



# *Elders, part 1 CONFLICT*

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## **Exploring Interpersonal Conflict**

*Wayne Plenert - Peacebuilder Mediation, January 2018*

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# Overview

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- How can we approach interpersonal conflict?
- There are almost as many theories of conflict as people.
- This webinar will explore one aspect (of many) of how the brain approaches conflict, and then will apply that approach in a study of conflict triangles.



# Overview

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- Part 1 asks how brains work (and how brains don't work as well as we might like) in interpersonal conflict.
- Part 2 is about triangles and conflict.



# Overview

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So in this section assume that:

- even though conflict is complex, there is a basic concept that you know, but have not adopted, that can help you with others in conflict;
- the patterns that people have in conflict are so entrenched that they rarely change, they simply adapt;
- i.e. the concept is so insidious that by its own nature, it will do its best to keep you from applying it to yourself!



# Overview

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Therefore it is not hard to accept that:

- It is easier to help others with their conflicts than to accept help ourselves;
- It is easier to expect others to change than to change ourselves;

■ We can see how conflict is a natural and normal part of human existence, while others act like it is something that either must be avoided, or ended at all costs.

# Why Others Don't Change

They are shaped from birth, and well before, on how they will handle conflict.

- Their shaping starts with how their brains work.
- It includes how they were raised, their culture, their identity, their relationships.
- Their way of dealing with conflict is deep seated, predictable, and often different from how you would do it.





# A Good Question

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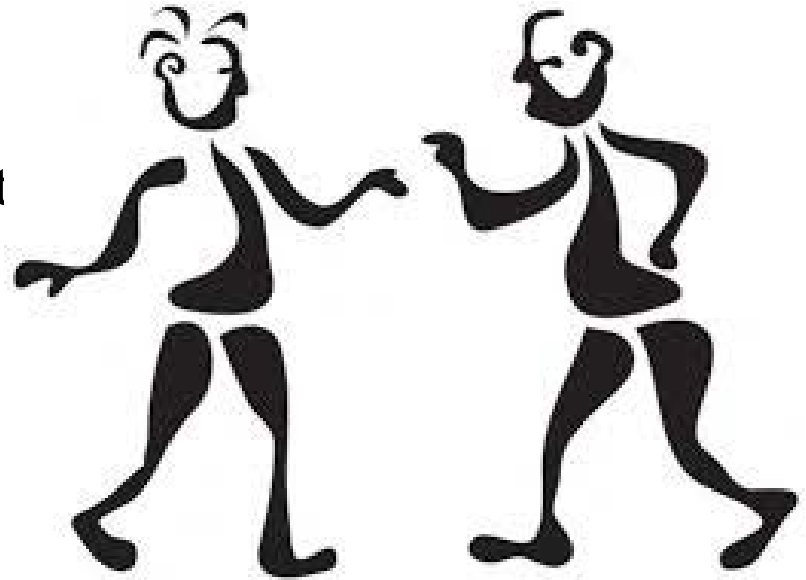
- Let's look at this in two ways:
  1. Why we might accept conflict as *natural and normal*.
  2. Why conflict is not natural and not normal and why it feels **WRONG**.



# Is conflict normal?

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- Conflict is how humans, and animals, deal with almost everything.
- History is our story of conflict.
- Psychology is individual conflict
- Sociology is group conflict.
- Politics sets rules for conflict.
- Law is our process for conflict.



