	10
Chapter 2 Capturing a Family History with Genograms.....	26
Chapter 3 Human Growth and Maturity.....	38
Chapter 4 Triangles in Family Life.....	49
Chapter 5 Triangles in Christian Ministry.....	63
Chapter 6 Christian Couples and Conflict	75
Chapter 7 Is My Family Like A Furnace or a Wood Stove?	89
Chapter 8 Family Roles and Relationships	97
Chapter 9 Improving Family Relationships	110
Chapter 10 The Results and Healing of Bitter Roots	118
Appendix A. Three Aspects of Sanctification	129
Appendix C. Blank Genogram Form.....	133
Appendix D. Sweeten Family Model	134
Appendix E. A Harrowing Story about Names (Author Anonymous)	135
Appendix F. The Moth Struggles to Grow.....	136
Appendix G. The Double Dirty Dozen of Codependents	137
Appendix H. Examples of Reactivity: A Case Study of Jan and Irene	138
Appendix I. The Night I Stopped Being a Referee	146
Appendix J. The Good Report Card.....	149
Appendix K. A Separation Agreement for Committed Couples.....	150
Appendix L. Encouraging Children to Leave Home	151
Appendix M. Family System Coaching.....	152
Appendix N. Works Cited.....	156
Appendix O. Bibliography	158

Chapter 4 Triangles in Family Life

An emotional triangle is a key way families and thereby all groups organize their interactions. Both the Bible and good fiction have many stories about triangles because they are universal in life. Now that I understand how they operate, I see them in every TV show and movie and cannot help but think about them when I listen to people discuss holiday conflicts, marital stresses, and troubles at work.

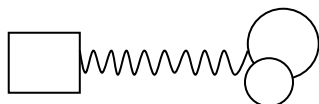
A triangle is a repetitive emotional pattern among three people or two people and a symptom. An ongoing triangle is unconsciously designed by all humans to dissipate the anxious energy that develops between two persons or an individual and a life pattern or symptom. Two persons are on the inside of the relationship because they feel emotionally closer to each other. The third person is on the outside, feeling either rejected or left out.

Examples of Triangles

Genesis 3 and 4 show us how symptoms can be the third leg of the triangle stool. The stories are full of triangles where two persons are on the inside coalition and a third is on the outside. Adam tries to draw God close to him by withdrawing from Eve. When God asks Adam who told him he was naked, he responds by pointing to his wife, pushing her emotionally away from him and attempting to pull God on his side. Adam says, “That woman you gave me did it.” Triangles usually have three roles: victim, persecutor and rescuer. The devil made me do it. This may be the oldest and most often used excuse in history.

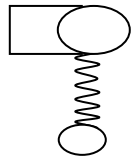
God approaches Eve to talk face to face. However, Eve knows she is guilty because she has disobeyed God. This makes her fearful to face God, so she tries to sneak in closer to God by blaming the devil, putting him away from her emotionally and spiritually. This is a very common thing to do in relationships with God and others.

It happens daily in families as well. Dad and Mom are in conflict and draw a child into the discussion to keep from facing the real issues. The child can be emotionally close, on the inside with Mom, so Dad is on the outside, feeling abandoned. When parents are in conflict, a child is a useful way to block open communication. This is a way to hide behind emotional fig leaves.



When Mom and Dad come together to discipline the child they usually join together emotionally. They are on the inside and the child is on the outside. So, emotional feelings and triangles shift and move around easily. In the diagram below we can see Mom and Dad are emotionally close

in order to take a stand with their child. The child is considered to be on the outside emotionally. Being inside means that two people are emotionally closer to each other by pushing the other away to the outside.



Here is an example. Nick and Jessica become *anxious* about their marriage. It has not been as intimate or happy as it was since baby Apple was born. This is an unexpected development and they do not know what to do. The young couple has not been trained in the art of conversation, especially when there are difficult emotional issues to discuss. Before marriage their hormones kept them close. After their sex drive was satiated, good skills in communication, problem solving, and conflict management are extremely important. However, few couples learn those skills before marriage. All they knew as singles was how to be cool and attractive.

Jessica was the first-born of three with two younger brothers. Dad was a blue-collar worker with a 7:00 A. M. to 3:00 P.M. job. He left early for work and came home to a wife who did not work outside the home. Dad and Mom fixed dinner together and served the family at a regular time each day. If there were conflicts between them, they were resolved behind closed doors and the children never saw it. Mom and Dad believed families were to be calm and hide any conflicts so the children never learned how to argue well or fight fair.

Nick was second of four kids. His elder brother was a star football player, and their parents both had jobs in sales. They were extraverted and verbally excited and fought openly and often. Dad traveled three days each week and Mom was home each evening after a hard day at the local travel agency. Meals were taken alone. Whenever someone was ready to eat, they grazed out of the refrigerator and kitchen cabinet. Sports dominated the conversations, and soccer practices were more important than family times.

Jessica and Nick were from two different universes and never expected them to collide after marriage. When Apple came into the family, Nick was worried about finances and worked harder at his coaching position to earn extra money. He agreed to coach the track team as well as the junior varsity football team and was rarely home to assist Jessica with Apple.

Jessica was very close to her mother and began to spend a lot of time back home. As Nick became more involved in competitive sports, Jessica complained that he was away too much and was never available to be with her. Nick became frustrated and hurt that Jessica did not understand his dilemma. He was working hard to provide for his family. It is in these kinds of difficult situations that triangles thrive.

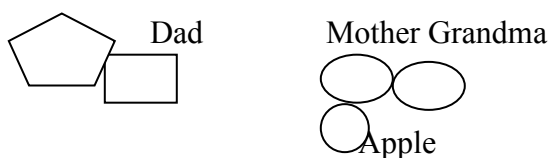
When two people experience anxiety (hurt, anger, fear, distance, rejection, etc.) in their relationship, the most natural thing is to complain to a third person. The one who complains and the listener are on the inside, and the third is emotionally distant.

A triangle can begin over a negative issue such as ‘we do not spend enough time together’ or a positive emotion like ‘I love my wife so much that I am embarrassed.’ When anxiety blocks open, honest, direct, truth in-love communication the couple will draw a third person into the discussion, making it a triangle.

Jessica is dissatisfied with her relationship with Nick. As a result, she talks openly and often about her frustration to her mother. A complaint can be a healthy interaction if it is handled properly. However, when it is wrongly directed and wrongly received, it keeps the couple from resolving their own issues directly.

In this scenario, Jessica and Nick won’t properly handle their marital tension unless Mother knows how to help her daughter deal directly with Nick and not get in the middle of the conflict.

Work



Jessica is close to Apple and Mom, but there is emotional distance between her and Nick. She is hurt that Nick works so much. She is angry and jealous of Nick’s work, punishes him for abandoning her, and moves emotionally closer to Apple and Mother, keeping Nick even more emotionally distant.

The energy and interests of Jessica are diverted from Nick to Apple and then her mother. If the pattern continues, the relationship will get stuck in an unhealthy habit pattern. She talks openly with her mother but not with her husband. When she does share with Nick, it is full of frustration and blame rather than understanding and compassion. Nick is already upset with Jessica, so he blames her for the problem. This leads to even more hours away from home as the cycle of frustration, blame and anger escalate and they move farther apart from each other.

He and Jon, another coach, go out for pizza after practice. During the conversation, Nick complains that Jessica is nagging him and on his case all the time. Unfortunately, his friend has the same problem at home and gives Nick advice that is not helpful. In fact, it aggravates the situation and adds additional feelings of hopelessness and frustration to Nick. However, Nick and his buddy feel emotionally close, so they are on the inside of the triangle with Jessica on the outside.



Nick has triangled with Jon. Jessica has triangled with her mom. Nobody has intentionally attempted to hurt the couple's marital relationship, but it is in danger of a collapse. If they cannot resolve the tension there will be additional conflicts and additional triangles. Who would you blame?

Blame vs. Responsibility

In my view, neither is to blame, but both are responsible for the situation. Many books and sermons will blame Nick for working too hard. He should, they say, love her and stay home with her. Others preach that Jessica needs to submit to Nick and make everything right between them. Neither actions will solve the dilemma. In fact, both of those interventions will make things worse.

In a family system all parts are involved in making the patterns function the way they do. No one person is in charge of the problem, nor is one person able to completely change the pattern. One person can change his/her pattern and force the other person to alter their behavior a little bit. In this case, Mother could change by insisting that Jessica not spend so much time with her. Jon could positively influence the couple by telling Nick to go home early from practice. Or, Jessica could stop nagging and thank Nick for spending so much time at work providing for her and Apple. All of these would alter the interaction patterns and might lower the frustration level.

