Understanding the "Adult Child"

Willow Oak Therapy Center
In-Service Training

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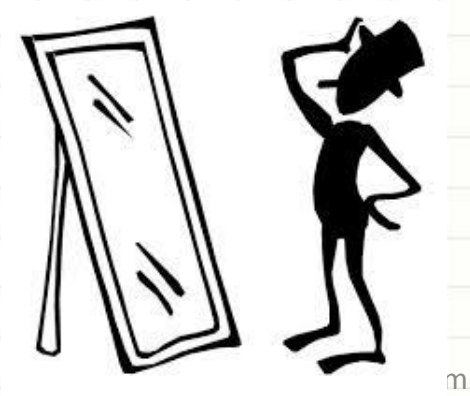
Overview

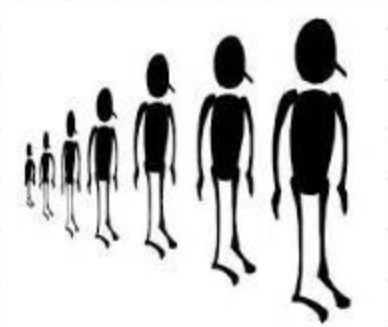
- The “Adult Child”
- The Dysfunctional Triangle
  - Persecutor
  - Victim
  - Rescuer
- The 4 Rs Model
  - Reactive Stage: Rupture & Regression
  - Proactive Stage: Repair & Resolution
- References & Resources

The “Adult Child”

- Lives with generalized fears
- Attempts to fit in with “as if” behaviors
- Family history of intergenerational shame
- Lives in a trance of anxiety and shame
- Strives for personal balance
- *<u>Not</u> adults living with their parents*



Intergenerational Shame



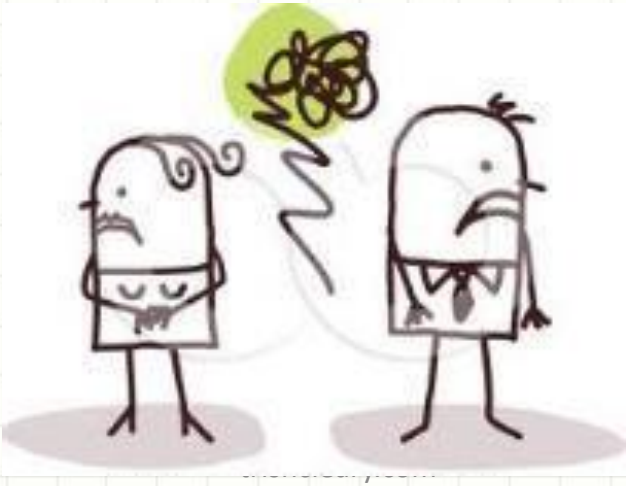
- Incidents of failure, frustration and trauma
  - Create feelings of powerlessness
  - Result in denial and/or despondence
- Intensified during the 20th century
  - Turbulent times
  - Mass-marketing schemes
  - Multi-media messages defining success
- Shame morphs into toxic family secrets
- Anxieties pass on to next generation

Toxic Family Secrets

- Growing up with secrecy
  - Requires concealing feelings
  - Promotes habitual deception
  - Torments the Adult Child with uncertainty
- Insulated by a dysfunctional system, the Adult Child
  - Mind-reads other's needs and expectations
  - Is only as strong as their weakest link
  - Avoids sincere connections
  - Dodges emotional danger

The Adult Child's Recurring Struggles

- Family history of shame and trauma
  - Unresolved rage, fear, and humiliation
  - Learned passive/aggressive interactions
  - Might for Spite
- Chronic depression and anxiety
- Confounding relationship dynamics



