

Giving and receiving effective feedback

(and why it is so frustratingly hard to accomplish)

KRISTEN ATKINS, MD

DIRECTOR OF ANATOMIC PATHOLOGY, UVA

FREQUENTER OF TOUGH GIVING AND RECEIVING TOUGH FEEDBACK

OCTOBER 27, 2025

Asked to be the chair of a committee

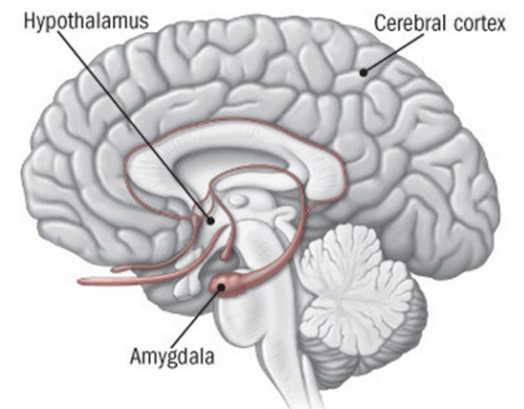
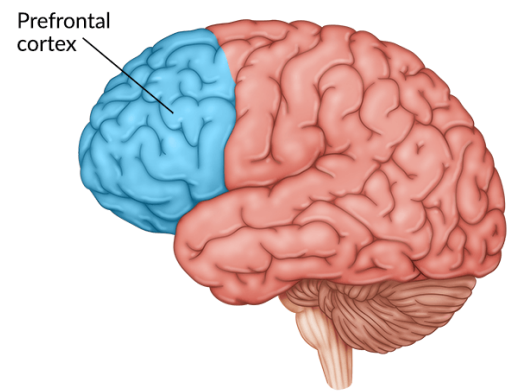




My Saturday morning...