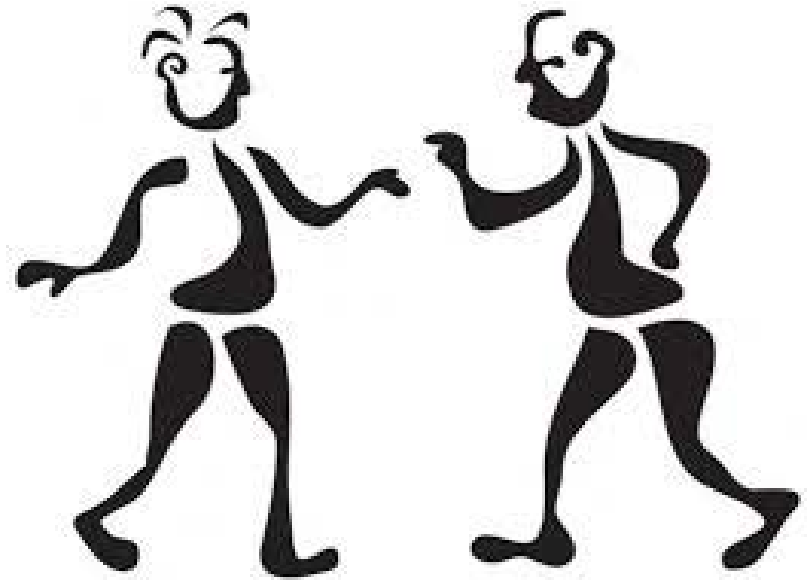




# Is conflict normal?

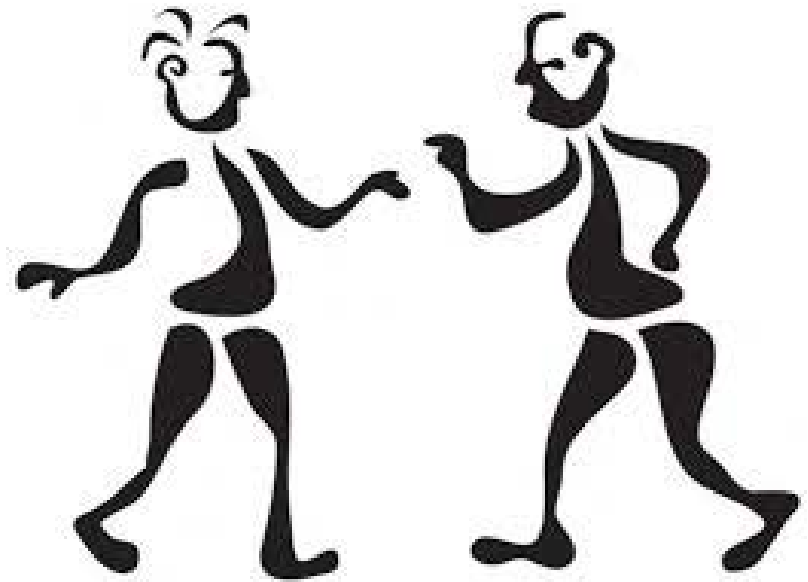
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- Look at your society. Where did red lights come from? Building standards? Courts? Governments?
- Conflict shapes our identity, culture, relationships. It is the tool by which we develop. It is how we work.



# Is conflict normal?

- In fact, most learning comes from conflict.
- Unless we feel tension and pressure, we **don't learn** and **don't change**.
- We need conflict. It is how we roll.
- Conflict is how problems from our past help us shape those challenges into what hopefully will become a better future.



# Conclusion: conflict is NORMAL

- Conflict is how we work together.
- It is the tool by which we develop.
- It can provide a source for faith and purpose in life.
- It is the cornerstone of our existence, so must be natural and normal!





# Why conflict is NOT NORMAL

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Now let's consider *how* we conflict and *how* conflict elements dominate how we behave.

- How does *your* brain act during interpersonal conflict?
- My point will be that much of your brain does not like conflict at all. This makes you behave in predictable ways in conflict.
- You may consider how these behaviours shape us as individuals, in relationships, and how this has shaped our cultures.
- I have argued using logic and reason that conflict is natural and normal. Most of your brain disagrees with me.



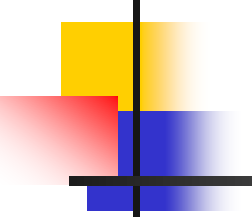
Problem



Dispute

- PIE (perceived injurious experience)





# Problem → Dispute

PIE (perceived injurious experience):

- Naming
  - Blaming
  - Claiming
- 
- Subjective
  - Unstable
  - Reactive
  - Complicated.



# It's personal

Preliminary assumptions:

- Interpersonal conflicts start with feelings, not logic (PIE).
- Our reaction to those emotions is to automatically target something in our past.
- Our *modus operandi* is blame.



# If you accept this...



Humans instinctively do not start as problem solvers.

- Our brain does not go: “Here is a problem, what are my options?”
- It does not say: “Let’s cooperate and work this out together.”
- Our instincts do not look forward. They look back, and focus on what went wrong back then.



# If you accept this...

- Conflict does not cause us to be positive, but negative.
- Let's explore why.



# The brain's Systems

Dr Kahneman *Thinking Fast, Thinking Slow.*

- System 1 & System 2.
- The Systems are not compatible.
- They operate very differently.



# System 1

- In conflict,
  - System 1 PROTECTS its human (or lizard or animal or fish).
  - This binary approach to protection = Engage or Avoid.





# System 1

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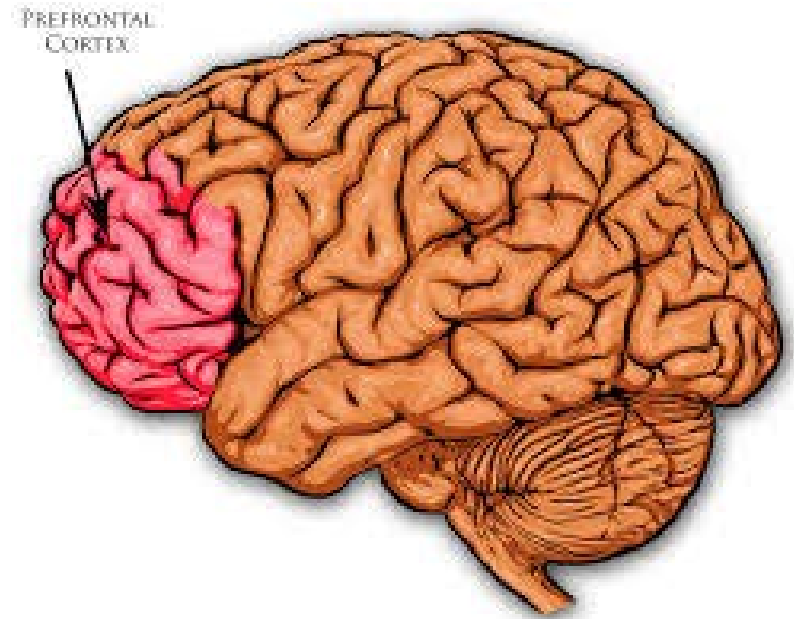
Avoidance (flight) is common.

- Most people avoid unless their System 1 considers that the odds favor engaging in the conflict.