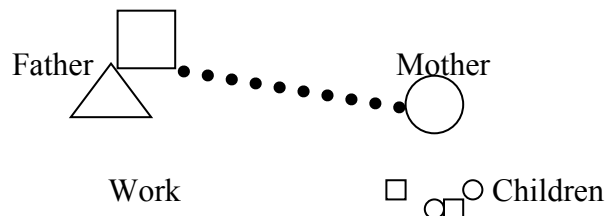
In some instances, the third part of the triangle is a child. The child might learn to take on the pain and fears of both the parents. However, despite trying hard, he discovers it is impossible to please them or stop the conflict. Mom might depend on her child's love and caring to make up for Dad's distance. Mom's motivation is pure, but it will not work. She wants to heal the unsatisfactory relationship with Dad, but it will fail. The triangle between Mom and the child actually promotes more distance between Dad and Mom.



A triangle stabilizes the emotional patterns and connections. However, it is not a good kind of stability. Nick and Jessica need to speak directly with each other about their relationship and stop bringing others into the fray. Triangles send mixed messages and fail to deal directly with feelings. Unfortunately, the relationship suffers even more as a result.

Triangles tend to become repetitive. Couples and families develop consistent patterns over stressful issues. Thus, third parties find themselves *volunteering* over and over to be in the middle of two conflicted people. In cultures where male/female roles are tightly prescribed, a wife may find it impossible to speak honestly with her husband about her needs. The overt

cultural power held by the man stifles open, intimate relationships. However, a clever wife knows how to influence him with her superior ability to form emotional bonds. She can make up for a lack of physical or legal power with feminine wiles. She will usually control the emotional processes in the family even if the male is the official head.



To outsiders it may appear that males hold all the power. Careful observation reveals that the female is often firmly in control of the emotional map. Each child will be in an emotional triangle with the parents and siblings. Mother normally controls the triangles. One child may play a prominent role by regulating the emotional map between mother and Father. These little professors seem to intuitively understand triangles and how to push our buttons.

In some Asian families, the elder son is essentially the emotional mate for Mother. Father is often physically absent and emotionally distant. He may rule the roost financially and legally, but she rules the roost at home. This pattern is of long standing and often causes great pain in the family. While teaching in Taiwan, I saw this repeating pattern at home and in the churches. My interpreter told me about the following Chinese proverbs.

Father rules the outside world and Mother rules the inside.

Big Brother replaces Father with Mother.

The social and financial restrictions of some cultures make it difficult for Fathers to be emotionally close with his wife and children. So, Mother and the eldest son are enmeshed. The eldest son has many religious and social expectations placed upon him. The roles and expectations are rigidly enforced. Anyone who attempts to change these roles will be punished.

In many Asian homes, however, Mother will not have a direct relationship with her children. If Mother hears that one of the children has a problem with money, she will tell the elder brother, who is expected to solve the problem. The sibling will not go directly to the elder brother for help but will ask Mother for assistance, and Mother will tell elder brother what to do. In these cultures, neither Mother nor Father takes care of the problem directly. In fact, Mother will not usually be able to solve it. Requests for assistance are normally solved indirectly through a triangle. It is rare for anyone to speak directly to Father or ask him for assistance.

In some cultures spouses rarely speak directly to one another about their emotional wants or needs. While I was counseling with a separated couple, the wife was upset because of the husband's affairs for the past 25 years. He replied, "I never knew you cared about those flings because you and the children did not say anything about them to me."

She wept and said, “I was a good Chinese wife who told my kids that it was our job to give you face, so we never brought it up. We assumed you knew how we felt.” He was shocked and replied, “I did not know how you felt. I was hurt that you didn’t care enough about me to complain about it. I kept having affairs to see if you would show me enough love to complain.”

In this instance, the man triangled other lovers into his marriage, but he never spoke to his family directly about his emotional or relational desires. Nor did he speak openly about his love and concern for his family. Mother triangled the two kids in between her relationship with Father and colluded with them to keep it a secret.

They then kept their intentions secret from even him so he would save face. Triangles are designed to lower the anxiety in a relationship. However, they actually keep the anxiety alive and chronically spread throughout the whole family system. Secrets grow and the truth is rarely spoken because of its potency to hurt. We tend to think that triangles and secrets will reduce pain, but they increase it dramatically.

In this situation, Mom was in an inside emotional coalition with the kids, and they agreed to keep the secret to save Dad’s face. Father was on the outside of that coalition. She was strong and powerful in the coalition with children while he was weak and ineffective. She was in control inside the family map. He was a very rich man who ruled the outside activities by building a mansion overseas and developing inside coalitions with lovers where he felt emotionally accepted and powerful. Because neither spoke directly about their needs, the vicious cycle persisted for years even though neither was happy about it.

They wanted to change but did not know how. In desperation a Pastor friend asked me to meet with them. He had met often with the man and wife separately, but had not been able to heal what he thought was the man’s sex addiction. I set a boundary of a two-hour meeting so they were willing to open the communication lines with me immediately. After seeing the triangles, they decided to speak directly and frankly about their needs. In two hours, they decided to be reconciled. He moved back to Singapore from Thailand and the children moved out of the home.

A basic principle to remember about triangles is this: Anything Peter says negatively about Paul to Phillip has much more to do with Peter's relationship with Phillip than any problem with Paul. Gossip, complaints requests for being rescued almost always come from a desire to send a message to the listener rather than change the problem supposedly caused by the third person.

Common Triangles

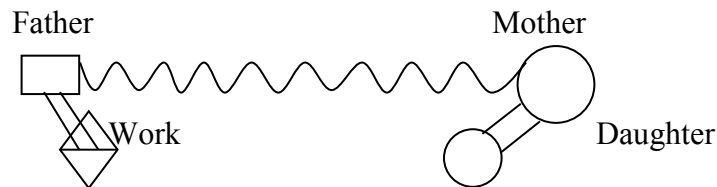
Below are several scenarios that many of us will find familiar in the families we know, for they are representative of family life and church family life all around the world.

Janie tells Mother that her teacher is so mean that she cannot face going to school today. The triangle is formed by Janie, the teacher, and the mother. Where is the anxiety? Upon examination, Mother discovered that Janie had not finished her homework and wanted to triangle Mother in to help her avoid the teacher. (Can you find the triangle? Is there more than one?)

1. George runs to Daddy crying and complains that big brother Joseph is teasing him. Dad wonders, is this a triangle? Is this sibling rivalry with George trying to pull me onto his side against Joseph? (What do you think? What is Dad's best course of action?)
2. Gloria complains to Pastor Wagner that the Assistant Pastor is rude. Pastor Wagner wonders if the complaint is legitimate or 'church family' sibling rivalry. (What do you think? What is the best thing for Pastor Wagner to do?)
3. Hillary asks her teacher to make the other children stop talking so loudly because she cannot study. Is Hillary attempting to study or trying to get the teacher to like her at the expense of the other children?
4. Jenny complains to a member of the elder board about the Pastor's lack of preaching/spirituality/biblical literacy/sensitivity/family life. Who does Jenny wish to influence, and what does she want emotionally?

Repeating Triangles In A Family System

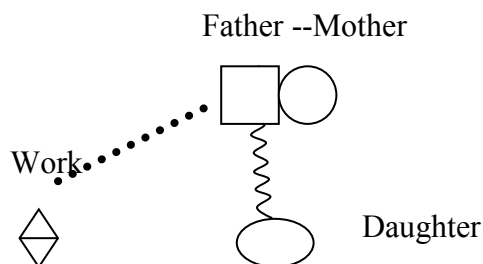
1. Mother and Father have a strained relationship. He works far too much and she feels powerless to change him. Daughter comes into an inside coalition by spending time and energy by having Mother help her with homework. Mother gets a great emotional boost. Father is on the outside, emotionally.



2. Mother and daughter have conflict or stress between them and Father is drawn closer to Mother in agreement about the need for better child discipline. The child acts out and mom says, "Wait until your father comes home. You are driving me mad. He will punish you for this." Daughter is on the outside of the triangle while mom and Dad are on the inside. When

Father comes home, Mother tells him to discipline her by sending her to her room without dinner. The power coalition between parents is secure.

3. Mother feels closer to her husband as they are in a coalition to control the daughter. She feels he is more distant to work and focused at last on the home fires. Dad feels powerful and needed because he has Rescued Mother who was victimized by the out of control daughter.

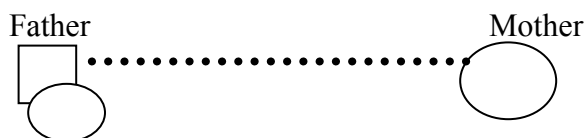


4. When Father enters the discipline coalition he seems to be closer to Mother and more distant from work, but that is short lived. The emotional cost is very high. It is at the expense of a good relationship with his daughter. He is in a double bind. In order to feel close to Mother, he has to attack his daughter and damage his relationship with her. The coalition leads to:
 - a. Giving mom more power over daughter
 - b. Drawing mom and Dad together emotionally
 - c. Pulling Dad's emotional attention away from work and closer to home
 - d. Alienating Dad and daughter
5. Later Mom feels badly about Dad's treatment of daughter. He is just too harsh on her. He is too much like my dad. He is not as sensitive about her as I.
6. She slips up to give daughter the food she had secretly saved from supper. "Don't tell Dad that I am feeding you. I feel sorry about what happened. He is just too harsh on you, but I really understand girls' feelings." Mom and child are again in a close coalition. Mother and daughter are on the inside and Dad on the outside.
7. The power and closeness of the emotional relationship and the shared secret has shifted the triangle from Mom and Dad to Mom and daughter.