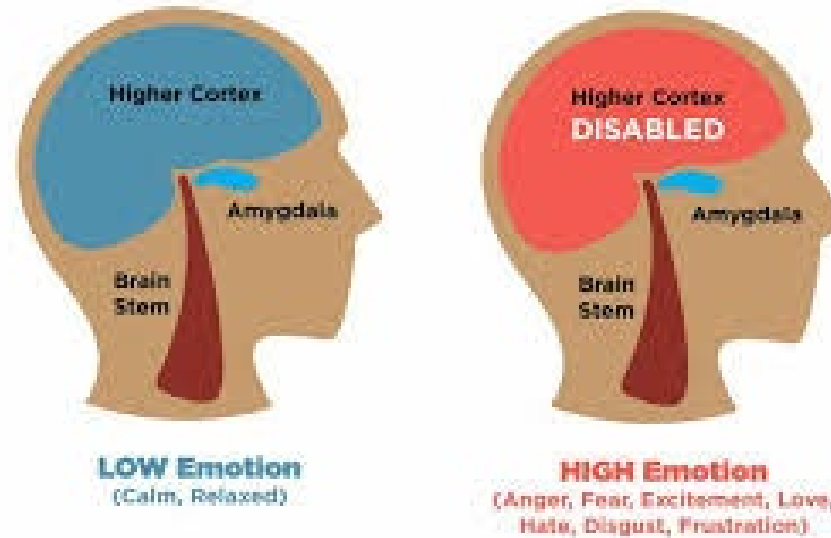






Limbic System

Amygdala Hijack



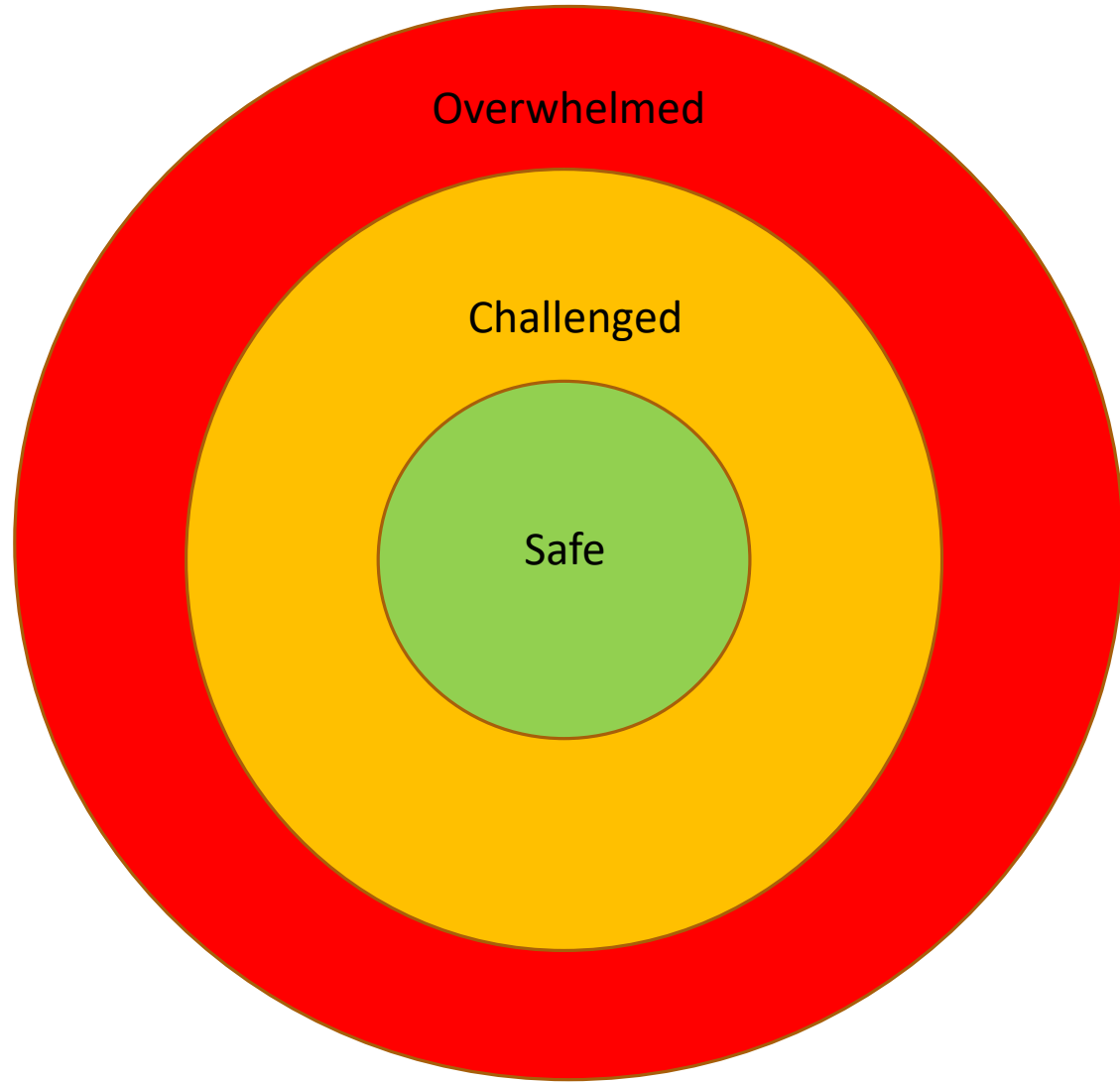
OVERWHELMING emotional response out of proportion to the stimulus because it has TRIGGERED an emotional threat!

Amygdala triggers a fight, flight, freeze, fawn response (epinephrine and cortisol)