# System 1 and System 2

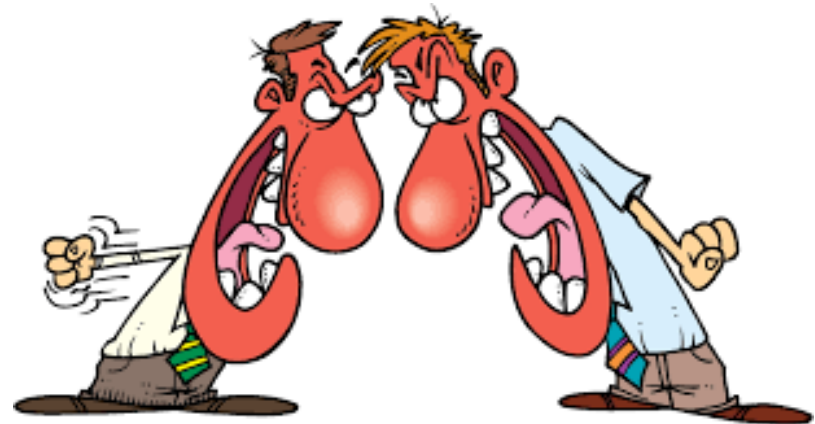
- System 1 turns to System 2 for those kinds of problems it cannot handle.
  - i.e. when the brain requires a precise calculation or trade-off or assessment or rule.



# System 1 and conflict

The assumption that protection is core means System 1 dominates in conflict.

- This is commonly understood as “fight or flight”.



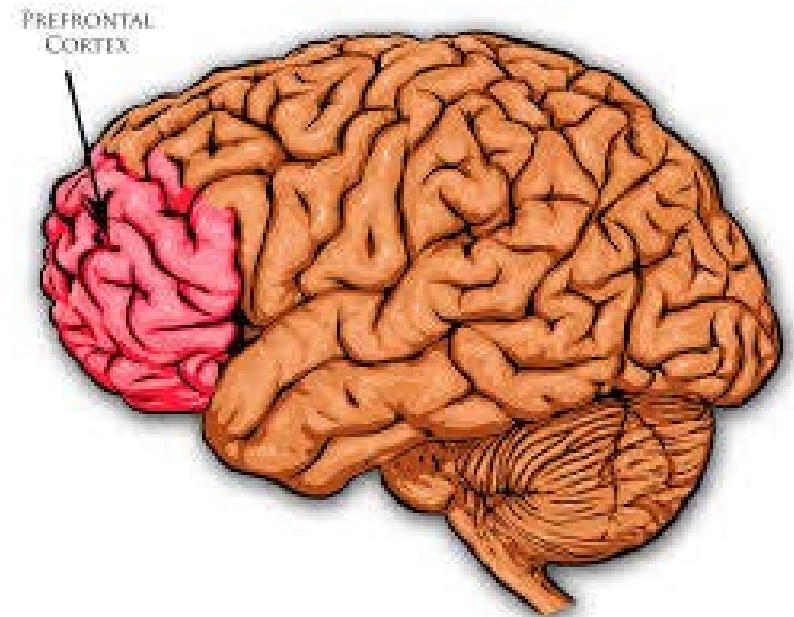
# Lessons Learned

The brain uses different paths for what looks like the same problem.

- The choice of System 1 or 2 is based on whether the problem is solvable using a binary approach.

Other examples of different paths:

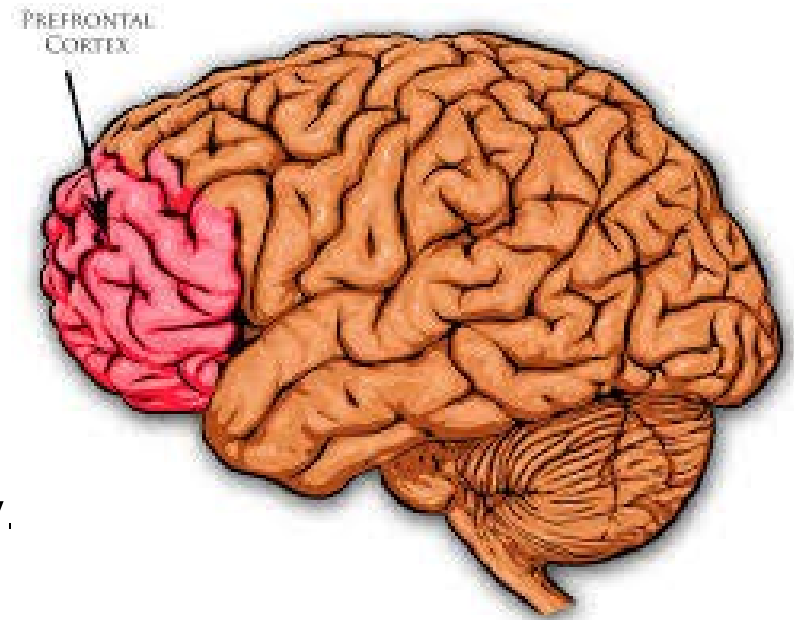
- Gains and losses.
- Friends and enemies.
- English or French (or other language).



# Lessons Learned

We know conflict is core to how we interact. It is absolutely core.

- Our brains do not see conflict as core, though. They see **protection** as core.
- Conflict means we are at risk.
- The brain therefore says conflict must be avoided or ended to protect its body.
- When we perceive a conflict, our brain instinctively looks at who (or what) to blame, so looks backwards.