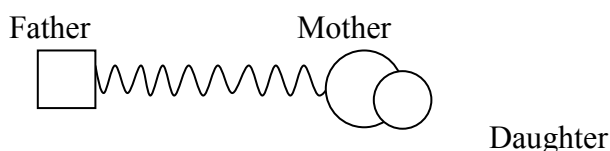
8. Father is also feeling badly about his behavior toward daughter. He slips up to her room to make up. He apologizes to her and offers her a bit of candy he had brought home. He also

asks if he can read her a book until she goes to sleep. This brings Dad into a coalition with child and distances him from Mom. The daughter may feel confusion, power, or split.



Dad and daughter are on the inside and Mom is on the outside.

9. The child is confused but excited, so she cannot sleep. Mom hears the noise and catches him reading the book. She severely scolds Father for getting the child all energized at bed time. She tells the child that “men just do not understand these things.” She attempts to calm her down. Mom and daughter have an inside coalition with Dad on the outside. There is again closeness between Mom and child but at the cost of conflict between the parents, anxious confusion in the child, and disrespect for Dad.



10. When daughter refuses to obey and go to sleep, mom and Dad form a coalition to force her to sleep. The parents feel together and seem closer to each other. They are on the same team with a common goal. Working together, they are able to get her to sleep.
11. The parents spend two hours discussing how to better raise this hyperactive child who is a real handful. Mother has bought a new book called Discipline God's Way that promises to straighten out rebellious kids by using a series of strict interventions and punishments.

“Childhood rebellions are,” according to the author, “the result of lax discipline and children who do not respect parental authority.” The philosophy is to spare the rod and spoil the child.

They agree to spank her in the future when she refuses to obey them. By continuing this conversation, Mom and Dad feel close to each other and maintain the coalition that evening. They are not sharing their own thoughts, frustrations, fears and joys. Instead, the conversations always focus on the child. It is a child-centered family.



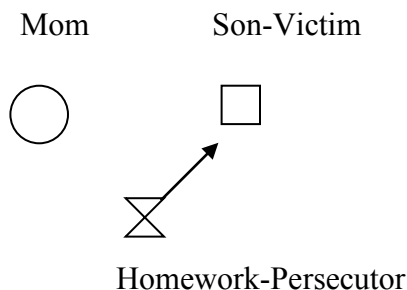
12. Since Mom and Dad never actually discuss their relationship, wants, needs or goals, the repetitive, compulsive pattern of triangling daughter, work and discipline will continue and get stronger. The child will not cooperate and be a discipline problem, refusing to obey and

being disrespectful to her parents. The parents will continue to invite her to join their coalitions and she will volunteer for that role even though she is terribly confused by it all. The couple's unresolved marital issues reappear as problems of the child.

The following repeating pattern of Triangles includes Mother, Son, Father, and Math Homework. In many families triangles occur daily around homework because there is so much chronic anxiety about school performance. In the following scenario, we will see how triangles move around from parent to parent and the child as well as his homework.

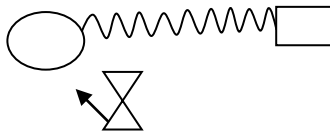
Stage One

The Son complains to Mother about not being able to do his math homework. (He is a Victim, math is the Persecutor.) He needs Mother to Rescue him from the evil math.



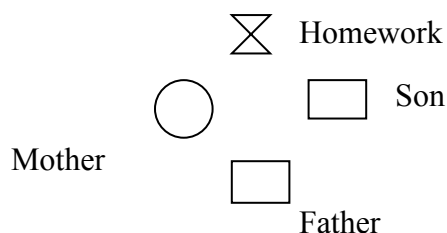
Stage Two

When Mother attempts to Rescue him, the Victim Son refuses to perform the problems. Mother gets angry and yells at the child, so she is now a Persecutor. The roles roll from one to another. Mother gets over-involved in attempting to help Son. Her failure to motivate him to do his own math results in her becoming frustrated, angry, and scolding.



Stage Three

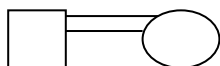
Father hears the fight and intervenes (Rescues) to help Mother. Son complains that Mother is not helping him at all. In fact, she is making things worse. This becomes an overlapping triangle of Father, Mother, Son, and Homework, which are all intertwined and overlapped with conflict swirling all about them and frustration rising.



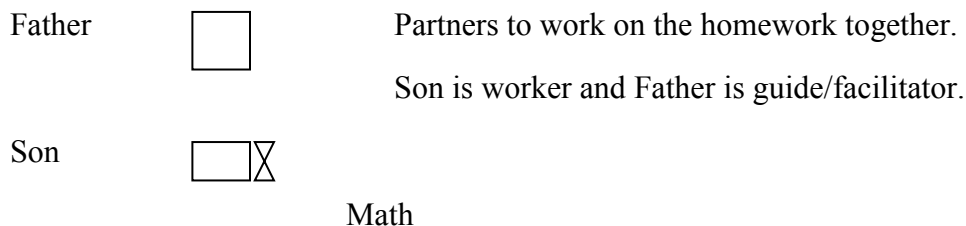
Stage Four

When the parents learned about triangles, they discussed a strategy to deal more effectively with the ongoing situation. This is a key step to resolve problem patterns. The parents, as authorities in the home, must establish the rules and the boundaries. This requires intimacy, honesty, mutual respect, and mutual problem solving processes by Mother and Father. Son may become involved, but the parents are the responsible architects of a healthy family system.

Father-Mother



They decided that Mother was too emotionally enmeshed with son to handle the homework situation without getting hooked. Second, Father met with son to support him as he did his homework. He instructed Son not to ask Mother for assistance. He and Father would work together. Father would not do the homework nor would he be responsible for the results. Son would have to live with the consequences of his own work habits.



Stage Five

Mother was anxious about how well Son was doing, and she worried that Father was too harsh with Son and it might wound his self-esteem. She discussed her concerns with Father, not Son. When Son complained that Father was mean and did not treat him as nicely as she did, Mother's anxiety rose to great heights. However, she was able to calm herself and resist the temptation to criticize her husband. Both Mother and Father were able to escape from the Toxic Triangles. They did this by communicating openly with each other and refusing to get involved in trying to Rescue their Son. Instead, they decided to help Son face his responsibilities with homework and deal with reality.

When Toxic Triangles Persist

If these patterns do persist, and parents are not able to remove themselves from the Rescue Triangles, we are likely to see the child become an Identified Patient who needs a counselor.

In the first example, Mother and Father became compulsively involved in repeating their dysfunctional behavior and sending confusing messages to their daughter. Most children take one of two options when the parents engage them in repeating triangles. They will engage in either Acting In or Acting Out.

The repetitive patterns of triangling in which the child and parents are chronically caught raise chronic anxiety. The child is especially vulnerable to the effects of this stress because of her position in the triangle. The parents' over-attention to her behavior and under-attention to themselves adds great stress to the child's life. She is not causing the problem but is caught in forces she neither understands nor can control. All her life she was tossed back and forth between the forces of Mom and Dad. By developing a problem, she might actually be trying to help her parents get some help.

Linear thinking will, of course, suggest that the problem is the child. The Identified Patient is usually taken to see a counselor by her parents. They are concerned about her strange and mysterious behavior. Acting In describes behavior that is destructive to the child's person's inner life. Acting out denotes behavior that is external to the person and is socially undesirable. In either case the parents will assume that the problem is inside the child and not in the family pattern.

When counseling an Identified Patient we need to understand her role and position in the family. It is important to understand the repeating patterns and processes in which she and her family engage. Then we can try to help her change that position and pattern of responses.

If she can change her role and the patterns of her relationships in the triangles, it will allow her to shed the IP role. In fact, it may even bring about a second order change to the system. The whole family and all of the repeating family roles can be altered by the shift of one person.

Patterns of Acting in

Depression
Anorexia
Bulimia
Anxiety
Fearfulness
Obsessive thoughts
ADD/ADHD

Patterns of Acting Out

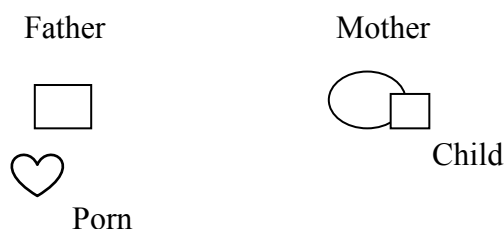
Drinking
Drugs
Gangs
School problems
Sexual promiscuity
Religious compulsions
Risky behavior

The Inner Anxiety is, of course, related to the Outer Behavior. They reinforce each other in a vicious cycle of destruction. If we drink or do drugs to calm our anxiety we will become more anxious and guilt-ridden, producing a stronger desire for medication, legal or illegal.