Amygdala **SOS!**

Hypothalamus **On it!**
Activate sympathetic nervous system

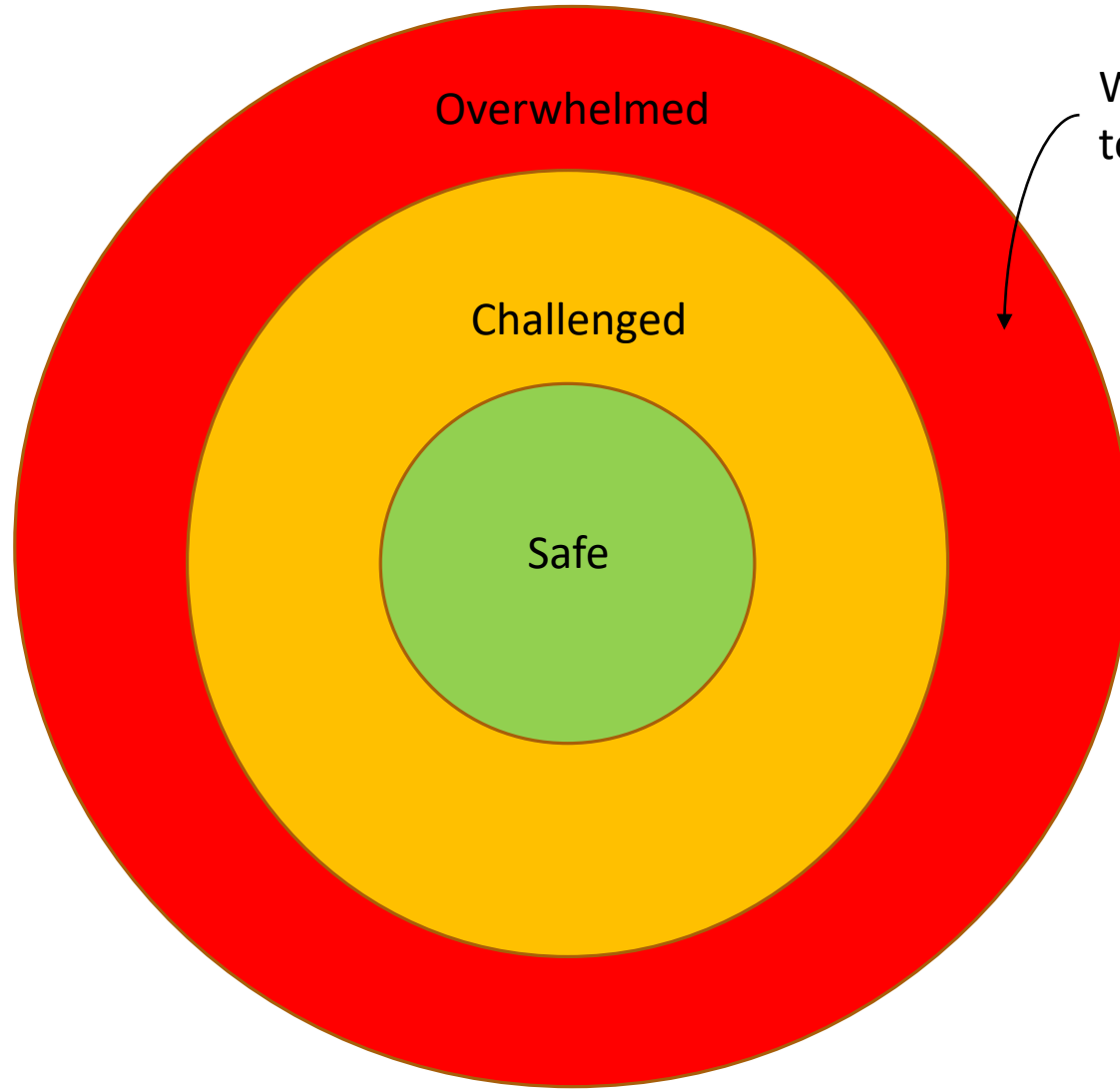
Adrenal glands **Release epinephrine!**



Overwhelmed

