

Ep #70: Free Yourself from Drama at Work



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With Your Host

Heather Branscombe

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Welcome to *Clinicians Creating Impact*, a show for physical therapists, occupational therapists, and speech-language pathologists looking to take the next step in their careers and make a real difference in the lives of their clients. If you're looking to improve the lives of neurodiverse children and families with neurological-based challenges, grow your own business, or simply show up to help clients, this is the show for you.

I'm Heather Branscombe, Therapist, Certified Coach, Clinical Director, and Owner of Abilities Neurological Rehabilitation. I have over 25 years of experience in both the public and private sectors, and I'm here to help you become the therapist you want to be, supporting people to work towards their dreams and live their best lives. You ready to dive in? Let's go.

Hi there, friend. I hope you're doing well today. I don't know about you, but I'm just loving that the days are getting sunnier and it's getting warmer. And when I'm recording this, which is actually at the beginning of May, it is just super exciting to get closer and closer to summer.

I'm really excited to chat with you today about this concept that I have come across before, but I've recently come across it again in some of my new coaching certification work I think I've talked about in some of the earlier podcasts. And I instantly knew when I came across this work again, it could be of benefit for you in your work, probably even today.

So here's my question for you, do you have drama at work? A lot of people will probably say yes to this because drama can feel like a normal part of work. But what I'm actually coming to see is that while drama can feel common, it actually doesn't need to feel normal. Understanding why something feels like drama is an amazing way to shift the narrative and actually move on from that drama dynamic. I'm here to help you with that today.

But before we chat more about that, I have a small ask of you. If you could please follow, rate and review this podcast, there's a reason all podcasters say this, it's because it feeds the algorithm so that when a clinician like you is searching for something like this, this kind of podcast will come up for them.

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Secondly, if you can share this podcast, or better yet a favorite episode of yours with a colleague, that would be even more amazing. If you've heard this before and you meant to do it before and you maybe haven't done it yet, it's okay. Don't worry about it. Let this be the sign, today's the day. Think about that colleague, clinical bestie that you have and think about what episode might be most helpful for them.

If this is your first episode, first of all, welcome. Thank you so much for listening and hopefully as you listen you can decide who of your clinical friends would love to hear more of this kind of information to help them at work. Thank you so much in advance for your action here. And with that, let's get back to the episode.

So there's actually a framework around drama that actually describes what's happening when something feels like a drama. And it's actually been well known for a while now, so far ago it was before I was born. So in 1968 psychologist Stephen Karpman developed a framework called The Karpman Drama Triangle. And this framework talks about the roles people play in a drama triangle and how those roles feed into that kind of situation that we like to call drama or dramatic.

As Dr. Karpman describes it, there are three roles in a drama triangle, and see if you can notice yourself at all in these three roles. The three roles are first the victim, which sounds like, oh, poor me. As the victim, you can feel attacked, helpless, needy, and have a lot of self-pity.

The second role is the role of the rescuer. And that's the role where we say, oh, poor you. That rescuer rushes to comfort, to calm, and to soothe, typically the victim.

And then the third role in this triangle is the persecutor. And when we think about the persecutor, we're thinking they are the problem. Ironically, we don't often self-prescribe ourselves as the persecutor, but the persecutor is and or is seen by others as a cruel attacker. And yet, ironically, they see themselves as the victim.

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Now, I don't know about you, how you felt as I was talking about those roles, but if I'm being really real with you, and that's all I can really be to you, I can see how I have actually played all of those roles at some time in my career as a clinician. And it's something that I'm not really proud of. But I think it's really important to acknowledge that, especially if the goal is to reduce the drama at work. So let me give you some examples.

These are real world, vulnerable examples for me. When I think about how I have thought of myself as a victim, not so much now, but when I've been working, at times I've thought of myself as a work victim of the organization and the systems that I worked in. So that would look like me thinking or saying something like, I can't do the work that I want to because they, whoever they is, won't let me.

That sounds almost honorable in a way, but it also sounds like I'm a prisoner at work, instead of a professional in a highly valued career, which I am, who could get work at alternative places whenever I wanted to, which is also true. That sounds a lot less like a victim, doesn't it? Even before that, I never actually even would bring up those concerns in a meaningful way to people that could change it. So in that way, I definitely played the victim at that time.

When I think about myself being a rescuer, I think we often can fall into this place when we are taking on that role as a clinician. For me, it would sound like something like, I can help you, client, rescue you from your struggle you have. Or even now, I can rescue you, clinician, from the struggle that you have. I can solve your problems, instead of I can help you solve the problem. You notice that difference? Again, I think so many of us as clinicians go into that role at times. I know I have, especially if you have clients that are happy to play the role of the victim.

Again, this is me being super vulnerable, but I can certainly label myself as a persecutor. It's very easy to label a funding source, clients, or bosses as a cruel attacker. And I know that because I've done that myself. Again, this is not to shame anybody, really, if anything I'm judging myself. But I really don't want to judge myself. I just want to meet myself with compassion, and here's this

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opportunity for you to meet yourself with compassion, noticing that we all can have that ability to fall into those roles at times.

As clinicians, it's important to see what role we play in any situation that feels dramatic. Because first, I would say as a group, we have a tendency, again, to jump into this role of the rescuer. Again, I say that as someone who has done it myself many times, and will probably make that mistake going forward. It's not that I want to, but it feels like an almost natural place for us to go.

This can have the unintended negative consequence of reinforcing our clients' or our co-workers' perceptions of themselves as unempowered victims. That is a problem because if we truly believe in client-centered care, which I know I wholeheartedly do. And the fact that you are looking to create a bigger impact for yourself and others tells me that you do as well. We know that client-centered care is all about empowering others.

