

FRUSTRATION AND BURNOUT

by Stephen B. Karpman, M.D.

Dictionary descriptions of frustration include words like thwart, oppose, defeat, foil and prevent (from accomplishing), to indicate how the disappointed person's efforts and plans are made useless, ineffectual, fruitless, futile, and in vain.

Many minor events occur daily that are not experienced or understood as frustrations, but that are, in fact, frustrations. When many of these occur consecutively, a person has a "frustrating week." In work situations, too many of these weeks can lead to too many of these months which can lead to the condition called "burnout."

In this article, the Drama Triangle (Karpman, 1968) will be shown to be a useful tool in the inquiry, expression, and clarification of the feelings of frustration. We will see that usually there is an unnoticed game in play. Frustration occurs when the Persecutor in the game interferes with the Rescuer's accomplishment and the Victim's gratification (see Fig. 1).

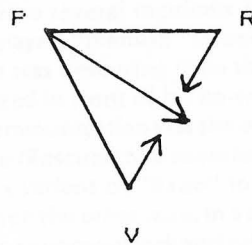


Fig. 1 Frustration

The depth of the frustrating events is elicited with a few questions: How many upsetting situations occurred last week? In what way was each frustrating? What were you trying to accomplish but didn't (Rescuer)? What stood in your way (Persecutor)? What did you want to feel, and what did you end up feeling (Victim)? Which situations are left in limbo?

This helps a person identify the situations and the feelings in those situations. When a pattern is established, further game analysis and script analysis can be done. For game analysis, further questions include: How was the other person your Persecutor, your Rescuer and Victim to you? How were you Persecutor, Rescuer and Victim to them? Is there a name to the game? What drivers (Kahler, 1974) were you in as Rescuer? How could you have done better in your Adult instead of in your drivers? What will you do differently next time? For script analysis, further questions include: What was your ending (payoff) feeling? What was the pattern and how does it happen over and over again in your life? What childhood script scene comes to mind? What did you feel then, and what did you decide? (Gouldings, 1966) Do you want to redecide that?

A Frustrating Week

The number of frustrating situations for an individual varies from week to

week. If it's in the zero to three range, it can be called a "normal week", four to six an "active week", and over seven a "frustrating week." To illustrate the "frustrating week", two cases will be described below along with highlights from the therapeutic work with each.

A. A woman hairdresser described a "lousy week" that left her feeling angry, frustrated and worn out. She could pinpoint seven specific frustrations:

Frustration #1) All week the phone (Persecutor) kept interrupting her work and she had to answer it (Rescuer) because the boss was away and she got more and more rushed (Victim) trying to finish on time. As Rescuer, she was working from all five drivers: Hurry Up and Try Hard (rushed), Be Perfect and Please Me (doing a perfect job under pressure), and Be Strong (don't complain in front of customers).

Frustration #2) She was frustrated as Rescuer with her nickel-and-dimeing cheapskate boss in a "Try hard to get him to be reasonable" over his decision to eliminate the free morning coffee for the customers during the summer. He was the Persecutor and the sleepy-eyed customers were his Victims and she had to make excuses to them as his Rescuer. She felt the game was a social "Rapo" ("Cheapo") in that he promised daily coffee and then withdrew it abruptly without allowing discussion. He was always changing his mind which was 'crazy making' to her.

Frustration #3) She was frustrated with her sister for always "bringing up the past" in a game of "Archaeology" and "Here We Go Again". As Rescuer, she had been working on old issues with her sister with the goal of a closer relationship. But despite her noble goals (and without a contract) nothing was really settled or accomplished. The sister still remained competitive with her in relation to men, and brought up her faults in their presence.

Frustration #4) She had always played the Rescuer in a "Do Me Something" game with the narcissistic sister. The sister rarely returned the consideration. The hairdresser had often broken dates when the younger sister (Victim) needed someone around for support. In contrast, the younger sister, as Persecutor, would never give support for her older sister and would make dates with men when the two sisters had plans to do things together. This had happened again in the past week.

Frustration #5) The woman also was frustrated at herself for being unable to stop smoking and lose weight fast enough. She felt her subconscious was her Persecutor, her mind couldn't Rescue herself, and she was her own Victim. The food and cigarettes became her Rescuer.

Frustration #6) She was frustrated with money problems. She (Victim) wanted more money (Rescuer). The IRS, as Persecutor, put a freeze on her money while investigating her, and she wasn't able to buy a plane ticket to visit her father across the country who was having an operation.

Frustration #7) She was frustrated in more than just the food, drugs, and money Script Currencies (Palmer, 1977) mentioned above. As a Victim, she was also unfulfilled in the One and Only —Sex—and Feelings currencies as well. Her love life had taken another turn for the worse. As Victim, she felt an emptiness and loneliness. Fate was the Persecutor playing cruel tricks on her. As Rescuer, she felt she was going out with a lot of needy men she didn't want to go out with. She believed "You have to kiss a lot of toads before you find a prince."

B. A male businessman described a baffling, topsy-turvy week that left him disoriented and needing a vacation. He carefully examined that “frustrating week” and found seven major frustrations:

Frustration #1) He entered into an important business project with a man who, in the midst of the work, left on vacation (Persecutor). He felt resentment inside (Persecutor) as a Victim who was suddenly without support, and a Rescuer who had to do two people’s work in time for a deadline. Time was the enemy (Persecutor). Additionally, he was to submit the work to an assumed Persecutor who would, he fantasized, criticize it excessively.