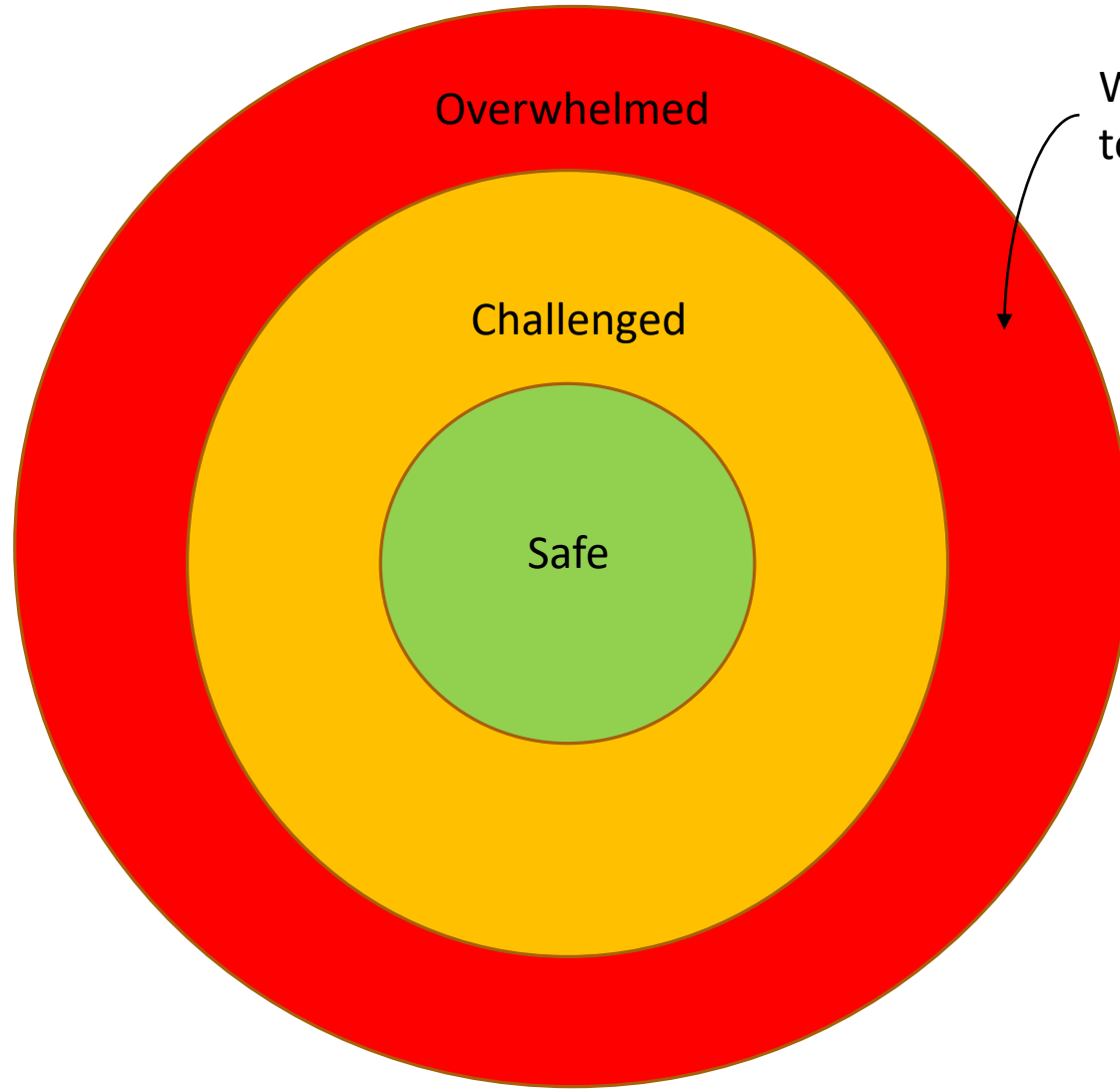
Challenged

Safe

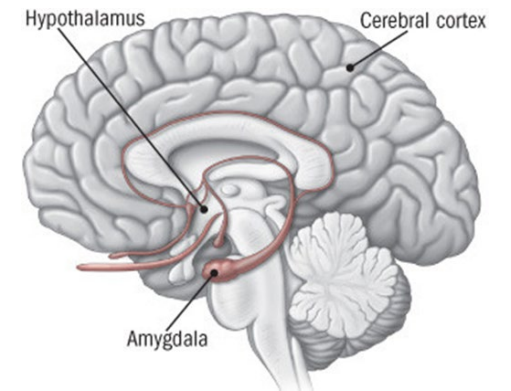


When here, there is only one thing to do





When here, there is only one thing to do



Trick is to...