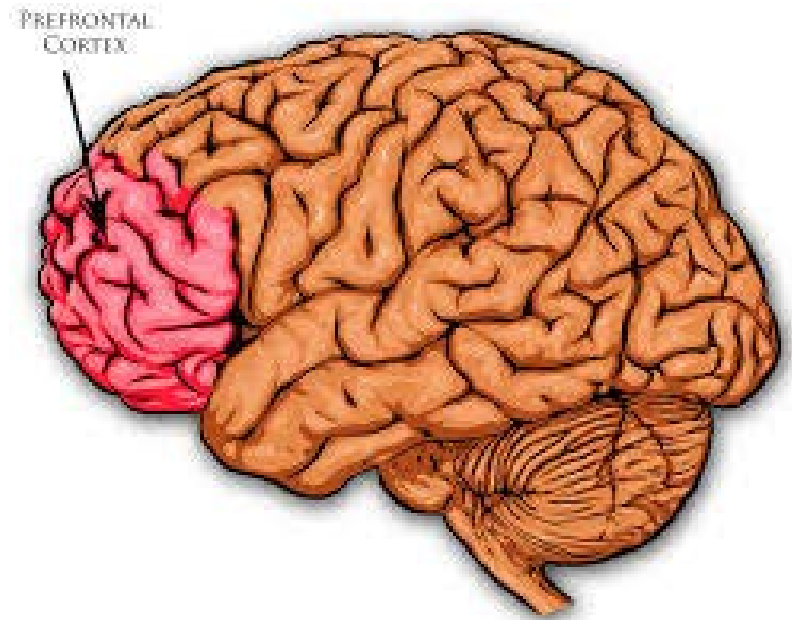




# Lessons Learned

If our brain accepted conflict as natural, it would naturally accept the state of being **engaged** in conflict.

- Instead, when it perceives conflict, it floods the body with hormones and puts muscles on alert.
- System 1 has powerful tools to enforce the principle of “fight or flight”.



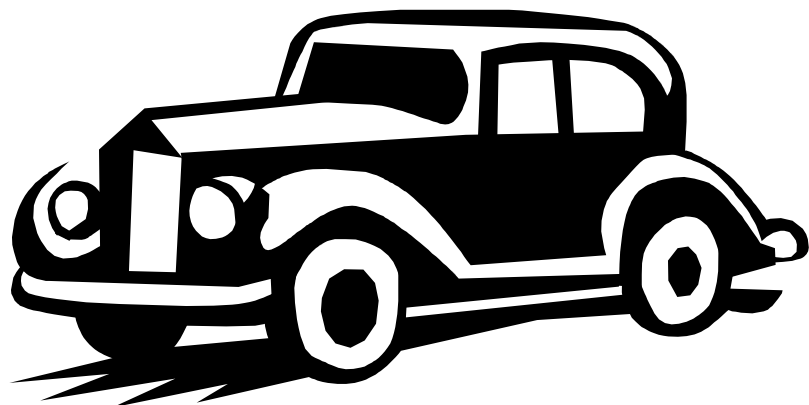


# Compromise

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Applying this to standard conflict resolution approaches like compromise,

- Each step is an attempt to end;
- Each reaction is a decision to avoid or confront;
- Each stage offers loss in exchange for a conclusion;
- We settle when each side determines that ending is more valuable than another round.



# Caution – High Conflict

Later, I provide a few techniques for **engagement** in conflict. However, **Fight/Flight** is the default model for all of us.

- There are many people (because of their personalities or their state of grief or their particular situation) who **ONLY** look backward.
- For these people, look to materials on how to deal with high conflict people or those in grief.
  - (i.e. The High Conflict Institute webpage with Bill Eddy).





# Summary of the Two Systems

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## System 1

Largely unconscious

**Intuitive**

Snap judgments

**Based on patterns,  
memory, recall, hard-wired  
rules of thumb.**

No energy requirement

## System 2

**Lazy**

Distractible

**Limited capacity**

Needs energy

**Defers to System 1**



# System 2 and Conflict

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Although the default is System 1, and System 2 is only the brain's fallback:

- we can learn techniques both to get us and others to use System 2 on occasion, AND
- we can discipline ourselves not to automatically appear to be blaming.



# System 2 and Conflict

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This requires people to switch to System 2.

Done by:

- detoxifying; addressing dysfunctional dynamics; and
- giving System 1 challenges that it cannot handle.



# System 2 and Conflict

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Examples of how to engage System 2:

- Brainstorm.
- Make a list.
- Engage “with” instead of “against”.
- Use the word “And” instead of “But”.

What these approaches have in common is that they cannot be answered by Yes or No.