Frustration #2) The project was done as a favor to certain people (Rescue) in a game of “I’m Only Trying to Help You.” He didn’t want to do it in the first place (Victim) and now it was taking up time he had planned to use for fun with others. The others saw him as the Persecutor for cancelling the weekend trip. As frustrated Victim, he felt to himself “I’d rather be playing,” as he worked overtime on the project all weekend.

Frustration #3) There were several incidents in which he had to be nice (Rescuer) to a boss who played “Blemish” to people (Persecutor to Victim) and eventually to him. He was Rescuing from the Please Me and Be Strong drivers while being criticized in front of his co-workers as Victim.

Frustration #4) Faulty communication was the enemy (Persecutor) when he tried to give helpful advice (Rescuer) to a superior at work who misinterpreted it as an attack. It was a variant of “Rapo” in that the colleague initially seemed to ask for help. Then the other man, in a game of “Now I’ve Got You, you S.O.B.”, proceeded to counter-attack and call him on his own shortcomings, adding in the game of “Furthermore”. The businessman, however, continued to be “helpful”, which put him in the most difficult position in the Drama Triangle, namely that of Rescuing your Persecutor.

Frustration #5) Faulty communication was again the frustrating Persecutor in an “Uproar” game with his wife. He felt she misinterpreted his overtures to make up (Rescue), and she saw it as a Persecutor manipulation. He was left helpless and confused (Victim) with no knowledge of what to do next. Each saw themselves as the Victim and the other one as Persecutor.

Frustration #6) His inanimate “list of things to do” was also seen as Persecutor because he started to realize that it was a neverending list and he’d never get the satisfaction (Victim) of getting it all done. The blank page would be his Rescuer “someday,” but that completion day was always beyond his reach. Each added item was a Persecutor that left him angry because his work was never done.

Frustration #7) Many other inanimate objects functioned as Persecutor to him that week. The morning newspaper he was trying to read wouldn’t fold back perfectly for him, a pencil that he set down rolled off the table just to frustrate him. And of course, his shoelaces broke. His shoelaces break only when he’s in a hurry, which is always. All the inanimate objects were obeying the laws of physics but he anthropomorphized them into Persecutors, and fought back by getting mad at them.

Burnout

The term burnout usually refers to an exhaustion and mental collapse at work, prompting a person to change professions. It results from a person approaching their work as a Rescuer and repeatedly ending up as a Victim in the Drama Triangle. Usually they are in the game of “I’m Only Trying to Help You” in which unsolicited work is done for ungrateful people. In time, the Rescuer begins to feel like a Victim — frustrated, unappreciated and unstroked — burned out (Fig. 2).

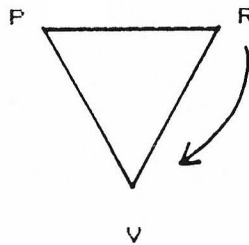


Fig. 2 Burnout

It is helpful for a person to identify the games and drama roles (as above) and to seek out the script issues behind them. A day by day monitoring of the miniscript drivers is extremely useful. A person heading for burnout will not be working in their Adult ego state but will do the work mainly in their drivers. The drivers, by definition, are negative Rescuing roles and inevitably fail, leaving the person feeling like a Victim in their script.

In the *Be Perfect* driver, a person no longer does a good job out of personal pride but gambles his OKness on the job being done perfectly... which never happens, of course. In the *Be Strong* driver, a person “toughs out” bad work conditions and denies the effect on her body and feelings. She considers it a weakness to ask for the help and changes necessary to create a healthier workplace. She may stay too long at a bad job. In the *Hurry Up* driver the person gets his OKness from looking busy and overworked. He won’t give himself enough time nor ask for enough time to get the work done. He is too busy to intelligently reflect on the overall picture. In the *Try Hard* driver, the person puts time into the efforting process but not in the completion of the task. She tires herself by trying and trying harder and doesn’t replenish herself by celebrating achievements. The person with the *Please Me* driver is a people pleaser who stakes his OKness on the casual approval of others. This can never be as satisfying as it is for the person with personal goals and pride. Criticism is seen as constructive for the person working in their Adult, but it can be devastating for the Please Me person who, in their Child ego state, will feel the criticism as Parent disapproval.

Escapes

Some individuals find their own ways to escape the frustrations and pressures, while others do not. If the work is taken too seriously there will be no room for Free Child whimsy. Healthy relief at the *Rescue* corner of the triangle can include daydreaming (escapes and mischief), laughing at the absurdity, short and long vacations, privacy or anonymity to get away from

people, shutting off the phone and doing nothing, meditations and spiritual reflections, nature walks, reviving old hobbies, sports, sex, entertainment, etc. At the *Persecutor* corner, the pent up aggression can be worked off with physical exercise and exertion, and the expression of anger. Action can be taken to get closure in the work situation, or a sense of closure can be achieved by completing projects, house cleanups, or other personal goals. At the *Victim* corner, a person can tune into their feelings, clarify them in the manner described in this paper, have a good cry, call lots of friends on the phone, meet with them to talk, and get to know the *Victim* feelings — how they got there and what to do the next time in order to avoid frustrations.

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