

# **Finding the Fourth Position: Beyond the Trauma Triangle**

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## **The Triangle We Cannot Escape—Until We Can**

There's a pattern that repeats itself endlessly in human relationships, one that Felitti and De Zulueta (1988) articulated with devastating clarity in their work on the trauma triangle. We cycle through three positions: Victim, Persecutor, and Bystander—the one who observes suffering but does nothing to intervene, who stands by while harm unfolds.

If we lived these dynamics as children—and most of us did, in various forms and intensities—we don't just remember them. We internalize the entire triangle. It becomes the water we swim in, the air we breathe, the automatic choreography of our relationships. We oscillate between positions, often without awareness, recreating the very patterns that wounded us.

Here's the cruel paradox: The child who was victimized grows up and, in certain contexts, becomes the persecutor. The adult who was persecuted can, in the very same moment, persecute another. The person who once stood by helplessly may now stand by as others suffer, caught in the same paralysis that allowed their own suffering to continue. The triangle doesn't end when childhood ends. It lives in us, playing out across our adult relationships, our professional work, our intimate connections. Until we find a way out.

That way out is what I call the fourth position.

## **The Triangle in Action**

Let me show you what this looks like in practice.

A woman with a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder comes to therapy. Over many sessions, a picture emerges: a childhood in which mealtimes were battlegrounds. She was made to sit at the table until she finished food she found repulsive—overcooked, unappetising, colourless. No protests were tolerated. No preferences acknowledged. Her body, her appetite, her very sense of what she wanted, were irrelevant. What mattered was compliance. She learned, at the most fundamental level, that her inner experience counted for nothing, that those who were supposed to care for her could override her with impunity, that love and coercion arrived in the same spoonful.

She carries this in her body as much as in her memory. The helplessness is visceral—it lives in her gut, in the constriction of her throat, in the rage that even now can surface without warning when someone tells her what to do.



One day she arrives at the session carrying a plastic box. She has cooked for me. She places it on my desk with quiet pride, a dense, brownish stew, aromatic with spices I don't recognise. She wants me to eat it. She tells me she made it especially. She describes how long it took. She looks at me with an expectancy that, beneath the generosity, contains something else—something harder. Something that leaves little room for "no."

I feel it immediately: a subtle pressure, a narrowing of options. The gift is genuine—and simultaneously, something is being asked of

me that I have not agreed to. To decline would be to hurt her. To accept would be to swallow something not of my choosing, in a room where the boundaries of my own body and preference should, of all places, be safe. The parallel is not lost on me.

In this moment, without any conscious intention, she has recreated the triangle—but from the opposite position. The child who was forced now forces. The one who had no choice now leaves me with very little. She has moved from victim to persecutor, and she cannot see it. Her face is open, hopeful, even loving. She is doing something she believes is kind.

And I? If I capitulate—eating food I don't want, in a role I didn't consent to, to manage her fragility—I become a bystander to my own experience, erasing my own needs to preserve the frame. If I react with irritation, or interpret the gesture too sharply, too soon, I become the persecutor in return—the latest authority figure who rejects what she offers, who finds her wanting.

Neither response is the whole truth. Both contain truth. This is the triangle at its most insidious: everyone is, in some sense, right; everyone is suffering; and the pattern perpetuates itself until someone finds a way to step outside it.

### **How the Triangle Gets Inside Us**

The trauma triangle isn't just a relationship pattern—it's a developmental arrest, as suggested by researchers such as Professor Karlen Lyons-Ruth and her group of Harvard Medical School (Khoury, et al., 2021). Lyons-Ruth's longitudinal work on disorganised infant attachment and hostile-helpless caregiving dynamics demonstrates how early relational trauma disrupts the normal developmental scaffolding of self-regulation, mentalisation, and coherent identity—leaving the child, and later the adult, cycling between contradictory relational states rather than integrating them. Children who grow up in traumatic or severely dysfunctional environments don't have the luxury of developing beyond these three positions. They're too busy surviving.