# The Story of Emma

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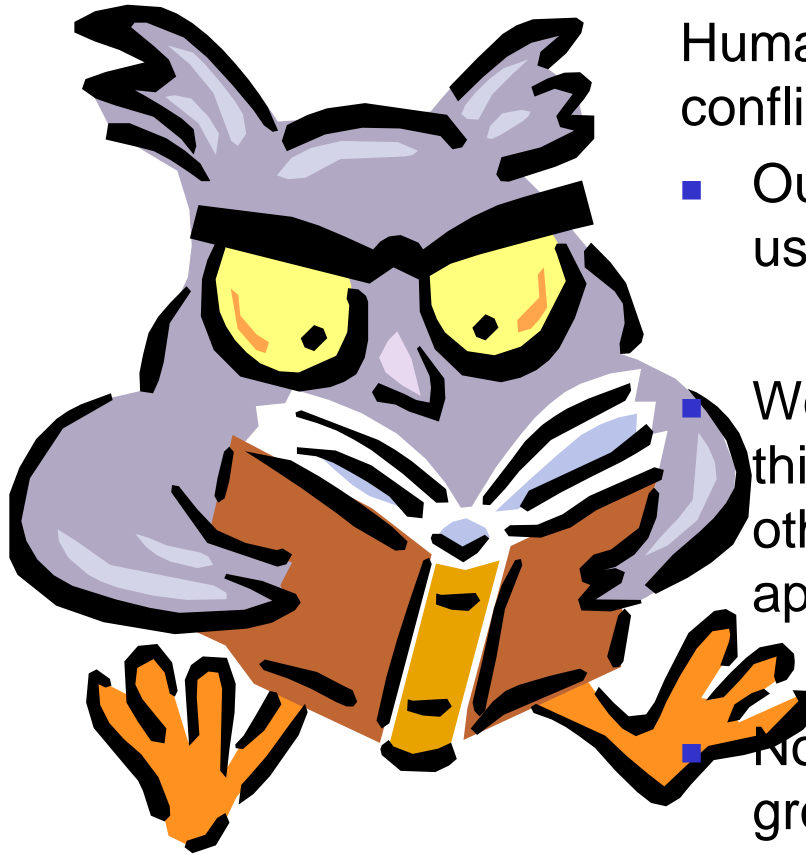






# Summary

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Humans find it hard to work within conflict. It has to be avoided or ended.

- Our patterns come from a lifetime of using this conflict system.
- We can step back and move past this default mechanism, as we help others and as we look at our own approach to conflict.
- Now, how can we apply this on the ground?



# *Part 2 CONFLICT TRIANGLES*

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## **Exploring Triangles**

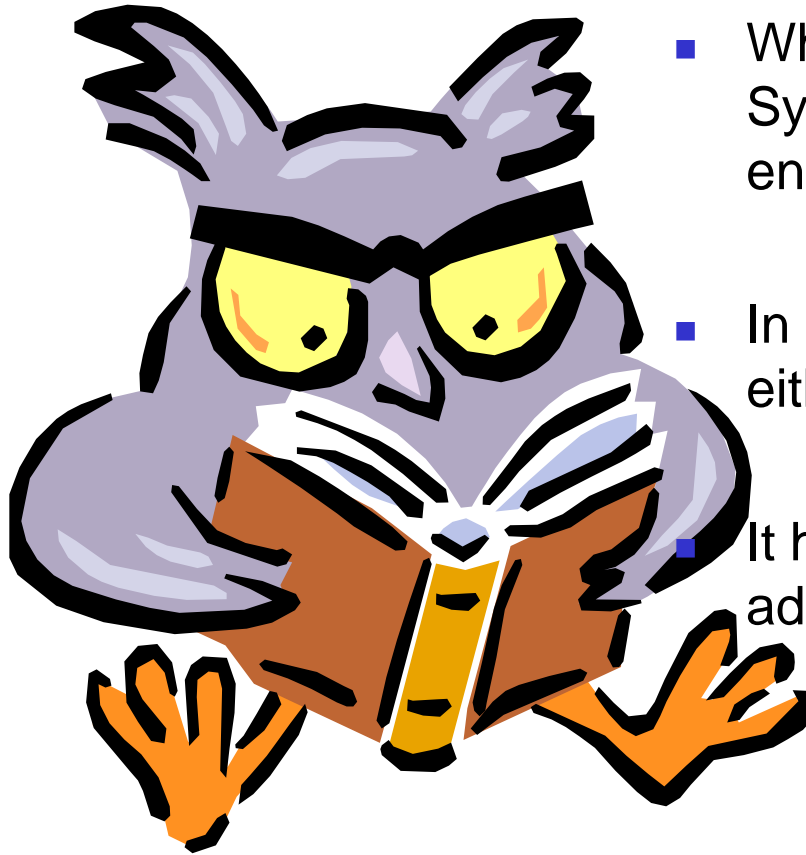
*Wayne Plenert - Peacebuilder Mediation, January, 2018*

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# Assumptions from Part 1

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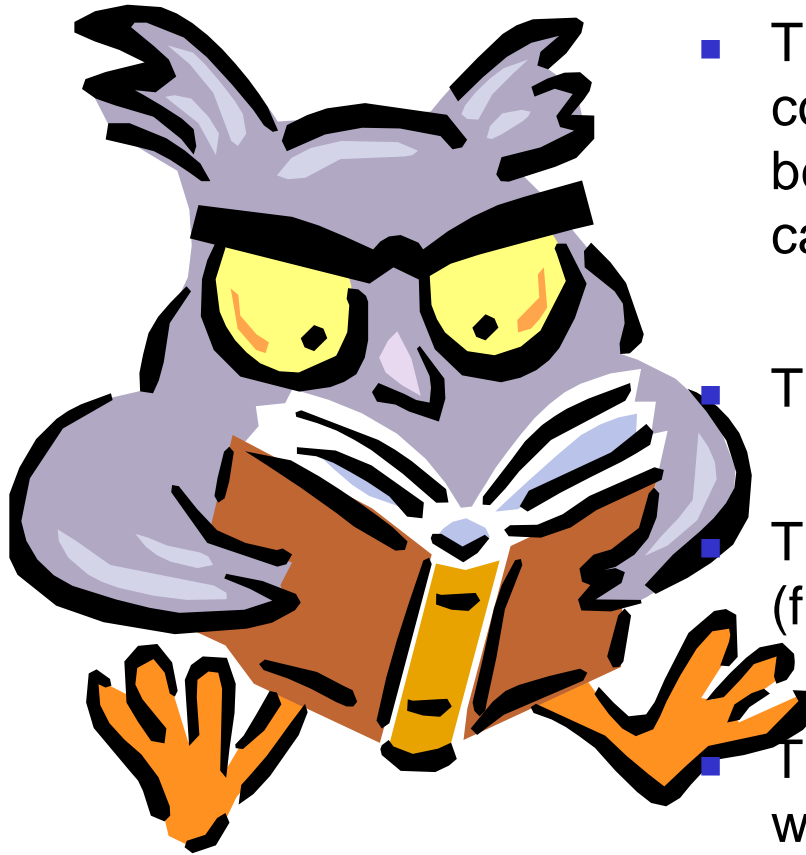