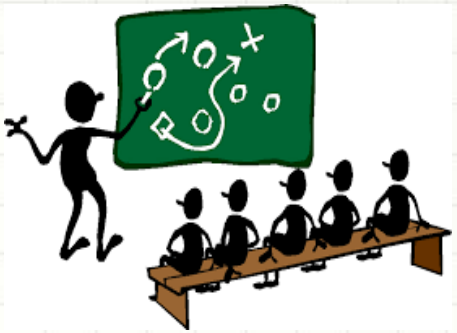
Psychotherapy and the Adult Child

Individual, Couple and Group Therapy

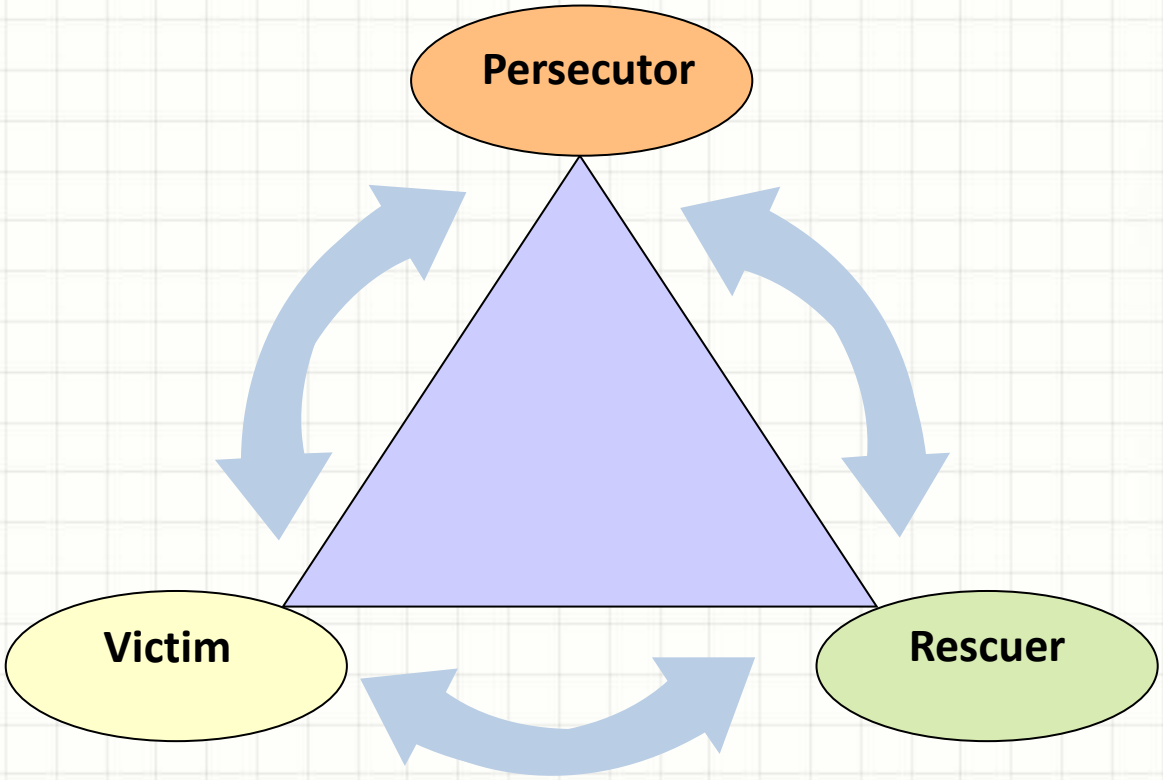
- Identifies secret shame
- Affirms sorrow and grief
- Slows down emotional chaos
- Supports awareness of
  - Painful thoughts
  - Sensations
  - Feelings

Assessment & Treatment Approaches

- The Dysfunctional Triangle
  - Exposes cycles of habitual family interactions
  - Reveals acting-out repetitions
- The 4 Rs Model
  - Reactive Stage: Rupture & Regression
    - Assessment
  - Proactive Stage: Repair & Resolution
    - Treatment

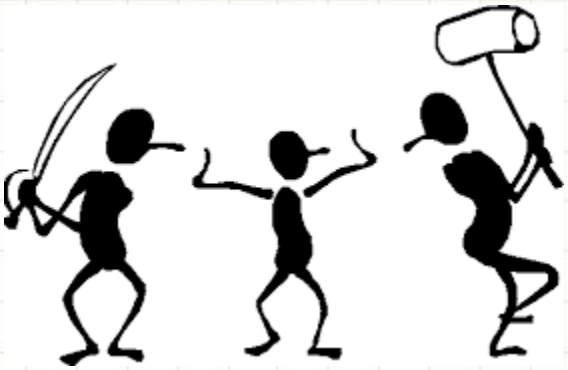


The Dysfunctional Triangle



- Closed internal communication system
- Intrusive codependent roles

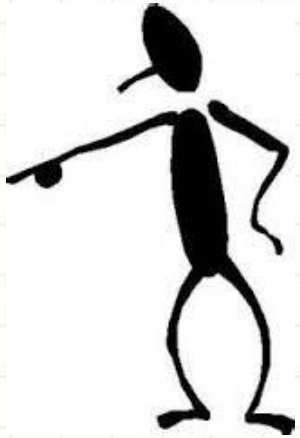
The Dysfunctional Triangle's Roles



- Three linking roles
  - Persecutor
  - Victim
  - Rescuer
- Each role represents specific feelings and behaviors
- Adult Child chooses one role as their primary defense
  - Suggests the nature of their childhood struggles
  - Is their go-to choice for self-sabotage