Counteract the stress hormones by lowering cortisol levels through soothing...Re-engage the prefrontal cortex with language, new stimulation...

Coping with Amygdala Hijack



Name the emotion



6-second rule



Breathing

- Gentle touch
- Hand rubbing
- Walking
- Symmetric tapping



Change the setting



Share the mental load



Draw on mindfulness



My call was over and I checked my email...

Subject: Feedback

Dr. Atkins,

I had my annual review and was told that I am difficult to get along with and that the fellows find me challenging to do prelims with. I don't think this is true and feel targeted. My supervisor has barely observed my performance. Would you have time to talk to me about this? You've worked with me for years and we have never had a problem- I would appreciate your help and advice.

Wait, is this actually feedback?

Subject: Feedback

Dr. Atkins,

I had my annual review and was told that I am difficult to get along with and that the fellows find me challenging to do prelims with. I don't think this is true and feel targeted. My supervisor has barely observed my performance. Would you have time to talk to me about this? You've worked with me for years and we have never had a problem- I would appreciate your help and advice.



Feedback has happened when the recipient understands what is being asked to continue, modify or extinguish





3 Feedback Triggers

1

Truth Triggers

"That feedback is wrong"

2

Relationship Triggers

"Who are you to say that"

3

Identity Triggers

"That's not who I am"

Thanks For The Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well.

Subject: Feedback

Dr. Atkins,

I had my annual review and was told that I am difficult to get along with and that the fellows find me challenging to do prelims with. I don't think this is true and feel targeted. My supervisor has barely observed my performance. Would you have time to talk to me about this? You've worked with me for years and we have never had a problem- I would appreciate your help and advice.

3 Feedback Triggers

1

Truth Triggers

"That feedback is wrong"

2

Relationship Triggers

"Who are you to say that"

3

Identity Triggers

"That's not who I am"

Or even worse:

"See I'm a phony. I knew it."

General musings about feedback

1. Most people are REALLY bad at starting feedback
2. Our defensive tendencies are just that...tendencies
3. Don't have to be a bumper car of emotions and story telling
4. Cultivating a curious mind is a huge first step

3 types of feedback

| Type of feedback | Giver's purpose |
|---------------------|--|
| Appreciation | To see, acknowledge, connect, motivate, thank |
| Coaching | To help receiver expand knowledge, sharpen skill, improve capability |
| Evaluation | To rate or rank against a set of standards, to align expectations, to inform decision making |

After a lab meeting presentation, the PI
says “Nice job”

Nice job



Golden Rule of Evaluations

There should be nothing in an evaluation that takes the recipient by surprise. Any areas of improvement or deficiencies should have been discussed during their rotation, or day to day interactions.

Not fair if the person didn't get a chance to modify their behavior.

Golden Rule of Evaluations

There should be nothing in an evaluation that takes the recipient by surprise. Any areas of improvement or deficiencies should have been discussed during their rotation, or day to day interactions.

Not fair if the person didn't get a chance to modify their behavior.

e.g. How would you feel if this was your evaluation and no one had told you/talked to you?

- KAA keeps her bench disorganized.
- KAA struggles with communicating her experiments at lab meeting. She speaks too softly and her overviews are hard to follow.

Golden Rule of Evaluations

There should be nothing in an evaluation that takes the recipient by surprise. Any areas of improvement or deficiencies should have been discussed during their rotation, or day to day interactions.

Not fair if the person didn't get a chance to modify their behavior.

e.g. How would you feel if this was your evaluation and no one had told you/talked to you?

- KAA struggles with communicating her experiments at lab meeting. She speaks too softly and her overviews are hard to follow.
- KAA has shown improvement in presenting at lab meeting. She gives a good background to get everyone up to speed and then discusses current experiments with good images. We discussed honing in on 1-2 areas for discussion (rather than putting every problem on the list) so that the group can help troubleshoot effectively in the time that we have.