- When we perceive harm or risk to self, System 1 in the Brain instantly engages.
- In its efforts to PROTECT its human, it either tries to WIN or AVOID.
- It has tools to reinforce this such as adrenaline and other stressors.



# Assumptions from Part 1

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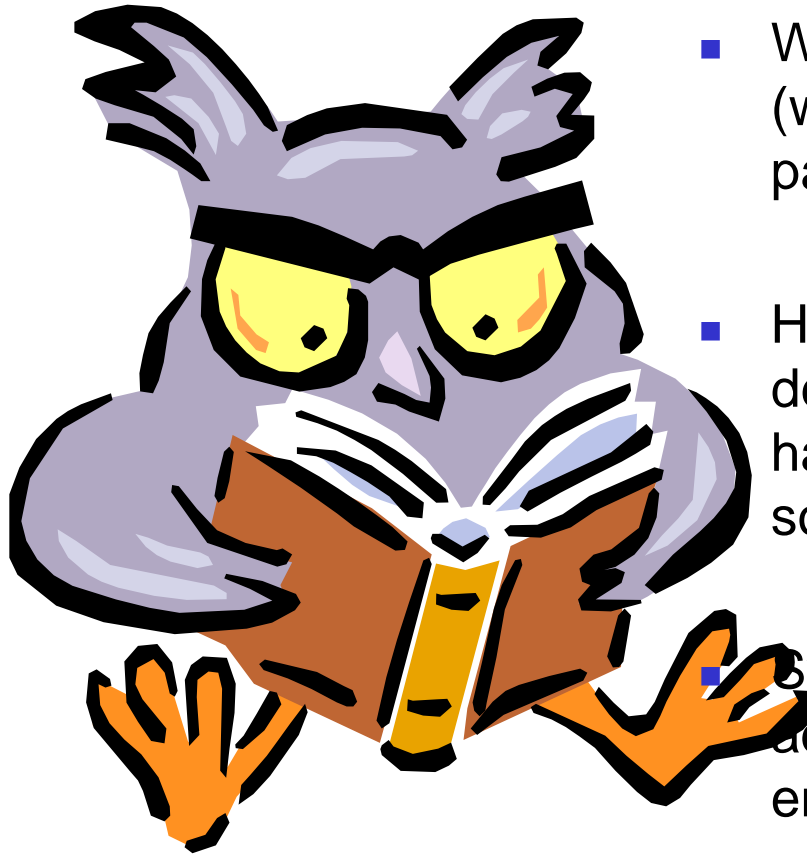


- The brain has been dealing with conflict since birth, and for millennia before, so our patterns and our habits can be traced to this mechanism.
- This mechanism is BINARY.
- The choice is WIN or GET AWAY (fight or flight).
- There is no room for engagement with the problem.



# Assumptions from Part 1

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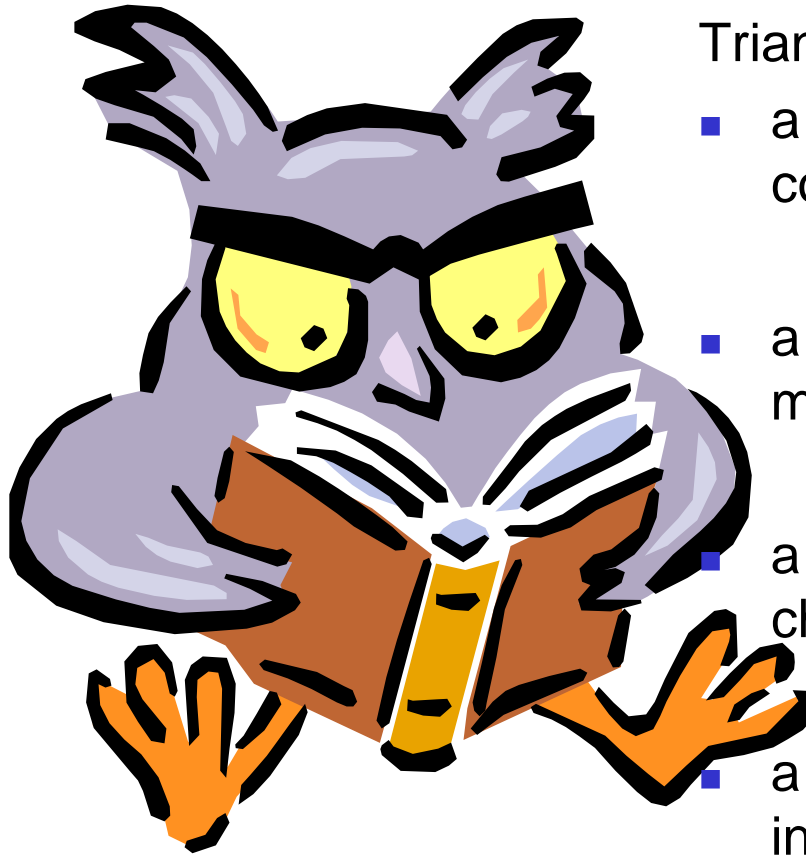


- When we do not perceive harm (when it is not personal), different paths in the brain address that topic.
- However, our instincts (System 1) determine if we see things are harmful or not, which is why we are so patterned in this area.
- System 2 is lazy, slow, able to address 1 thing at a time, low on energy, and secondary to System 1.