Triangles and Addictions

Sometimes the third party in a triangle is a symptom such as alcohol, smoking, or eating. It is also popular to use religion, work, or the computer as the third leg of the triangle. When a couple fails to deal directly with their relationship, time, energy, and attention gets focused on something else. In some cases, it is a lover or pornography.

A major cause of anxiety among Christians is the rise of pornography and fantasy sex. In my experience, the root problem is conflict between a couple with pornography as the symptom. Some men use pornography to provide them with a false sense of emotional acceptance. If Mom places all her emotional affection on a child and Dad feels frustrated, angry, and rejected, he may turn to pornography as a way to both feel accepted romantically and get even with his wife.



It is more common for Father to get over involved with work and get his emotional fix there. Mothers tend to become over-involved with the children. Dads are usually over involved with things outside the home, while Mom's emotional involvements revolve around the family. The results are overlapping triangles that can develop a life of their own. If the mutually reinforcing patterns are not broken, they will escalate over time into a series of serious conflicts.

Dad can become obsessed with money, work, gambling, or _____ and talks about it incessantly. Mom is obsessed with children, religion, makeup, or _____ and can think or speak of little else. This obviously detracts from intimacy in the marriage. Remember, in

triangles, two people are on the inside of the emotional processes and one is on the outside. The result is an increased pattern of anxiety and shallow marital relationships.



When a child's acting in or acting out becomes so great that both parents think they must get involved, another coalition is formed. They have a strong inside coalition with the child on the outside. This may give the parents a sense of deep intimacy and harmony. For a while they are on the same team struggling with a common concern. However, unless they begin to work on their own relationship, the good feelings will not last.

A family crisis can either weld a couple together or drive them apart. Illness, behavioral problems, or emotional challenges give families an opportunity to change their dysfunctional roles and patterns. In some families, a crisis degenerates into accusations and recriminations. If the couple is unable to deal with differences and conflict effectively, an Identified Patient (IP) can rip the marriage and family apart. (Church conflicts are similar.)

Our ministry at Sweeten Life has recently been involved with parents with a child who has serious chronic illness. We are developing materials to assist parents do a Quality Of Life self-assessment to help them look at patterns of stress and support. One of the most common items of stress in such families is the temptation to emotionally focus on the needs of the IP and neglect the rest of the family. This can bring about toxic triangles and increase the stress of all the family including the IP. Cyndi Wineinger, a parent well trained in understanding triangles, and I did a teaching on this topic. It is available at the SLS Vimeo Channel.

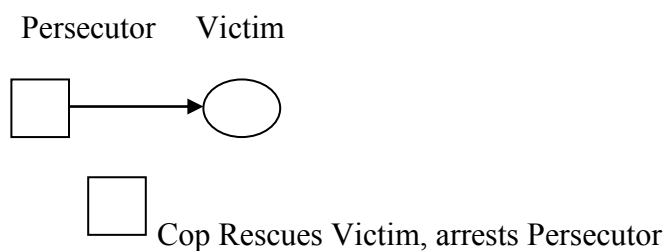
In some cultures, mothers are assigned the role of rearing the children. If one of the children fails academically, emotionally, or legally, she will be blamed and shamed. This approach to family life places enormous pressure on mothers to make sure her children do not act in or act out. It is a partial explanation for why many mothers take extreme measures to push their children to succeed. Such unconscious rules place mothers in a no-win double bind situation. The stress placed on working mothers in Asia is incredible. It is best if both parents are mutually engaged in parenting.

Chapter 5 Triangles in Christian Ministry

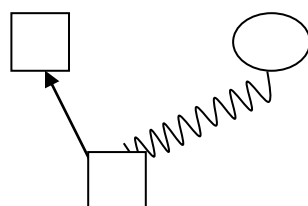
One of the most common questions asked at our seminars has to do with triangles. Pastors and other Helpers will say something like this: What should I do to keep people from getting upset with me when I try to help them? This is an indication of a common pastoral mistake: attempting to give advice. When that happens, we move into the middle of what is called The Responsibility or Rescue Triangle. Here is a phrase to remember to keep you out of a triangle more dangerous than the one in Bermuda.

If you try to Rescue a Victim from a Persecutor, The Rescuer will be perceived as the Persecutor, and then feel like the Victim.

My nephew, Jeff, tells me that the domestic violence run is the most dangerous type of call to make as a police officer. He says that a cop who shows up in a home ready to Rescue a battered wife from a Persecuting husband must watch his back at all times. The great danger is that the Victim will attack the arresting officer she had called to Rescue her. The Triangle continues, but the roles are transferred to other people.



When the case comes to court, the Victim wife drops the case and blames the cops for being violent, the courts for being mean, and the neighbors for being nosy. The cop is confused. Why is he, the good guy, considered the bad guy?



In some states it has been necessary to pass laws requiring victims to go to court because so many were dropping their complaints. Why do these battered, helpless Victims have so much hatred for the police who are repeatedly called on to Rescue them?

Why is the U.S. so often blamed for the problems the government and military try to solve in foreign lands? Why are U.S. troops attacked and shot in Africa, Asia and Bosnia when they are only there to Rescue the people? Why are wealthy Christians so often attacked for trying to help the inner city poor? Why do people gossip, tell tales, and attack pastors who are trying to help them? The reason is simple: the rules of relationships say, "When a Rescuer attempts to save a Victim from a Persecutor, he/she gets blamed for the problems."

Mom attempts to Rescue a little brother/sister from being Victimized by a big brother Persecutor, but finds that the cycle of conflict increases rather than decreases. The little brother then blames Mother for her inability to discipline big brother and big brother blames Mother for her taking the side of the other brother.

In most churches, the pastor is assumed to be Rescuer, parent, care giver, and saint who must keep the church and its members in constant harmony. The pastor's role:

If I could teach the world to sing

In perfect harmony...

Any perceived failures of harmony, growth and offerings are laid at the door of the pastor. Churches can be ripped apart by triangles. Members are used to getting their way by using triangles. Every congregation is a family of families, so all the old family patterns are played over and over again in the church family. Coalitions, triangles, and blaming are so normal that we do not even see them as unbiblical. The members will not change so if the pastor wants to stop being blamed he must change his behavior from Rescuer to Facilitator.

Nodal Events And Systemic Changes

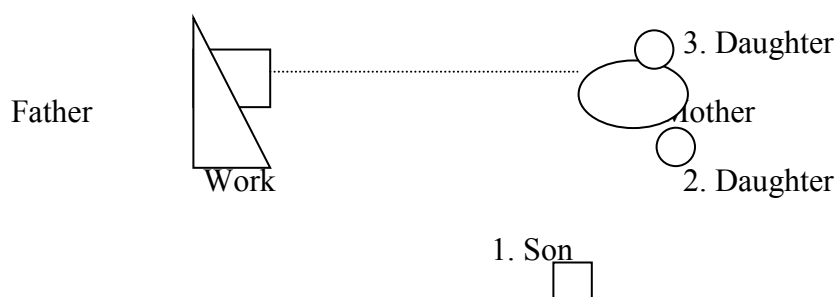
Any small or large change in the family relational pattern has an immediate impact on all members. Since the entire relationship system is emotionally interconnected, a change in one pattern sets off a chain reaction in the other patterns, resulting in increased anxiety and an attempt to change back to the old ways of behaving. The system reaction is mindless and automatic in its response to change. It hates any disturbance in its homeostatic balance. When our balancing partner slides in closer to the middle on a see saw, we react automatically to the imbalance and scoot quickly in the other direction to restore the feeling of safety. So does a church system.

Imagine what would happen if a normally distant father suddenly changed his position to being emotionally close to the wife and children. Instead of being gone from home, he spends more time with Mother and Child. Would that be an improvement? Would Mother be happy or sad or

confused? Mother may complain to her friends and family members that “Father is bugging me. He is in my way and interfering with the things I do at home. I never have any peace now.” Why would she not be happy that he is doing what she has asked him to do for years?

Also imagine what would happen if he began to assert himself in rearing and disciplining the child. This is the scenario that greeted us in an Asian consultation. Father was a high ranking official with the Drug Enforcement Agency who took an early retirement. For 25 years he had worked 60 to 70 hours each week. Mother ran the home and family, and he ran the drug enforcement agency.

They had three children who were well-behaved and doing above average academic work. Before retirement, the emotional map looked like this.



Father is emotionally close at work. Mother is emotionally close with the family. Homeostatic balance is evident in the family. There is little if any conflict and little intimacy between Father and Mother. When Father retires, the balance is disturbed. He enters into the family system in a different manner than ever before.