3 types of feedback

| Type of feedback | Giver's purpose |
|---------------------|--|
| Appreciation | To see, acknowledge, connect, motivate, thank |
| Coaching | To help receiver expand knowledge, sharpen skill, improve capability |
| Evaluation | To rate or rank against a set of standards, to align expectations, to inform decision making |

Good Coaching Feedback...

Specific

Timely

Objective

Consequences

Next Steps

Encouraging, not punitive

Coaching a process: national presentation, poster presentation, Lab meeting update/ discussion, Research in progress presentation

What went well- performer

What went well- coach

What would help/was tough- performer

What would help- coach

Some observations

Coaching can be dispersed in small doses.

We are afraid to give “critical” feedback. Why is this?

Preparing

Identify the behavior rather than generalities

Identify the impact of the problem

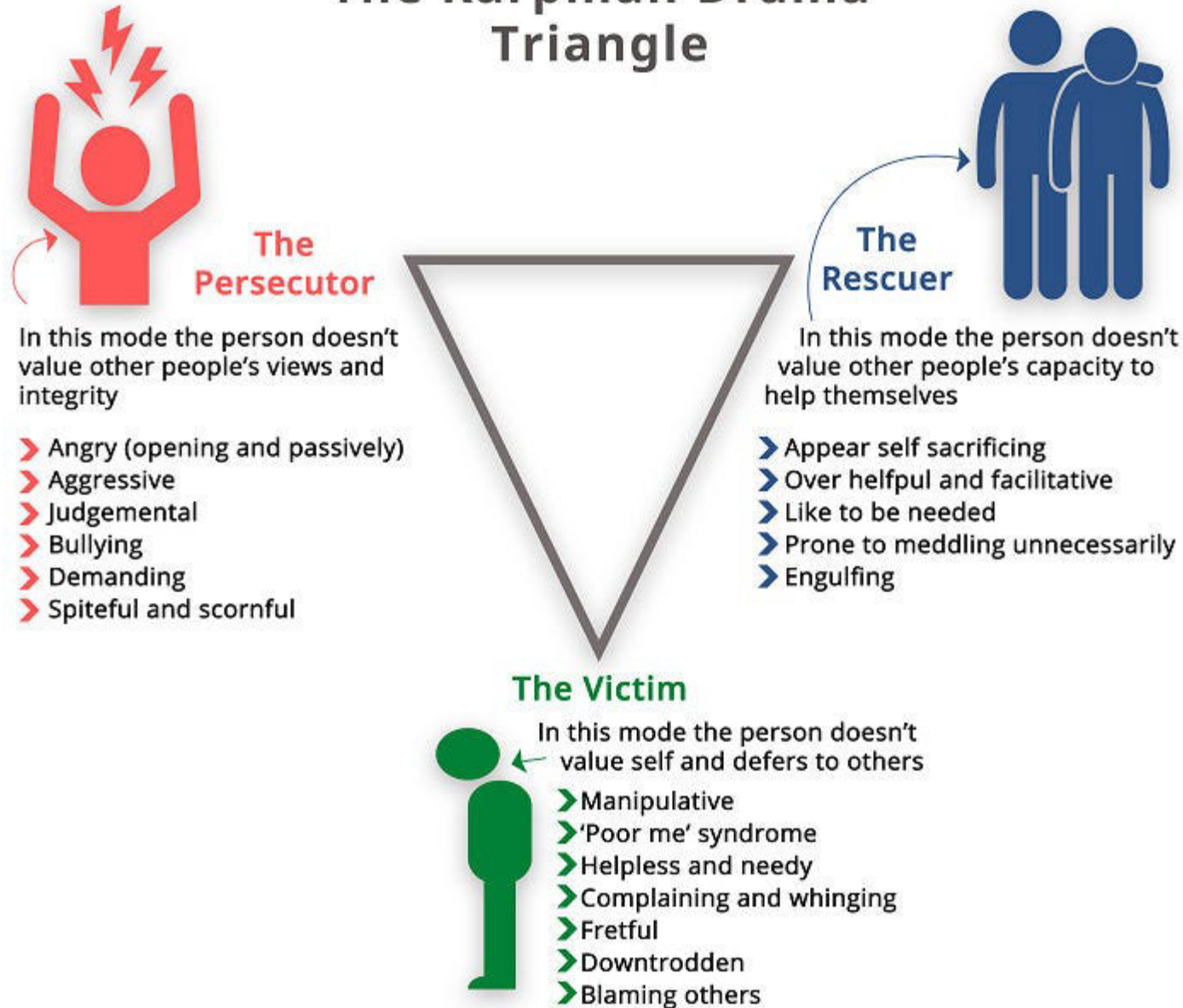
What was the outcome of the behavior- why was this a problem