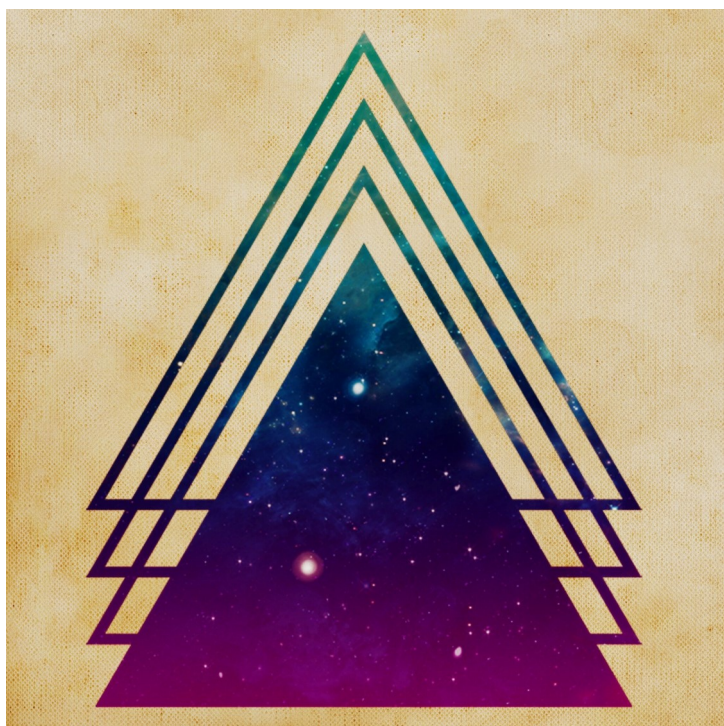
The child who is subjected to relentless coercion becomes intimately familiar with the victim position. She learns what it feels like to be helpless, to have her preferences overridden, to live in a body that belongs, somehow, to someone else's agenda. This isn't just a memory, it's encoded in the nervous system, in the implicit knowing of how relationships work.

That same child also learns the persecutor position. Perhaps she enacts it with younger siblings, with pets, with children smaller than herself. Or perhaps she simply internalises it as the harsh, attacking inner voice that will torment her into adulthood. The internalised persecutor—what some call the "inner critic" or "superego"—is often far more vicious than any external persecutor could ever be.

And she learns the bystander position intimately. Perhaps she watched others be overridden and stayed silent to protect herself. Perhaps she simply learned that adults—the people who should protect—look away. They stand by. They prioritise their own comfort over another's reality.

All three positions get wired into the developing psyche. They become the repertoire, the familiar default settings we return to under stress. And here's what makes escape so difficult: each position feels justified. Each has its own logic, its own truth.

### **The Internal Triangle**



Even when we're alone, the triangle plays out internally. Gerda Boyesen (1969) spoke of the Primary Personality and Secondary Personality—the authentic, open-hearted self and the defended, protective self we construct for survival. John Pierrakos (1975) wrote about the Mask we wear to navigate a world that feels unsafe for our true nature. These aren't theoretical abstractions. They're lived experiences we can observe in ourselves. There's a part of me that feels victimised—by institutional indifference, by having my own experience dismissed in spaces that claim to value the personal. This part is genuine, hurt, deserving of recognition.

There's a part of me that can be the persecutor—sharp-tongued, critical, capable of wielding authority (clinical, linguistic, professional) in ways that wound

others. This part often emerges defensively when I feel threatened, but it is real nonetheless.

And there's a part of me that's the bystander—that watches something wrong unfold and stays silent, too tired, too protective of a relationship, too uncertain of the consequences. The part that swallows a response to maintain a frame. The part that decides not to speak up because the cost feels too high.

All three live in me. All three live in you. The question isn't whether we contain these positions—we do. The question is whether we can become conscious of them; whether we can develop the fourth position that allows us to observe the triangle rather than unconsciously enact it.

## What the Fourth Position Requires

The fourth position isn't a place we arrive at once and remain forever. It's a practice, a continuous effort to see beyond the automatic patterns that capture us. Creating it requires three essential capacities.

### First: Acknowledging We Contain All Three Positions

This is harder than it sounds. Our ego wants to identify with one position—usually victim—and project the others onto external figures. *I'm the one who was wronged. They're the persecutor. Those other people should have helped, but didn't.* A situation that, when a child is trapped in it, genuinely involves helplessness—but which, as adults, we may have more capacity to navigate than we realise.

Wholeness requires acknowledging: I can be victim, persecutor, and bystander. These aren't separate people, they're aspects of my own psyche, shaped by history and circumstance. When my client arrives with her plastic box, she is in the victim position—genuinely, historically victimised by those who violated her right to her own embodied preferences. That is real. And simultaneously, in this very moment, she is enacting the persecutor position toward me, the therapist who is supposed to be safe, the body in this room that she is now, without knowing it, pressuring – she is giving me the order – “eat Elya, eat”. And she is a bystander to the effect of her gesture—not because she is cruel, but because she cannot yet see it.

The same is true for me. I feel the pressure, the narrowing, the faint alarm. And if I snap at her, I become the latest persecutor. And if I silently comply, eating food I don't want to preserve the relationship, I become a bystander to my own experience.