Father is present daily in the home. That is a big change from the time his work kept him occupied. Second, Father is a very active, powerful leader who gave orders to and received obedience from an entire division of police officers. He naturally attempted to transfer that military style of relating to the home. Mother had run the home quite successfully for 20 years. She had reared the three children with little or no input from Father. She had been in charge, but he has suddenly displaced her as the authority figure with the children.

Soon after retirement, the youngest daughter, age 16, begins to act out. She 1) Paints her hair green; 2) Dates a motorcycle gang member; 3) Starts fights with Father; 4) Stays out late at night; and 5) Talks on the telephone a lot.

Father became very upset and tried to control his daughter. This makes things worse. Father had just come to Christ and heard the pastor's talks about submission of wives and children to the fathers. So, he went in to see the Youth Pastor and asked for advice about how to make his wife and children submit. The conversation went something like this. “My wife and children will not submit to me. They are rebelling against my authority. I think you must demand that they obey scripture.”

If you were the pastor, what would you say and do? Do you tell them to submit? Do you blame the rebellious daughter and tell her to submit? Whatever you do will cause conflict. You are in a difficult spot. Assess the situation. Name the Persecutor, the Victim, and the Rescuer.

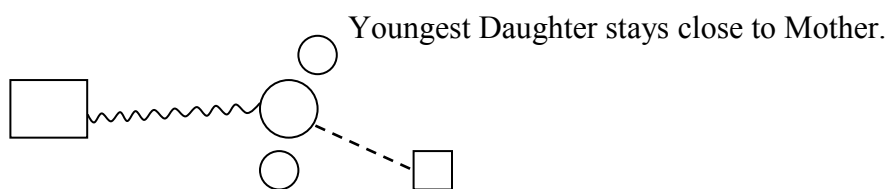
Youth Pastor decided that his authority was being questioned, and he wanted to show Father he was a good pastor. He went to their home for a family conference and attempted to Rescue the Victim, Father, from the Persecuting Family Members. He met with the whole family and taught them that the Bible commands total submission to Father. Before he finished the lesson, Youngest Daughter attacked Youth Pastor verbally. She ran out of the house in a rage to her gangster boyfriend waiting nearby on his motorcycle. Youngest Daughter shouted as she drove away, “You crazy Christians are why I’m becoming a Buddhist.”

Father reported Youth Pastor’s failure to Senior Pastor, who became very angry. The famous police inspector was upset, and the daughter was becoming a Buddhist. By the time the Youth Pastor came to the Family Class, he was devastated and embarrassed. However, he was interested in finding new ways to work with these common situations. His young colleagues said that such things often happened and they had no idea about how to respond to these requests.

This is a Rescue Triangle because the Youth Pastor is trying to Rescue a person who is in conflict. Pastors are often urged to Rescue people but it rarely turns out well for anyone. The Rescuer tries to solve the conflict but fails and then he gets blamed and called the Persecutor but feels like a Victim.

Before discussing the trap the pastor unwittingly fell into, we will diagram the family system after the nodal change when Father retired:

Stage 1: shows that the Conflict between Father and Mother increased dramatically after Father switched his time, energy, and focus to home and family from the police force. She had been in charge at home, but now he wanted to take over and run things leaving her powerless. Mother, by cultural rules and Christian tradition, was unable to assert herself with Father. She needs help, and the whole family system feels extremely tense and anxious.

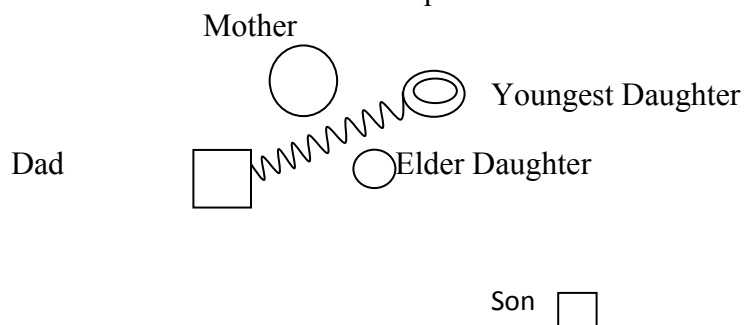


Son becomes distant by withdrawing to school

Elder Daughter moves closer to Mother

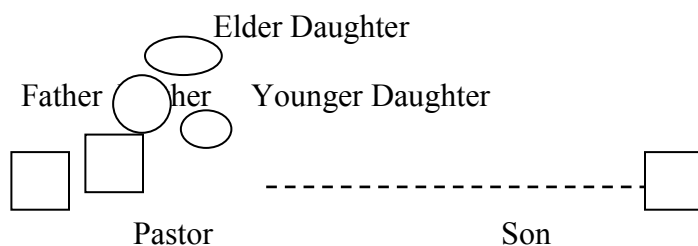
Stage 2: Youngest Daughter comes to Mother’s aid without being asked. She unconsciously stops the parents from fighting. She feels Mother’s anxiety and fear the conflict between her parents. She acts out with a Buddhist motorcycle gang member, a person hated by her straight-laced father. This shifts the conflict from Father-Mother to Father-Daughter and keeps Mom

from being displaced as the caregiver to the children. It also Rescues Mother from being blamed by Father. The Daughter defies Dad's values, and now Mom and Dad are in agreement that something must be done. First Daughter supports Mother emotionally but does not act out. Son is still distant. Mother is calm and pleased.

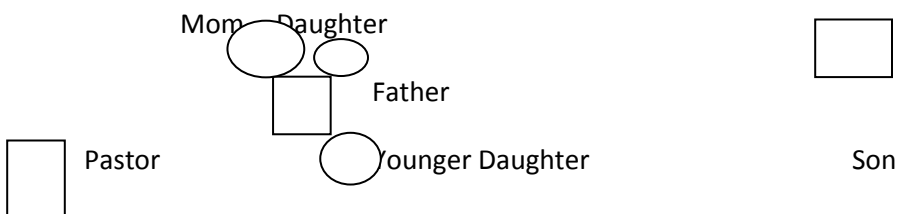


Father and Mother have more peace. Mother-Daughters are close.

Stage 3: Father seeks support from the Youth Pastor, who gets very anxious. The Father is famous and he is embarrassed that one of the members of his 'Youth Service Corps' is in rebellion. Youth Pastor decides to Rescue Father. He visits the home and preaches to Mother and Children on submission. (Son is absent.) Youth Pastor is in the middle of the conflict Triangle.



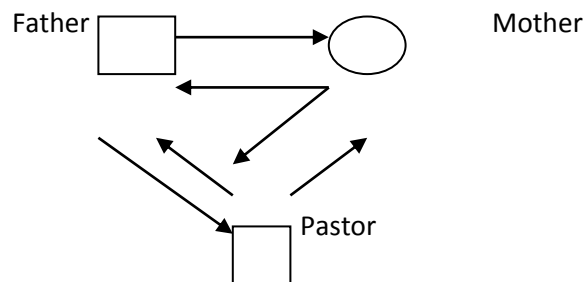
Stage 4: Pastor is the focus of Father, Mother, and Children's complaints. He is a Persecutor to them. They feel closer because they have a common enemy.



Father complains to Senior Pastor that the Youth Pastor is not making the family submit; Mother complains that Youth Pastor has been too harsh on Youngest Daughter; Youngest Daughter complains that Youth Pastor is a big bully just like Father and says that her Buddhist boyfriend is

upset with all this Christian business. Youth Pastor is shocked, confused, and stunned. He thinks, 'I have ruined the family and made the girl seek Buddhism instead of Christianity. It is entirely my fault.' (Linear thinking is attractive to clergy.)

Stage 5: Youth Pastor attends my teaching on triangles and removes self from Rescue Position. He comes up with a plan to meet with Father and Mother to discuss how they can cooperate in managing the home. He takes emphasis off Youngest Daughter and focuses on the Couple. He does research on the deeper meaning of Ephesians 5 for Christian couples and leads them in a Bible study about mutual care and support. He is a Facilitator, not a Rescuer.



The goal is for Youth Pastor to help Mother and Father work out a new style of relating. He stays out of the Responsibility Triangle and challenges them to find a process that works. Pastor communicates openly with both of them and helps them communicate openly with each other to set reasonable goals and expectations. They get involved in a couples' group to learn how to rear children. Youth Pastor meets with Father to mentor him in relationships. He knows that the Father needs something to do outside the home and suggests that Father work part time as a security manager at the church. Father is delighted and accepts the job. Father feels powerful again and has less time at home, allowing Mother to influence the children.

The best way to avoid unhealthy triangles is to have a well-defined, open, straight relationship with each person. Becoming emotionally committed to either side of the triangle changes a healthy triangle to unhealthy. Each person needs to discover his gifts, call, talents, and life. Healthy triangles are globs of Gorilla Glue that keep the family stuck together.

