



Triangulation

How Indirect Communication and Loyalty Conflicts Harm Relationships and Family Systems

Author: Dean Harrison — Counselling Psychologist / Managing Director, iflow Psychology

What Is Triangulation?

Triangulation is a relational pattern where conflict between two people is managed by drawing in a third person — intentionally or unintentionally — instead of resolving the issue directly.

It is one of the most common and powerful mechanisms seen in:

- Enmeshed families
- High-stress households
- Couples experiencing conflict
- Parent–child loyalty tensions
- Workplaces with poor communication
- Friendships marked by alliances, gossip, or exclusion

Triangulation creates a “three-pointed relationship,” allowing two people to stabilise their tension at the expense of the third person, ultimately damaging all involved.

Triangulation is a core process described in Structural Family Therapy and Bowen Family Systems Theory, because it shows how anxiety moves through a family or relationship system.

Why Triangulation Happens

Triangulation is not usually malicious. It is a coping strategy used when people:

- Avoid conflict
- Fear emotional intensity
- Struggle to self-regulate
- Lack healthy boundaries
- Seek reassurance or alliance
- Feel insecure or controlled
- Want validation for their perspective
- Fear abandonment or rejection

Because the conflict is redirected onto a third person, the original relationship dyad becomes temporarily more stable — but the system as a whole becomes dysfunctional.

Examples of Triangulation

1. Parent–Child Triangles

A parent vents to a child about the other parent or their partner, making the child an emotional confidant or ally.

2. Couple Triangles

One partner complains to a friend, family member, or even a child instead of addressing the relationship concern directly.

3. Sibling Triangles

Siblings align with one parent against the other, or siblings compete for parental approval, often encouraged inadvertently by the parent.

4. Workplace Triangles

A staff member goes to a colleague to complain about another staff member instead of speaking directly or using proper channels.

5. Friendship Triangles

Two friends bond by discussing the third—creating alliances, gossip, or exclusion.

How Triangulation Harms Relationships

Triangulation may feel relieving in the moment, but the long-term consequences can include:

1. Loyalty Conflicts

Individuals feel torn between people they care about (“If I support one, I betray the other”).

2. Anxiety and Emotional Exhaustion

The third person carries emotional burdens that aren’t theirs to carry.

3. Erosion of Trust

People feel manipulated, used, or undermined.

4. Communication Breakdown

Problems are talked around people instead of with people.

5. Identity and Boundary Problems

People lose clarity about:

- What they believe
- What they feel
- What they are responsible for

6. Reinforcement of Enmeshment

Triangulation prevents healthy differentiation and keeps individuals stuck in dysfunctional roles.

7. Generational Transmission

Children raised in triangulating systems often replicate the same patterns in their adult relationships.

Common Roles in Triangulation

Triangulation often assigns people into predictable roles (even without awareness):

1. The Distancer

Avoids direct conflict and brings in a third party to absorb tension.

2. The Pursuer / Complainer

Seeks validation, reassurance, or alliance from the third person.

3. The Third-Party Rescuer / Buffer

Absorbs emotional pressure, solves problems, mediates, or provides advice - often at personal cost.

These roles become rigid over time, leaving individuals stuck in roles they never consciously agreed to.

Why Triangulation Maintains Dysfunction

Triangulation “works” in the short term because:

- It reduces immediate anxiety
- It avoids uncomfortable conversations
- It provides emotional relief
- It creates a sense of alliance or power

But it fails in the long term because:

- Issues are never resolved
- The third person becomes overwhelmed
- Relationships weaken
- Resentment grows
- Boundaries blur
- Conflict intensifies over time

Triangulation is a stability tactic that destabilises everything.

How Triangulation Relates to Enmeshment

Triangulation and enmeshment often occur together.

Enmeshed families struggle to tolerate:

- Emotional distance
- Disagreement
- Boundaries
- Independence

Triangulation becomes a tool to:

- Pull people back into the system
- Maintain closeness at the expense of autonomy
- Diffuse anxiety
- Prevent family members from challenging the status quo

This is why triangulation was historically used by Minuchin and Bowen as a primary indicator of a poorly differentiated family system.

Breaking the Triangulation Cycle

To stop triangulation, you must strengthen:

- Boundaries
- Assertiveness
- Emotional regulation
- Direct communication
- Tolerance for discomfort and conflict

Triangulation breaks when each person takes responsibility for their role in the triangle.

Practical Strategies to Reduce and Prevent Triangulation

1. Shift Communication Back to the Source

If someone brings you into a triangle, gently redirect: “This sounds important. Have you spoken with them directly?”

2. Set Clear Emotional Boundaries Avoid taking responsibility for:

- Mediating
- Carrying messages
- Managing someone else’s emotions

3. Identify Your Feelings vs Theirs Ask yourself:

- “Is this my emotion or theirs?”
- “Is this my responsibility?”

4. Separate Facts From Interpretations

Encourage direct clarification instead of assumptions.

5. Reduce Over-Functioning

Stop rescuing, fixing, or smoothing conflict for others.

Rescuing reinforces helplessness and prolongs conflict.

6. Increase Transparency

Where appropriate, move from secret discussions to open communication.

7. Learn to Tolerate Discomfort

Conflict is uncomfortable — but necessary for growth and authentic connection.

8. Work on Differentiation

Develop the ability to:

- Hold your own beliefs
- Express your feelings directly
- Remain connected without being fused or reactive

Using the Karpman Drama Triangle to Understand Triangulation

Triangulation often pulls people into the classic Drama Triangle roles:

- Victim (“I’m helpless, you fix this”)
- Rescuer (“I’ll solve this for you”)
- Persecutor (“They’re the problem”)

These roles trap people in circular conflict and prevent maturity, autonomy, and accountability.

How the Drama Triangle Helps Break Triangulation

The Drama Triangle provides a clear framework for understanding relational roles and moving toward healthier alternatives.

Using the model, individuals can learn to shift from:

- Rescuer → Supporter
- Victim → Empowered individual
- Persecutor → Assertive communicator

Because you already have a separate article on the Karpman Drama Triangle, your Triangulation sheet can link to it naturally: For more on breaking these relational roles, see our companion article on the Karpman Drama Triangle.

This allows cross-linking while keeping this sheet focused.

A Healthier Alternative: The “Straight-Line Relationship”

Healthy relationships remove the third point of the triangle.

This involves:

- Direct communication
- Clear boundaries
- Accountability
- Honesty
- Emotional responsibility
- Empathy
- Reflective listening
- Respect for autonomy

The more direct the communication, the less room triangulation has to survive.

A Final Word

Triangulation is a powerful but destructive relational pattern. It is maintained by anxiety, unclear boundaries, indirect communication, and avoidance of emotional discomfort.

1. Awareness is the first step.
2. Changing your role is the second.
3. Strengthening boundaries and communication is the third.

With support, people can move from triangulation to healthier, direct, respectful relationships based on authenticity and trust.