Acknowledging this doesn't dissolve the positions. But it begins to create space around them. *Ah—here I am, feeling pressed into a corner. Here is the impulse to capitulate. Here is the temptation to become sharp. Here is the triangle.*

### Second: Mentalising the Other Position

Mentalisation—the capacity to understand that behaviour is driven by mental states—is what allows us to step outside our own immediate experience and wonder: *What is happening for them?*

Not, *What are they doing to me?* But, *What might be happening in their internal world that leads to this behaviour?*

My client has cooked for me. I feel a flash of repulsion—at the sight of it, and at the commanding edge in her voice as she places it before me. And yet this is not aggression dressed as kindness—or rather, it is not only that. It is also a genuine reaching toward something she never had: the experience of offering nourishment and having it received. Of preparing something with care and being met with gratitude rather than criticism. Of mattering enough that someone would take what she offers into their body without recoiling. The plastic box contains a bid for love. What she is really saying, through the gesture, is: *I want to feed you. I want my nourishing to count. I want, for once, to be the one who gives rather than the one who is made to receive what they didn't want.*



When I can mentalise this—when I can feel my way into what it might be like to be her, carrying that history, arriving at this session with this offering—my reactive discomfort softens. Not because the pressure disappears (it doesn't; the repulsion stirred by that brown, unrecognisable food remains in my body), but because I can see the pain underneath it. I can hold both: this is uncomfortable for me, and she is reaching for something she has never had. Holding both, however, does not mean I can give her what she is looking for. The therapeutic relationship is not the table she was forced to sit at as a child, but neither can it become the unconditional feast she never received. What it can offer is something more modest and perhaps more durable: the experience of being seen in her longing, without that longing being either fulfilled on demand or refused with contempt.

Mentalisation isn't merely cognitive. It's not enough to think *Oh, I understand why she did that*. It requires genuine curiosity, emotional attunement, a willingness to feel into another's experience—especially when they've just activated something difficult in us.

This is sophisticated developmental work. Piaget showed us that children move through stages of perspective-taking, from complete egocentrism to increasingly complex abilities to hold multiple perspectives simultaneously. Many of us get developmentally arrested in domains where we were wounded. The part of my client that stands at the table, forced to eat, cannot yet mentalise effectively. She is still too close to her own pain, still fighting to be seen. She is operating, in this domain, from an earlier developmental stage—not because she is immature generally, but because this particular wound arrested her development in this particular domain.

The therapeutic task is to help her grow through this stage. Not by dismissing the gesture or interpreting it coldly, but by gently, persistently inviting mentalisation: *How do you imagine it feels for me to be presented with food I didn't know was coming, and to feel that saying no might hurt you?*

This question does not deny her experience. It invites her to expand her awareness to include mine.

### **Third: Seeing Beyond the Triangle Entirely**

The fourth position ultimately requires recognising: *We are two human beings in a room*. Beyond the triangle, beyond the position's trauma assigned us, beyond the histories we carry—there are two people here, both trying to survive, both carrying pain, both deserving of recognition.

This doesn't mean ignoring the asymmetry of the therapeutic relationship or pretending that our histories place us in identical positions. They don't. Her experience of coercion at the hands of those who should have cared for her is qualitatively her own. My experience of the pressures of the therapeutic frame is qualitatively mine. These differences matter. But beneath the differences, there is a shared humanity. We are both trying to be seen. We are both capable of wounding and of repair. We are both more than our pain.

Seeing beyond the triangle requires examining our projections—all the ways we unconsciously attribute our own disowned parts to others. It requires confronting our prejudices, both the implicit biases we are barely aware of and the more explicit assumptions we carry about certain presentations, certain diagnoses, certain kinds of people. The label "borderline" itself can function as a persecutory act, flattening a complex human being into a category that explains—and thereby dismisses—everything she does.

### **The Practice of Finding the Fourth Position**

So how do we actually do this?

In the moment of activation, pause. When we are triggered—when we feel suddenly pressed into victim consciousness or persecutor rage or bystander paralysis—our nervous system is lit up. We are in survival mode. The prefrontal cortex, where mentalisation happens, goes offline.

So the first practice is simply noticing: *Ah. I'm activated. I'm in the triangle*. This small moment of awareness begins to create the fourth position. We are not just in the experience; we are also observing it.

Name the position you're in. *I'm in the victim position right now. I can feel the impulse to comply and resent it. I'm tempted to become a bystander to my own discomfort*. Naming doesn't make the position disappear, but it loosens its grip. We are not just the person feeling pressured—we are someone who notices they are feeling pressured. That is already the fourth position beginning to emerge.