Persecutor Role

- Governed by Societal "Shoulds"
  - Rigid Rules
  - Authoritarian Attitudes
  - Expectations
  - Compliance
- Assumes a stance of Authority
  - Controlling
  - Variable
  - Punitive
  - Shaming



Victim Role

- Assumes a position of Shame
  - Complains
  - Compares

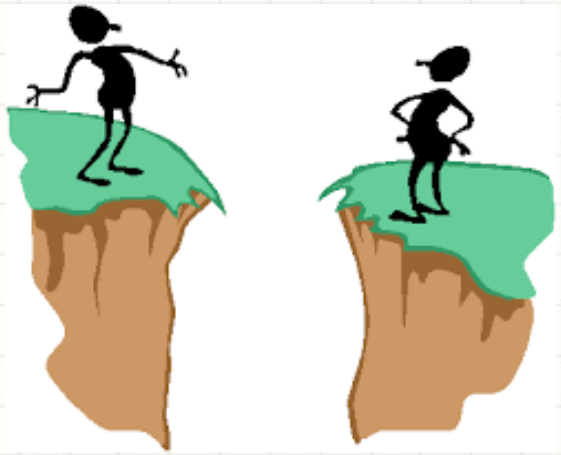
- Boxed in by feelings of
  - Anguish
  - Misery

- Consumed with
  - Guilt
  - Resentment
  - Outrage

Rescuer Role

- Assumes a stance of Concern
  - Placating
  - Yielding
  - Soothing

- Struggles with Dread
  - Detached
  - Numb
  - Cunning
  - Avoidant



Understanding The 4 Rs Model

- Rupture, Regression, Repair and Resolution
  - Identifies what is going on & what is needed
- Rupture & Regression: The Reactive Stage
  - Dysfunctional sequencing
  - Uses Might for Spite
  - Perpetuates the Adult Child's Painful Past
- Repair & Resolution: The Proactive Stage
  - Functional sequencing
  - Uses Might for Right
  - Supports Awareness and Relationship Health

Rupture in the 4 Rs Model

- Reactive Stage
- Unexpected Situation initiates
  - Primitive Startle Response
  - Spontaneous Reaction
  - Confusing Feelings
- Unbalances the Here-and-Now

Regression in the 4 Rs Model

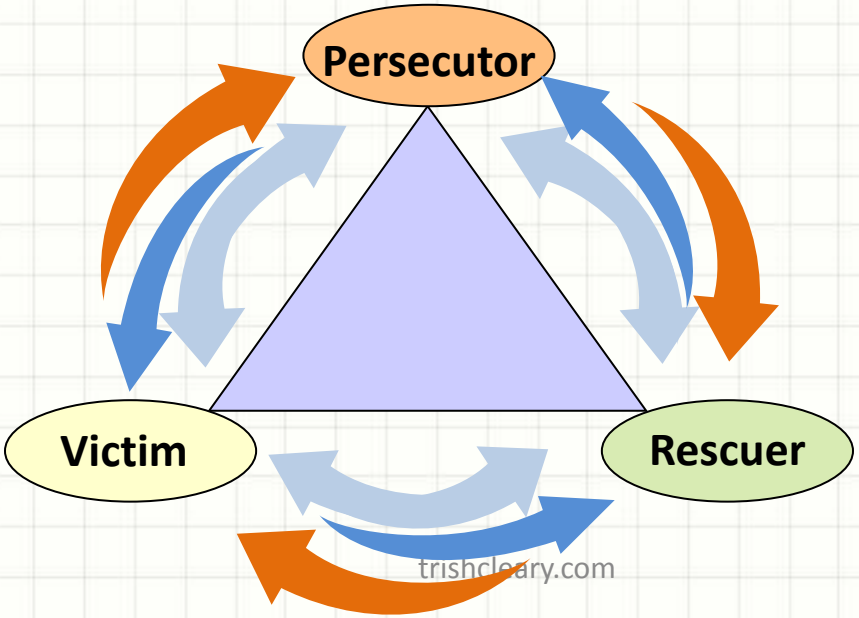
- Reactive Stage
- Awakens past experiences and feelings
  - Painful emotions overpower the present
  - Releases sense-memories in puzzling fragments
- Disowned regressive emotions backfire
  - Dysfunction Junction
  - Might for Spite
  - Emotional Whiplash
  - Emotional Glass Ceiling