# Overview of Part 2

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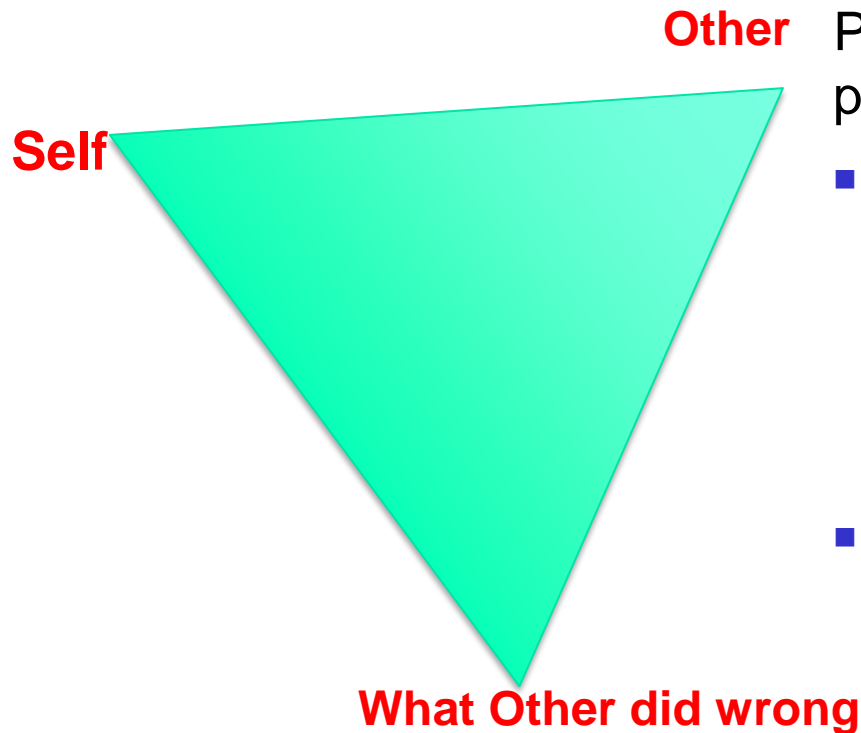
## Triangles:

- a valuable way of explaining how conflict works;
- a tool for introducing a cognitive model to work alongside System 1;
- a tool for encouraging behavioural change AND
- a tool for changing the environment in which System 1 is operating.



# Triangles

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Picture what happens when you perceive a conflict.

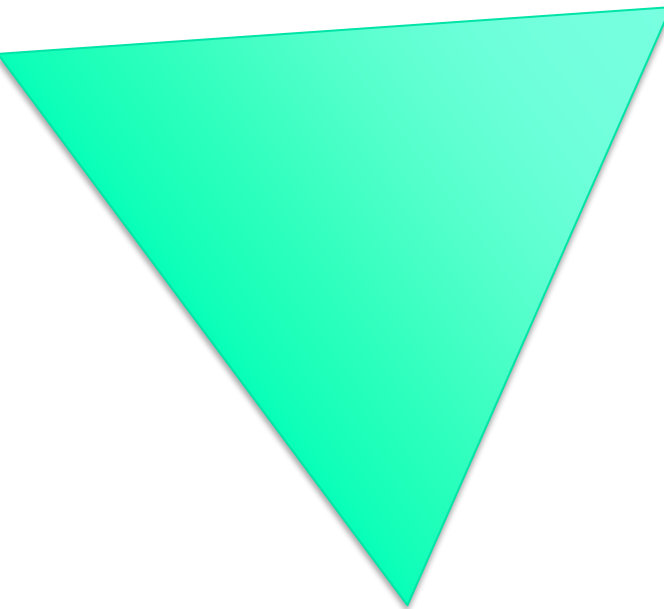
- You make a triangle - Yourself, the Other and your Reason for the conflict.
- Triangles are **binary**, when the one corner is you, and the others are two aspects of the problem.



# Curious Aside #1

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**Self**



**What Other did wrong**

**Other** *Aside 1: Players do not see their conflicts as Windows for engaging with Others in problem-solving.*

*Why is this?*

*Why don't we start with a future focus, why do we invariably start with a dark look to the past?*