Now I had to have all of those 1:1
conversations



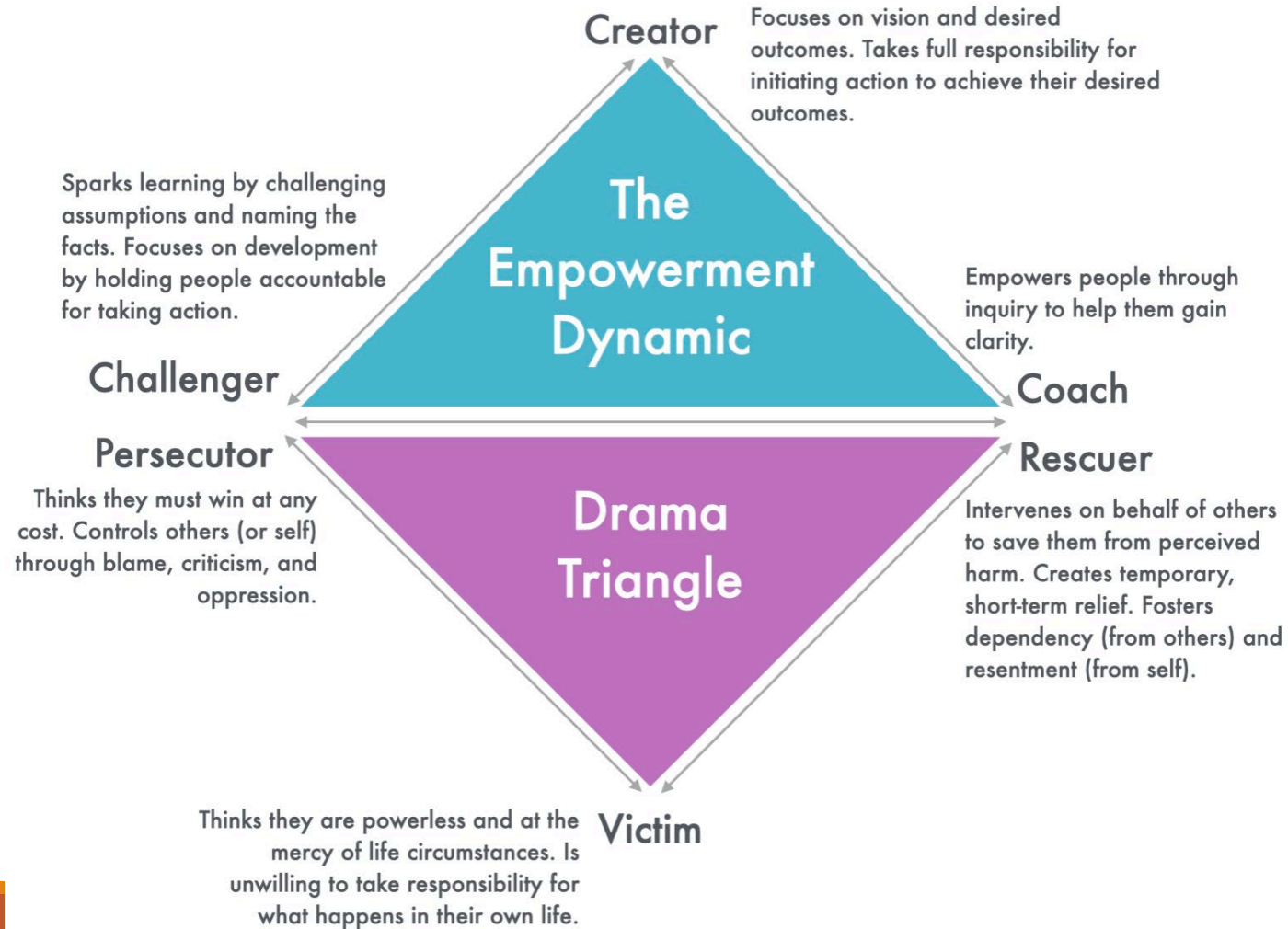
I am so mad at her for so poorly communicating with this committee and leaving me hanging. Now I have to spend an inordinate amount of time cleaning up a mess that I didn't make. If the current president had discussed this with the current chair, this wouldn't have happened. And of course I now have to represent him and the entire society as well.

