

# Working Creatively with Triangles

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People often seek counseling because they cannot or will not communicate their full range of feelings to the significant people in their lives. So, when they come to you for help, they will reveal feelings and grievances to you that they have not yet revealed to the people for whom they have these feelings. Whenever you receive these communications, you participate in a triangular relationship. Triangular relationships form a part of working with individual members of families (children and teenagers without parents present), or one member of a marital, or intimate relationship. Also, whenever group members subgroup, they often triangulate by confiding with other members, or with the leader in private, about how they feel about other group members.

*Dysfunctional triangles.* It is natural, but not healthy, for the therapist and confidant to support the client at the expense of the non-participating partner or family member. The client is often in a passive, if not victimized, state of mind, and will try to convince you that the other person cannot or will not change, and prevents the client from making constructive changes, or openly confronting the other person. If you support the client in his/her sense of passivity, you run the risk of 1) further disabling the client, 2) perpetuating the myth that the other person is intractable, and 3) intensifying the conflict between the client and the other person(s).

*Therapeutic triangles.* If the therapist or confidant supports the client in communicating his or her needs *directly* with the other party, the therapist transforms a dysfunctional triangle into a therapeutic triangle. It may take the client some time to build up their courage, and to define what it is he or she needs to say, but the counseling process focuses on what the *client* needs to do, not the other person's response to them.

A therapeutic triangle may involve some or all of the following:

1) reframing the conflict as an opportunity for the client to "find his voice," "speak his truth," and reframing the other party as a "teacher" or "taskmaster" who is well suited for the job of provoking necessary change in the client.

2) focusing on what the client has not done, and can do, rather than the other party's behaviors.

3) encouraging direct, personal communication with the other person.

4) role playing such communications in order to prepare the client to enact them in real life.

5) convening sessions with all members of the family/marriage/relationship, and encouraging direct communication between parties.