Get curious about your own experience. What exactly am I feeling? What does this remind me of? When have I felt this before? The intensity of my reaction to the plastic box—the sense of something being asked of my body without my full consent—probably connects to my own history, my own experiences of having my wishes overridden, my own accumulated exhaustion with having to manage others' needs at the expense of my own.

Mentalise yourself before mentalising the other. What is happening in my internal world right now? What am I afraid of? What do I need? This is not self-indulgence—it is necessary preparation for genuine connection. I cannot truly mentalise another person while I remain unconscious of my own mental states.

Then, and only then, mentalise the other. What might be happening for them? What pain might be driving this behaviour? What do they need that they are not getting? What wound are they trying to heal through this interaction?

Find the question that invites them into the fourth position with you. Not eating the brown, repulsive food — swallowing what has been forced upon you (victim). Not Why are you trying to force this on me? (persecutor). Not silence and compliance (bystander). But something like: *I can see how much care went into this, and something is happening in me that I think it's important for us to explore together — something about feeling that I might not have much room to say no. I wonder if that resonates with anything in your own experience.*

This question does several things simultaneously. It honours the genuine care in her gesture. It acknowledges my own experience without attacking hers. It invites her to make a link—gently, without forcing—between what she has enacted and what was once enacted upon her. It models vulnerability without collapsing. It creates space for something new to emerge between us.

### When It Works

When we successfully find the fourth position together, something shifts in the room. There is a sense of two people genuinely meeting—beyond their roles, beyond their defences, beyond the triangle's prescribed choreography.

She might say: *I hadn't thought about that. I just... I wanted to do something nice. But I can hear what you're saying. I didn't give you a choice, did I. That's exactly what they did to me.* And I might say: *Yes. And the fact that you can see that—right now, in this moment—is extraordinary. The care you put into cooking is real. And the not-having-a-choice is real too. Both things are true.*



This is the fourth position. Not *I'm right, you're wrong*, or *my discomfort cancels out your generosity*. But: *We are both here. We have both been shaped by things larger than either of us. And right now, in this room, we have a chance to do something different with that pattern—together.*

### The Mask and the Primary Personality

Gerda Boyesen's work reminds us that we develop a Secondary Personality—a defended self—for survival. John Pierrakos writes about the Mask we wear to navigate a world that was not safe for our authentic nature. These defensive structures are not the problem. They protected us when protection was needed.

The problem is unconsciousness. When we don't know we're wearing the mask, when we cannot distinguish between our defended self and our authentic self, we are trapped—acting out patterns automatically, without awareness, without choice.

When my client arrives with the plastic box, she is wearing the mask of the generous caregiver. It is a real part of her—and it is also a defence, a way of managing the terror that her real needs will once again be trampled. She is trying, through feeding me, to rewrite the story. But because she is doing it unconsciously, she is unwittingly reproducing the very dynamic she is trying to escape.

The fourth position does not require dismantling her defences. It simply invites her to become conscious of them. *Ah—I am in my defended position right now. This is the part of me that learned to give before being taken from, to feed before being forced to swallow.* Once she knows she is wearing the mask, she has options. She can choose differently. She can risk being present without a plastic box as the price of admission.

### **The Healing That Becomes Possible**

From the fourth position — holding and acknowledging all three positions whilst observing the base of the pyramid from its uppermost corner, as though surveying the entire three-dimensional structure from above — healing becomes possible in ways the triangle never allows. When we are caught in the endless cycling between victim, persecutor, and bystander, we are recreating trauma: repeating the past, hoping desperately for a different outcome whilst using the very same strategies that have never worked.

From the fourth position, something genuinely new can emerge.

My client can come to know: *I was coerced. And I am not only someone who was coerced. I have agency, choice, the capacity to offer something freely, without the hidden demand that it be received.* She can recognise: *I have coerced others, without meaning to. And I am not only someone who repeats that pattern. I am capable of seeing it, sitting with the discomfort of that recognition, and choosing something different.*

The triangle is where we are stuck. The fourth position is where we are free.



## An Invitation to Practice

The triangle will keep showing up—in your relationships, your workplace, your therapeutic work, your internal world. You will find yourself in victim consciousness, or persecutor rage, or bystander paralysis. This isn't failure. It is being human, carrying patterns learned when we were too young to choose differently.

But now you can choose. When you notice the triangle, pause. Breathe. Ask yourself: Which position am I in right now? Where is the other person? What would it be like to step outside this pattern, even for a moment?

The fourth position is where we recognise our shared humanity beyond the roles that trauma assigned us. It is where healing happens—not because pain disappears, but because we finally stop unconsciously recreating it.

We are not just victims or persecutors or bystanders. We are human beings, capable of consciousness, capable of choice, capable of meeting each other beyond the triangle—in a place where genuine transformation becomes possible.



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