The Karpman Drama Triangle



The Empowerment Dynamic

Shift into the Empowerment Dynamic by moving from Victim to Creator; Rescuer to Coach; and Persecutor to Challenger.



I am so mad at her for so poorly communicating with this committee, not talking to the current president (who was the one who did the fricking chair assignments) and leaving me hanging on that stupid zoom meeting. Now I have to spend an inordinate amount of time cleaning up a mess that I didn't make and teach this group better communication strategies.

I wonder why she didn't tell the committee that I was going to be chair. This is a productive and tight-knit group and they might not know how appointments are manifested in the society. I want to cultivate strong (even when it's hard) communication between the president and the committee chairs. I will learn from each of my meetings where the trust is failing and work on empowering them to speak up.

What about tougher feedback?

Take care of yourself first

- What are you afraid of? Be honest...
- Run the Drama Triangle- can you reframe to healthier approaches?
- Reframe the entire conversation to coaching
 - They need to know
 - They deserve to know
 - I would want to know if the roles were reversed
 - I want to be kind and clear

If you are angry, triggered, STOP TALKING, you haven't taken care of yourself enough to address the problem

A mistake came up at tumor board, the TB faculty disagreed with the diagnosis that had managerial consequences, and the faculty forgot to tell the original diagnosing faculty about the error. They find out 1 month later when the clinician reached out to them about amending the report.



How do I get started? Prepare...

1. Take care of your emotions first.
2. What is the kindest reason the person is behaving this way?
3. What do you want to say and how?
 1. Is this an intent versus impact situation?
 2. Is this a repeating problem?
 3. Have you discussed this previously?
4. Anticipate responses
 1. What I want and what I don't want

In the moment

Just bring up the topic, ask how things are going from their perspective.

- Often they will id the thing you want to discuss
 - If they don't, you have identified a blind spot

Stop talking

- Let the person ask questions or reflect
- If they say nothing, ask, is this tracking or what are you thinking?

Stop talking

- Let the person ask questions or reflect
- If they say nothing, ask, is this tracking or what are you thinking?

Stop talking

- Look for triggering in yourself and them
- Repair as you go
 - I really appreciate you discussing this so clearly with me. You are asking all the right questions. This is not easy and if you want my help, I am committed to getting you on track

Stop talking

- Let the person ask questions or reflect
- If they say nothing, ask, is this tracking or what are you thinking?

Stop talking

- Look for triggering in yourself and them
 - Offer a break if they seem resistant to conversation
- Repair as you go
 - I really appreciate you discussing this so clearly with me. You are asking all the right questions. This is not easy and if you want my help, I am committed to getting you on track

Stop talking

- Give them time to process
- After the conversation is over, offer future chats if they need it
 - “We talked about a lot and I imagine you will mull. I’m happy to talk more tomorrow if you need it”