Dysfunction Junction: A Perfect Storm

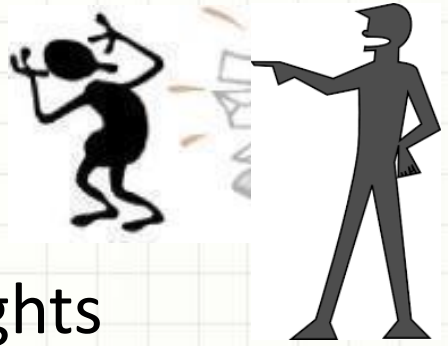
- Acute distress unleashes rage and hostility upon self and others
- Rupture and Regression engage with all Dysfunctional Triangle roles
  - Survival is essential
  - All stances shame, offend intimidate, and manipulate
- Uses “Might for Spite”
  - At the cost of one’s relationships
  - To be the winner in a losing battle

“Might For Spite”

- Stingy passive and/or aggressive power tactics criticize, control, dominate, belittle, and threaten
- Amplify defensive coping strategies
- Impose blame and shame
- Inflict moderate to severe emotional whiplash



Emotional Whiplash aka Bullying



- Deep wounding inflicted by toxic rapid-fire attacks and/or stinging slights
- Dazed and hurt, the recipient of this abuse escapes into the Rescuer role
- Crushing agony is buried with dissociation and/or numbing compulsive behaviors

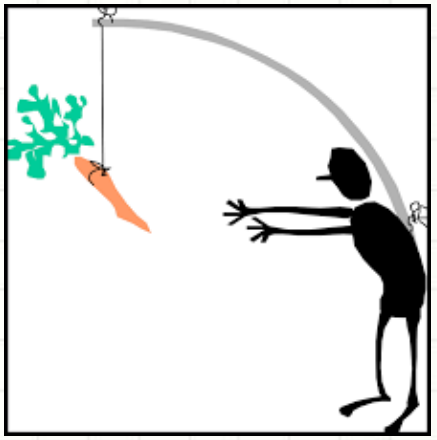
Shame: The Adult Child's Glass Ceiling

- Family system secrets and trance dynamics
  - Restrict emotional maturity
  - Undermine adult relationships
  - Conceal painful puzzle pieces from the past
- Expose out-of-date defenses
- Antidote for Shame: "Truth"

Clinical Considerations with the Adult Child

- Empathy
  - Track for attachment limitations
  - Consider their need to accommodate
  - Exercise clear boundaries
- Enactments & Reenactments
  - Transference
  - Counter-transference
  - Dissociation

Repair in the 4 Rs Model



- Proactive Stage
- Reveals the Adult Child's frustrations
- Begins the painstaking work of change
- Slows the pace of regressive feelings and behaviors
- Uncovers defensive coping strategies
- Explores the meaning of puzzle pieces
- Awakens authentic feelings

Decoding Puzzle Pieces

- Regressive feelings support understanding in Repair
- Expose the illusion of safety in secrets
- Clarify insecurities
- Affirm courage and stamina
- Promote insight
- Support self-regulation

Resolution in the 4 Rs Model

- Proactive Stage
- Unpacks past trauma
- Reframes past distress into present awareness
- Develops emotional muscles
- Conveys authentic feelings with words
- A personal journey that cannot be rushed

“Might for Right” > Exit Dysfunctional Triangle

- Key to doorway out via the Persecutor Role
- Repetitions of Repair and Resolution
- Breaks through the cycle of intergenerational pain
- Motivates responsibility for healthy changes
- Builds compassion, responsibility, and satisfaction
- Supports secure connections and healthy relationships

References/Resources

- Trish Cleary's Website https://www.trishcleary.com/
- Blog - Spoken Truths: A Shared Journey https://www.trishcleary.com/spokentruthssharedjourney/
- Suggested Readings https://www.trishcleary.com/558314b4e4b039c3676f1639/#/resources-1-1-1/