Triangles With God

Perhaps the most seductive and powerful of all possible triangles occurs when Christian leaders try to Rescue people from the world, the flesh, and the devil. Many of us in ministry grew up as the caregivers in our families. It seems natural for us to fall into that role in ministry. The temptation for us is to be more concerned about the spiritual, mental, and relational health of our members than they are for themselves. One of the most common questions we get at our seminars is from Pastors and Leaders who ask: "How can I motivate the unmotivated?" My answer for the past several decades has been, "be careful when you try to motivate the

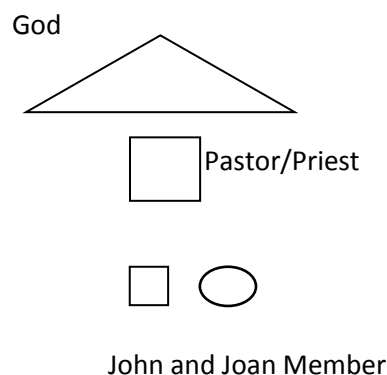
unmotivated. You may motivate them to be less motivated to do what you want them to do. Everyone is motivated, but not everybody is motivated to do what we want them to do. If we push on one side of the triangle, we are most likely going to motivate people to be less motivated to change.”

Most religious systems encourage leaders to think of ourselves as Rescuers. Whether the leader received training through a Seminary or Bible school, I hear it from almost everyone. As a Priest in Asia told me, “I was taught to never take time off or take a vacation because I was responsible to meet the needs of all the members. I learned that exhaustion was the mark of a mature minister.”

If we are not careful, we who reach, teach, and pray for the needy can unconsciously think of ourselves as the Rescuers of the unsaved and healers of the sick. But that is just the beginning, for we can also try to be responsible for church growth in numbers and the spiritual growth of the entire flock. We are born, bred, and conditioned to believe we must take on all the loads of the world. If the church does not grow and people are not healed or saved, the people look at us as failures and we agree with them. This is why we ask people to go through [*Hope and Change for Humpty Dumpty*](#) and [*Power Christian Thinking*](#) before learning about Inner Healing.

The usual hook for a Rescuer is a plea for help. “Pastor, please tell me what to do. What should I do in life? How much should I pray? What is God saying to me? Do you have a word from the Lord for me? Can you heal me? You are the best, the only true Christian, the greatest...”

In the diagram below the Pastor/Priest is in the middle between the Member and God. This makes idolatry very tempting. In modern Christianity people tend to look to the superstar leaders for healing and growth rather than God. In fact, the more gifted, talented, and anointed a leader is, the greater the temptation of members to idolize him. The problem with this approach is the depression, anxiety, and stinking thinking that occur when we are not able to be a superstar. I often remind leaders of 1 CO 3:5: *I planted, Apollos watered but God gave the increase*. No leader gives an increase. That is the job of God.



If a member actually does not know the appropriate scripture, the request for information may be legitimate. However, this is known as The Pharisees' Query. It puts the Pastor in a no-win situation by asking him to reply to a question which might be a trap. Jesus was extremely wise in dealing such queries. He instructed us to be as wise as serpents and as gentle as doves when confronted by tricky issues.(Matthew 10:16.)

Each Christian must learn to hear and follow God for himself. Many believers look for someone to Rescue them from having to face God directly. In the above graphic we see that John Member is not looking to God for guidance. He wants the Pastor's answer. People will often argue with a Pastor or friend about an issue if they do not want to face God personally.

If the Pastor responds in a way that is confrontational, he will likely be seen as the Persecutor with John and Joan Member as Victims. John and Joan Member will then complain to another member who will sympathize with his plight and blame the Pastor. John Member needs a Rescuer who will assist him as he Persecutes the Pastor/Rescuer. This is how gossip and rumors spread like wild fire. The people we attempt most mightily to Help/Rescue will usually be the ones who attack us most viciously.

Another tempting triangle scenario is common in churches when a person tries to recruit a leader to be on their side against someone else. Mrs. Taylor calls Pastor Charles and complains that Mr. Clark, her Bible teacher, has failed to follow scripture. He asked a sinful woman to pray in class. She tells the Pastor that he must intervene and confront the Teacher. Can you see the roles? Who is the current Victim? The Persecutor? The Rescuer?

What is the wise thing for Pastor Charles to do? Should he attempt to Rescue the Victim? Should he confront Mr. Clark or remove him from the class? Or, would it be best to defend Mr. Clark by telling Mrs. Taylor how wonderful he is as a teacher? Jesus teaches us in Matthew 18:15-19 how to deal with complaints to church leaders.

1. If two people have a complaint, let them settle it privately between themselves. Do not get involved in trying to Rescue the person who sees herself as the Victim. Do not meet privately with either party.
2. If the two people cannot become reconciled between themselves, get one or two neutral persons to act as counselors as they meet personally with the two parties. Do not meet privately with either party.
3. If they cannot resolve the conflict when witnesses are involved, take the matter to the church leaders for resolution. Do not meet privately with either party.

Pastors, church workers, and lay persons often violate these commands of Jesus and get into hot water. We attempt to Rescue a Victim but are accused of being a Persecutor, so we feel like a Victim. No wonder so many Pastors complain about being Victims with a lot of gossip in their churches. When Rescuing becomes a repetitive pattern in a leader, it can even get worse and turn into compulsive behavior. The Compulsive Rescuer is called a Codependent. The Compulsive behavior of a Rescuer/Codependent is harmful and actually fosters compulsive behavior of those we try to Rescue.

Victims look for Persecutors. Victims keep their power by continually being helpless. Their power comes from the blame and shame game at which they have become experts. When a Victim cries out to a compulsive Rescuer/Codependent for help, the cycle is repeated. A Compulsive Rescuer cannot resist the temptation to find Victims to assist. This is what it means to be a Codependent. An alcoholic must have a drink and a Codependent must find an alcoholic to Rescue. One must ask the question: Who is the Addict and who is the Helper?

Rescuers look for Victims to take care of. Being a constant hero means that we always need a crisis to rescue people from. Rescuers need to be needed. We are not altruistic or loving. We are not selfless or giving. We are arsonists who set fires just so we can put them out. If there is not a Victim to help we will push someone in the water so we can save them from drowning. The Rescuer's message to a Victim is plain: 'You cannot operate your life without me. You are inadequate, helpless, and hopeless without my assistance.' Rescuers are actually disrespectful because they imply others are helpless.

We can get so overinvolved in the situations of other people that we do not examine our own life. We can unknowingly neglect our family, our feelings, and our faith. God and others are far away. Victims are on the inside of the triangles and this keeps the Holy Spirit and family on the outside. The emotional pain of a Rescuer can push him/her to look for someone or something to do which will replace the pain. The rush of good feelings gives us a high, and that high reinforces our compulsive patterns.

The Rescuer is often manipulated into this position. Victims know how to hook us. They may complain that we are doing too little to help them get out of their dilemma, and we cannot stand the false guilt that arises inside us. Their complaints makes us feel like Persecutors. We then react with false guilt and shame, the great motivators of chronic, compulsive Rescuers. A Rescuer cannot resist the temptation to jump into the water and pull the expert swimmer out.

Never Persecute, accuse, blame, or shame any person. Never Rescue, take monkeys, or try to be the expert. If we can change these roles, we can stop repeating our favorite triangles. Sometimes we who are programmed to be Rescuers become angry when our attempts to Rescue fail. Our hurt and anger at being rejected can turn us into Persecutors, causing a cycle of hurt, recrimination, and rejection. This is a role I found myself in with my mother. She often called me from Illinois to complain about her spiritual condition. She seemed anxious about her salvation and I was sure I could convince her that she had no worries.

Almost every time she called and complained, I jumped in, eager to teach her the Bible. Those conversations usually ended in a predictable manner. I lectured and she cried. I felt terrible after we hung up the phone. I would study harder so I could be more successful the next time. I asked Dr. Friedman, my Family Therapy teacher, about this pattern, and here is what he said: "You know too much." To which I replied, "It is impossible to know too much," and he replied, "See? You are addicted to knowledge."

The next time Mother called, I was ready. I gently probed and asked questions then listened to her answers. Despite having written several books on the importance of listening, I was stuck in a role of Rescuing Mother from herself and talking instead of listening. Dr. Friedman was right: I knew too much. When I quit knowing so much and offering Mother all my answers, she came up

with them herself. In fact, I finally asked her a key question: “Mother, are you saying you doubt your salvation?” She said in a disgusted tone, “Why of course not, Gary Ray. I was saved at age 15 and never doubted it. I have taught the security of the believer for over 50 years.” Then she gave me all the verses I had tried to share with her for so long. I could not hear her before because I needed to be the Hero Rescuer.

When I knew less, Mother knew more.

