

Reducing Holiday Stress: Escaping Family Triangles

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

The "triangle" is a three person communication system in a family. It involves an attempt to reduce stress and tension in the system by reducing the direct expression of uncomfortable feelings between two people. The communication triangle involves a third person to carry messages between two people.

Dysfunctional families often use communication triangles to avoid direct confrontation or communication about conflict. Ultimately, dragging a third person into a relationship between two other people is about avoidance of adult responsibility. A classic example is the parent who tells one of the adult children (the "third person") about the inappropriate or hurtful behavior of another adult child. The third person relays the information to the sibling who behaved inappropriately or hurt mom's feelings. The "offending" child, of course, has his own version of what happened, an explanation for his behavior, and complaint about the mother's behavior. The third person is then expected to run that information back to the mother. This constitutes a communication triangle. This third person often serves a "referee" between family members. They often find themselves serving in this role in several relationships. The third person or referee may initially feel "special" or "important". Family members that have "control" issues often find themselves serving as the "third person" or "referee". Eventually, the third person ends up feeling used, confused about divided loyalties, and resentful.

The holidays are a time when covert conflicts come to the foreground as different parts of the family try to make plans for holiday gatherings. When family systems routinely talk about each other behind their backs, or use a third person to communicate, this pattern can become obvious during the Holiday Stress Period.

The referee is expected to step in to offer communication and problem solving assistance. While these unhealthy communication triangles can be eliminated, it takes a lot of work to escape the triangles. The first step in abdicating responsibility for other adults' relationships is to identify that you are engaging in this behavior. If you know that you are playing referee and want to stop, think about what you will say the next time that someone drags you into their relationship conflict. Write yourself a brief script. It might sound something like this, "What you are talking about is none of my business. That is between you and him/her. I suggest that you talk to him/her about it instead of me."

At the beginning of this process of change, it will often feel uncomfortable or aggressive. It is assertive rather than aggressive to stand up for yourself without tearing down others. Initially, you may just recognize after the fact that you have been playing referee again. The more you pay attention to your interactions and your reactions to them, the better you will get at identifying your participation in the triangle while still engaged in the conversation. When you realize that you are playing reference or information conduit, just stop talking. Identify what you feel. Take a breath. Use an assertive statement

indicating that you resign from the position of referee or third person. Use your simple script. When the other person objects, repeat your script. It takes practice and repetition to escape the triangles. It often feels uncomfortable, setting boundaries with others, but this is exactly what you are doing. It can also be confusing when you want to be supportive. When you are trying to break out of triangles, it is helpful to take yourself out of the consultation business in relationships until you can tell the difference between supportive listening and taking responsible for solving someone else's relationship difficulties. Resigning from your unpaid referee position will free you up mentally and emotionally to own responsibility for your own relationships. Giving up responsibility for others' relationships is one more thing that can help reduce your holiday stress.

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