So this framework and the roles that we unintentionally fall into are really a great way to describe that downward spiral that we also call drama. Again, I want to acknowledge, I fall into these traps all the time. They are totally normal, but it doesn't mean that you're a bad clinician or a bad employer if this happens.

So now that we've talked about that dramatic triangle, what to do about it. Let me give you some steps. The first step is just to notice it. You're starting to do that today, and decide if you want to reframe yourself in the situation that you're thinking about, in this dramatic situation, to be able to start to ease that feeling of drama.

And fortunately, there is a way to turn this pattern or this dynamic upside down. There's an author named David Emerald, and he created a positive alternative to this drama triangle, and it's called the Empowerment Dynamic. Of course, I'm going to love it, and I think you're going to love it too. This kind of dynamic will help you become a better clinician and have happier relationships, both inside and outside of work. I know that because I use this myself and it definitely works.

So here's how the empowerment dynamic works. It's really just taking those three roles of the victim, the rescuer, and the persecutor and switching it on its

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head. So the persecutor becomes the challenger. The rescuer becomes the coach. And the victim becomes the creator. So let's look at this role by role.

When you're tempted to see a critic as a persecutor, you can also choose to reframe this person as a challenger who's actually a valuable feedback mechanism. So a client, a coworker, or someone else in authority can deliver feedback that can feel critical and maybe even limiting. And this person, if we view them as a challenger, can also provide an opportunity to develop a more efficient and maybe even more effective care.

So you can help reframe this by searching for anything meaningful that you can find and illuminating in the feedback that you're getting. Once you find that meaningful and illuminating feedback, you can apply it. And if you don't find anything illuminating or helpful, ignore it. The persecutor says you are bad, but if you reframe it, the challenger says this isn't working for me.

And this can apply when we're giving feedback as well. Instead of labeling systems, coworkers, or clients as persecuting, what if they're providing an opportunity to clarify our values and our boundaries? If we look at it that way, how could that actually help you to be a better clinician?

I know that the systems that we have here at Abilities are better because others have challenged us repeatedly to clarify our boundaries and to find a better way. And I know that our systems will be better five years from now because I do try to see what initially feels like a persecutor as an actual challenger, even if it takes me a while to do so.

So second, when you see someone who is seemingly drowning in hurt feelings and other struggles, my advice would be not to rush in as a soothing rescuer. I get it, it feels good to you and the other person to rush in and rescue. And I'm not saying that help isn't what is needed in this situation. The question, or the better question, is what kind of help is actually helpful? What if instead we chose to believe this person is powerful and can solve their own problems, even when they feel like they're struggling and they have a lot of hurt feelings?

Being like a coach in this situation would look like something like holding faith that this situation is an actual opportunity for this person to grow. It's the

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opposite of pity, right? Because pity is like a poison that creates dependency and incapacity. So the rescuer would say something like, poor you, you bad persecutor, let me do that for you.

Whereas the coach would come in and say something like, hey, this is an interesting challenge. What are you going to do about it? What do you want to do about it and how can I support you? Do you notice the feeling that it has when you ask that question in a different way?

I think that when we're using our clinical skills, we actually naturally do this really well. We meet people where we're at, and then we offer them choices for the next step, letting them decide if and when they're ready to take that step. That's the kind of long-term help that is so valuable as a coach and as a clinician, and why so much of what we do as a clinician is actually coaching.

Finally, when your pride is wounded and you're tempted to become and feel like a victim, know that this is also your chance to be a powerful creator. Every situation that feels challenging to you is also an opportunity for you to exercise your creative imagination. That's why every hero, when you think about the hero's journey, that's why every hero encounters huge difficulties. So you can ask yourself a question like this, what can I create from this situation?

If you feel like a victim, and if you find yourself choosing sympathy or you're gossiping about people behind their back, you're really in a no-win dynamic that will ultimately negatively impact your work and your impact in the world. So I would offer that you choose to use the empowerment dynamic instead.

Whenever you feel victimized, create something positive. Whenever you're tempted to be an enabling rescuer, stand strong and be that coach. And whenever you're attacking anyone, including that behind-the-back gossip that we all do, consider giving them brave, useful, face-to-face feedback.

Do that, and I guarantee you, you will step out of that downward drama drain and set yourself up and those that you work with to actually be freer. This is the path to decrease drama in your life, and I know that you can do it. So give it a try and let me know how it goes.

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I absolutely want to hear how it goes well and how it doesn't go well. Please feel free to email me, heather@abilitiesrehabilitation.com. Yes, I am busy. Of course I'm busy. We're all busy, but I'm never too busy to talk to you. With that, I wish you well in this upcoming week and I will talk to you soon. Take care.

If you enjoyed today's show and don't want to worry about missing an episode, you can follow the show wherever you listen to your podcasts. And if you haven't already, I would really appreciate it if you could leave a rating and review to let me know what you think and to help others find *Clinicians Creating Impact*.

It doesn't have to be a five-star rating, although I sure hope you love the show. I'd really want your honest feedback so I can create an awesome podcast that provides tons of value. To learn more about me and the work that I do, visit my website at www.abilitiesrehabilitation.com/clinicianscorner to download your free Getting it All Done at Work process and to see what I'm up to. Thanks so much.

Thanks for joining me this week on the *Clinicians Creating Impact* podcast. Want to learn more about the work I'm doing with Abilities Rehabilitation? Head on over to abilitiesrehabilitation.com. See you next week.