Points to Ponder

1. These repeating patterns are based on emotional insecurity and lies. Much of our emotional pain is caused by 'shoulds and oughts' rather than the truth.
2. Every position in the triangle both results from and causes pain. Thus, the patterns will get stronger over time if they are not broken.
3. We usually have a favorite starting place. Some are tempted to start as Rescuers while others are stuck in a pattern of Victim who consistently cries out for help. My favorite pattern has been the Rescuer, but I have also retreated into the Victim role when I was tired or needy. After being rebuffed by my mother when I attempted to Rescue her from depression, I would get angry and Persecute (scold) her until she was upset with me. I broke this pattern when I learned to listen without offering any advice or counsel despite her repeated requests to be Rescued. (Lord it is hard to be humble...)
4. Many pastors are chronic Rescuers who worry more about their members' spiritual life than the members do. This is one key to assessing whether we are about to enter into a Rescue operation. Do I worry more about the person's behavior than they do? Am I working harder to help this person than they are to help themselves? Do I chronically attempt to help or change people who do not want to change? Do people complain that my attempts to help are inadequate? Do I feel overwhelmed by people's problems?
5. Rescuers carry monkeys others are supposed to carry. If you want to be a Rescuer:
 - Be very worried and anxious about the person and/or his problems.
 - Attempt to be the answer expert for people when they have a problem or concern. This is called Omniscience.
 - Be available at all times for all people. This is called Omnipresence.
 - Become angry when people do not get well, change, or take your advice.

If you want to let people grow up and care for themselves, do these things.

- Relinquish the person to God who loves them.
- Receive God's Word about what to do, how to pray, and what to say.
- Resist evil and do the right things.

- Relax. As the psalmist David said, “Be still and know that I am God.”

How To Get Out Of Triangles

- Recognize your past role and pattern. Define your new role in the triangle. Self-awareness is important. Slow down and think about how you may be pulled into triangles. Revisit the materials on the Golden Rule in [*Hope and Change for Humpty Dumpty*](#) (Sweeten and Griebeling).
- What is the pay off? What is the cost? How do I feel after the triangle? Recognize the emotional rewards you get for agreeing to be in the triangle. Examine your role in your family of origin. Were you the Rescuer, Persecutor, or Victim?
- Think about your boundaries. What are you willing to do and what are you not willing to do? Describe them to others. Write them down.
- Speak directly to people. Stop being a conduit for others. Do not try to speak or take up for others. Do not offend and do not defend. Speak only for self at all times.
- Do not gossip. The people who murmured against Moses were strongly confronted by the Lord.
- How will you increase your tolerance for their anxiety? In the past you reacted. What will be different this time?
- Be concrete about what you will do and not do. Speak directly to each person. List what you want, you need, and you like.
- Be at peace. No one can make you anxious.
- Prepare for a lot of mental, emotional, and physical stress. Pray for God's protection and guidance.
- Expect others to be surprised and upset at your newfound peace. Think of a non-anxious, playful way to describe your new focus.
- Expect resistance. You have decided to change and it is impacting others, so why would they not resist? People do not like surprises and changes.
- Do not preach or explain why this is good for the other people.

Jesus teaches Peter a lesson about triangles in Matthew 16:

¹³ When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

¹⁴ They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵ “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

¹⁷ Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you

loose on earth will be^[e] loosed in heaven.”²⁰ Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Jesus Predicts His Death

²¹ From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

²² Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!”

²³ Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”²⁵ For whoever wants to save their life^[f] will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.²⁶ What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.

Peter goes from spiritual hero to satanic failure. He recognized Jesus as the Messiah, but tried to stop him from carrying out his call. He was so caught up in the Hero Rescuer role that he tried to dominate God. The teaching of Jesus is very instructive for us as well. He said to Peter, *You are not concerned about the concerns of God but merely human concerns*. Much of what passes for godly compassion is human anxiety. When Jesus said we had to die to self it was a selfish desire to Rescue people and to be important. Death and resurrection are the answers to dysfunctional behavior.

When a threat is actually present, our automatic thoughts/feelings prepare us to take appropriate action so we can react with a proper level of emotional and physical energy. If the threat is extreme our reaction must be equally strong so we can meet the challenge. Our ancestors may have faced life or death situations daily, so the Lord prepared them to meet the crises with emotional, physical, and mental energy. If a lion attacked my great grandpa and he failed to have an appropriate level of fear, his physiological and emotional response could be disastrous to him and his family. If the threat was a nine on a ten-point scale, he needed to have an immediate level nine reaction. In fact, God has created us with a brain designed especially to make us react with the amount of chemicals to have the visual acuity, muscle readiness, hearing, and speed necessary to stay alive.

God constructed the brain to analyze some issues like a computer. The analytical part of the brain processes data analytically without emotion. However, another part of the brain records the feelings that are appropriate to the situation. The emotional aspects thinking are essential to our well-being. The analytical, computer part tries to get the facts straight, but those facts do not tell us if it is good or bad. In order to accurately assess our emotional surroundings, we need to also develop the emotional brain.

A person who does not have the ability to gather and store facts for immediate or long-term use is considered to have a low Intelligence Quotient. Although it is important to have a good IQ, it is even more essential in modern life to have a high Emotional Intelligence Quotient. Many of us are unable to accurately assess the meaning of the data our brain picks up, so we cannot apply the facts to our lives in a meaningful manner. Some of us consistently fail to engage the appropriate emotions of anger, grief, sadness, affection, or fear and live in a world of muted or inappropriate feelings.

Others, especially those from anxiously dysfunctional homes, consistently confuse their present situations with past events. Their current situation gets all mixed up with their unresolved emotional bank of pain or joy. The result is emotions that are actually in response to memories of past events rather than the present circumstances. Children reared in environments where there is mental and emotional confusion are less able to respond to adult situations with appropriate emotions and behaviors.

When a family lives in anxious FEAR, its members absorb the anxiety like a dry sponge and the think/feel continuum becomes disturbed. Chronic anxiety causes both the IQ and the EQ to be low. Anxious persons fail to interact with the full range of thoughts and feelings of a peaceful person. Children raised in a "False Evidence Appears Real" environment consistently confuse reality and fail to think/feel appropriately. Such fear is part of every family, but some families are more expert at passing it around. For example, great anxiety is produced when children are threatened by abandonment. Adults know this, of course, and, unfortunately, use its power to threaten children into obedience.

When a child is afraid to go into their pre-school class, a sensitive parent will take the time necessary help him work through his fears of abandonment. If instead he raises the level of anxiety even further by chiding, threatening, or shaming the boy into compliance, damage to the child's spirit can occur. A cruel parent might say something like, "You quit crying right now or

no one here will be your friend. They are all looking at you and think you are a baby." Instead of helping the child develop a healthy sense of trust in parents and other caregivers, the adult adds to the stress and anxiety he already feels.

Healthy parents do not threaten children with abandonment. Because the fear of it is such a powerful event, the emotional brain will retain its panic for many years. Whenever the adult experiences anything similar to being abandoned, flashbacks to these kinds of events will occur. The emotional brain is not good at making fine distinctions between harmful and virtual threats, so any similar event may be confused with the past threat.

Some parents have the opposite problem and fail to allow the child to grow from dependence into adult independence or interdependence. Parents can emotionally smother a child by projecting fear about his decisions. Smothering can lead the child to experience fearful anxiety whenever he enters a relationship of intimacy. Those with anxiety about abandonment react with a sense of terror each time a mate wants some emotional distance. Terror occurs because we cannot differentiate between the actual abandoning experiences in our childhood and a natural desire for distance and privacy in a marriage. A parent might become so emotionally enmeshed with a child that he/she cannot stand to have them develop intimacy with anyone else.

Just imagine a marriage between a male who fears being smothered and a female who fears being abandoned. He hides and she seeks. He withdraws and she pursues him. In fact, this kind of relationship is not unusual. The dance is fairly predictable. When she wants intimacy he feels overwhelmed and seeks some distance. She asks for time together and he works more hours, plays golf or works at church. She pursues and he flees. The harder she tries to develop intimacy the faster he runs away.

This and many other family patterns will change only when one spouse learns how to change his/her pattern. This is very difficult to do because it surfaces his fears and pain from the past. She thinks, "If I do stop pursuing him will he stop running, or will it reward his behavior?" Or he may say, "If I do stop running, will she quit trying to smother me?" It is frightfully difficult for an anxious person to gain enough peace to bring about change.

The best way to stop a repetitive dance is for one person to move in the opposite direction of their habitual pattern.

Exercise 3

Family rules and roles: Assess the rules and roles of your family origin and then your current family

1. How were differences settled in your family? Argued until it is settled? Avoid conflict at all costs? Calmly work conflict through? One parent made all difficult decisions? Fought but never settled it?
2. Male/Female Roles? Very clear and very different? Who did what in the family? Confused about roles? Dad did work outside home? Mom did work inside home?
3. Communication Patterns: Everyone talked freely to everyone else? Mom talked to each child separately? Dad talked to no one or favorites? Nobody communicated openly?
4. Discipline: What are some emotional threats? Physical threats? Threats never carried out? Sometimes carried out? Systematic and consistent? According to emotional climate of how the parents felt?
5. Finances: Who made the money? Who spent the money? Who was the spendthrift and who was tight?

Appendix F. The Moth Struggles to Grow

A man found a cocoon of an emperor moth. He took it home so that he could watch the moth come out of the cocoon. On the day a small opening appeared, he sat and watched the moth for several hours as the moth struggled to force its body through that little hole.

Then it seemed to stop making any progress. It appeared as if it had gotten as far as it could and it could go no farther. It just seemed to be stuck. Then the man, in his kindness, decided to help the moth, so he took a pair of scissors and snipped off the remaining bit of the cocoon. The moth then emerged easily.

But it had a swollen body and small, shriveled wings. The man continued to watch the moth because he expected that, at any moment, the wings would enlarge and expand to be able to support the body, which would contract in time. Neither happened! In fact, the little moth spent the rest of its life crawling around with a swollen body and shriveled wings. It never was able to fly.

The man in his kindness and haste did not understand that the restricting cocoon and the struggle were God's way of preparing it for flight. The small opening was actually forcing fluid from the body of the moth into its wings so that it would be light enough for flight the fluid was gone. So, when it had finally achieved freedom from the cocoon, there were no more obstacles to taking off. Freedom and flight would come only after the struggle. By depriving the moth of a struggle, he deprived the moth of strength and health. When it came time to take flight, he was too weighed down by the water still hanging to his body.

Sometimes struggles are exactly what we need in our life. It is the only way to grow up. If God allowed us to go through life without obstacles, it would keep us from taking off. As St. Paul said, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." Trials get us ready to soar. They strip us of the weight of sin that hangs on to us from the past. Without them, we will not be as strong as we could have been, or as strong as we need to be.

Appendix G. The Double Dirty Dozen of Codependents

1. Often think and feel responsible for other's feelings, thoughts, actions, choices, wants, needs, well-being, lack of well-being, salvation, and ultimate destiny. No boundaries of feelings.
2. Feel anxiety, pity, and guilt when other people have a problem.
3. Feel compelled --almost forced -- to help others solve their problems.
4. May offer unwanted advice, give rapid-fire series of suggestions, or fix feelings.
5. Feel angry when their help is not effective or not accepted.
6. Anticipates needs of others.
7. Often wonders why others do not feel and act the same toward them.
8. Do not really want to be doing more than their fair share of the work, or work that others are capable of doing for themselves.
9. May not know what they want and need, and tell themselves that wants and needs are unimportant.
10. Try to please others instead of themselves.
11. Find it easier to feel and express anger about injustices done to others rather than injustices done to them.
12. Feel safe and secure when giving, helping, and rescuing.
13. Feel insecure and guilty when somebody gives to them.
14. Feel sad spending their lives giving to other people without receiving.
15. Are often attracted to people in need.
16. Needy people are often attracted to them.
17. Feel bored, empty, and worthless if there is no crisis, problems to solve, or people to help.
18. Will abandon their own projects and routines to help others.
19. Commit themselves to more than they can do.
20. Often feel harried and pressured.
21. Believe that others are responsible for them.
22. Blame others for their situation.
23. Think that others make them feel and act the way they do.
24. Feel angry, victimized, unappreciated, and used.
25. Find other people become impatient or angry because of these characteristics.

These are the characteristics of a person with few, if any, boundaries. They send a message that others can cross over their boundaries of time, family, prayer, worship, study, recreation, and work. The result is usually burn-out, exhaustion, and sometimes, moral problems. Although co-dependent people seem to make good church leaders at first, in the long run, they will cause dysfunction. Co-dependents fail at the core characteristic of a disciple: trusting God. This problem arises from being a rescuer in a dysfunctional family.

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At SweetenLife, one of our main concerns is discovering ways we can support families who have a child with a chronic special need. The Hatton Foundation of Cincinnati provided a generous grant to Sweeten Life to conduct a yearlong, in depth study to investigate their strengths, needs and best practices. The research provided many insights and revelations. Some key points are:

1. Hardly anyone, doctor, educator, counselor, physical therapist or minister had visited the family or seen them in a natural environment.
2. Hardly anyone had asked the parents and other care givers how they were faring emotionally, relationally, spiritually or physically.
3. The parents and care givers were almost never asked for insights about their child's behavior or reactions to treatment, education, medication or patterns of behavior.
4. Despite having insights about successful ways to rear a child with special needs, there was no platform to share their best practices.
5. No one asked if the parents were receiving emotional and spiritual support.
6. No one asked about what stresses them or brings them peace
7. No one asked about helping with the overwhelming daily tasks.

These results indicate the places churches and community groups can be very useful and helpful to these families without having to get advanced training. Sweeten Life VIP Family Care will network with those organizations already involved in supporting families and develop supportive materials to enhance their work. Come in to see what we have already developed for interested parties and get a taste of what great things are coming.



Can you and your family benefit from the Sweeten Life VIP Family Care Self Assessment? Score the 10 questions on the [Snap Shot Assessment](#) and see for yourself.



VIP Family Care SnapShot™ App 1.0

Can you and your family benefit from the Sweeten Life VIP Family Care Resources? Score these 10 questions and see for yourself.

1. Caring for my family's needs (circle 1 number closest to your situation)

We take care of all my family's needs

1 2 3 4 5

We routinely allow others to help us

2. Getting the resources my disabled family member needs

We easily get what our disabled family member needs

1 2 3 4 5

We must fight for everything our disabled family member needs

3. Planning ahead

We always plan ahead and are very organized

1 2 3 4 5

We don't have time or patience to plan ahead, life is too chaotic

4. Physical & Mental effects of Work

We get our work done and still feel good both physically and mentally

1 2 3 4 5

We work until we are physically and emotionally exhausted

5. Caring for our spiritual needs

We have the time, resources and relationships to care for our family's spiritual needs

1 2 3 4 5

We do not have the time and relationships to care for our family's spiritual needs

6. Family relationships

We have the time, skills, and resources to build and maintain great family relationships

1 2 3 4 5

We do not have the time, skills, and resources to build & maintain great family relationships

7. Circle of great friendships

We have a circle of great friendships that care for us

1 2 3 4 5

We do not have a circle of great friendships that care for us

8. Great support system that is working well

We have a great support system (medical, educational, etc.)

1 2 3 4 5

We have a poor support system

9. Mom has the personal support she needs

Mom has the support system she needs

1 2 3 4 5

Mom does not have the support system she needs

10. Dad has the personal support he needs

Dad has the support system he needs

1 2 3 4 5

Dad does not have the support system he needs

Add up your score for the 10 items. If your score is _____

10 – 20	You and your family are feeling good about the 10 Quality of Life measures on the SnapShot. You have probably learned some personal and family skills that other families can benefit from. Have you thought about sharing those skills with others?
21 – 35	Have you identified one or more of the Quality of Life measures that you would like to focus on improving over the next year? Reaching out to resources and sharing your needs with those that want to help can be a great 'first step' toward improvements. You'll find additional helping resources from Joni and Friends, online at SweetenLife.com, and from family members and friends in the community.
36 – 50	Have you identified several of the Quality of Life measures that you would like to focus on improving over the next year? Reaching out to resources and sharing your needs with those that want to help can be a great 'first step' toward improvements. You'll find additional helping resources from Joni and Friends, online at SweetenLife.com, and from family members and friends in the community.



SweetenLife VIP Family Care™ Self Assessment



The Sweeten Life VIP Family Care™ Self Assessment facilitates jobs-to-be-done that could improve the quality of your life and your family's life.



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Why a Self-Assessment?

The Sweeten VIP Family Care Self Assessment™ tool helps you identify Jobs-to-be-done that could improve the quality of your life and your family's life.

Complete your self-assessment in 3 steps:

- Please set aside one hour of non-interrupted time for completing this survey.
- If two parents are available, each should complete the survey separately, receive a separate report, and set aside 1-2 hours to discuss and prioritize their five most important 'Help Needed' items.
- Feel free to discuss the results of your assessment with family members or members of your support team so that you can begin a collaborative effort to improve any area you chose as 'Critically Important'.

After you complete the self-assessment, the results will help you:

- Focus on those specific items that will make the biggest improvement in the quality of your life.
- Set and achieve family life improvement goals, and
- Find high quality resources to achieve goals.

The Sweeten Family Care self-assessment is **NOT** a test... It is a planning and communications tool. You can share the results with the family members and friends who are looking for practical ways to help you.

Thank you for taking the time to complete the Sweeten Life Family Care Family Support Self Assessment survey.

The Sweeten Life Family Care Team,

Gary Sweeten, Ben Poake, Andrea Bowsher & Jim Donovan

In partnership with Just and Friends International Disability Center,

Debra Petersmann and Lisa Brown, Church Relations, Ohio Office





SweetenLife VIP Family Care™ Overview



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Self Assessment



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