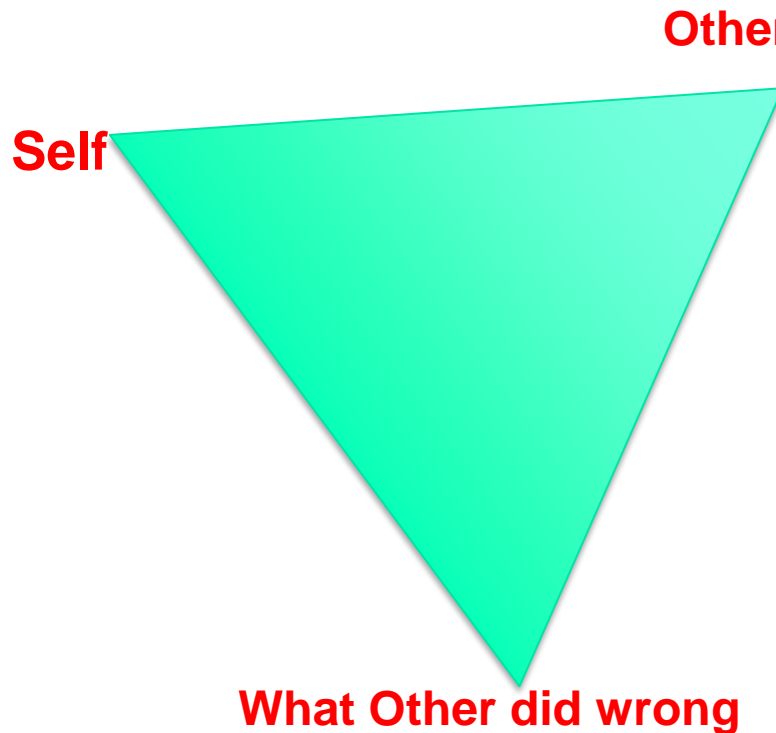
*How can conflicts become windows?*





# Curious Aside #2

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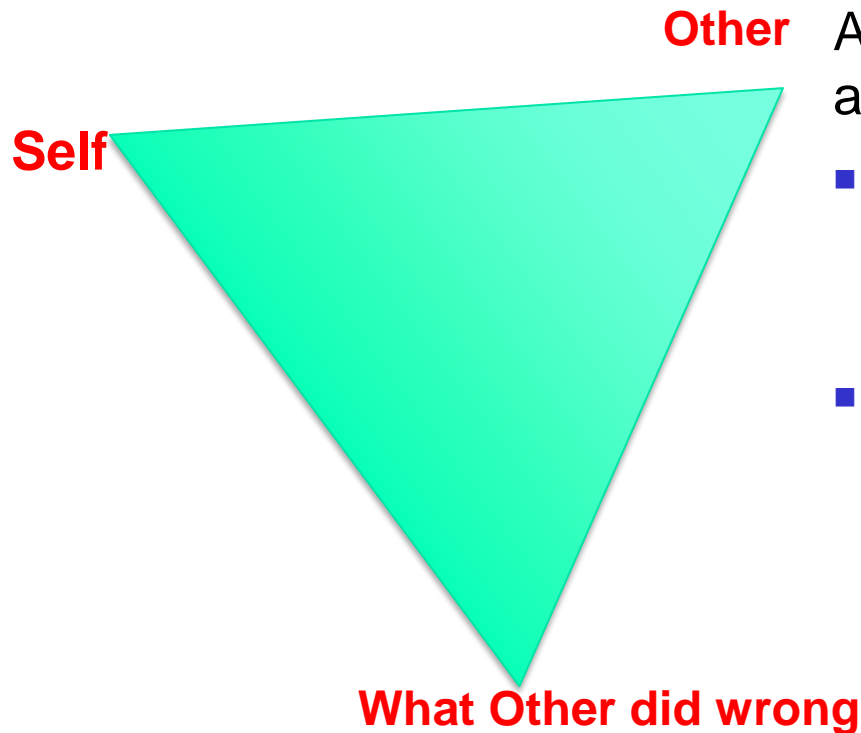
**Other** *In this triangle, it is common to act poorly – to be rude or lie or gossip or avoid when we shouldn't.*

- *When **OTHERS** act poorly, we say “They always blame and act badly - it is their Character. They are not nice people.”*
- *When **WE** act poorly, our System 1 insists it is a one off, completely out of Character. “After all, we are nice!”*



# Triangle Assessment

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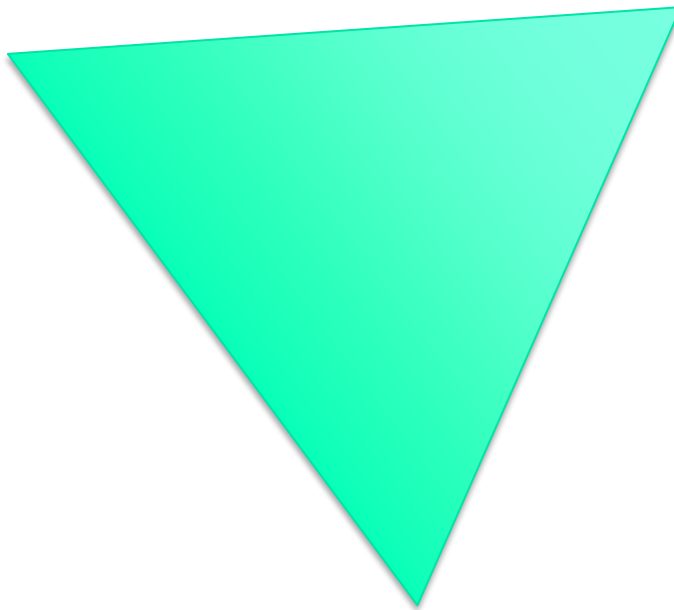
**Other** After framing, System 1 then assesses:

- Is Other higher or lower power than me?
- Is this a situation where I should try to win or try to avoid?

# Triangle Assessment

Self

Other



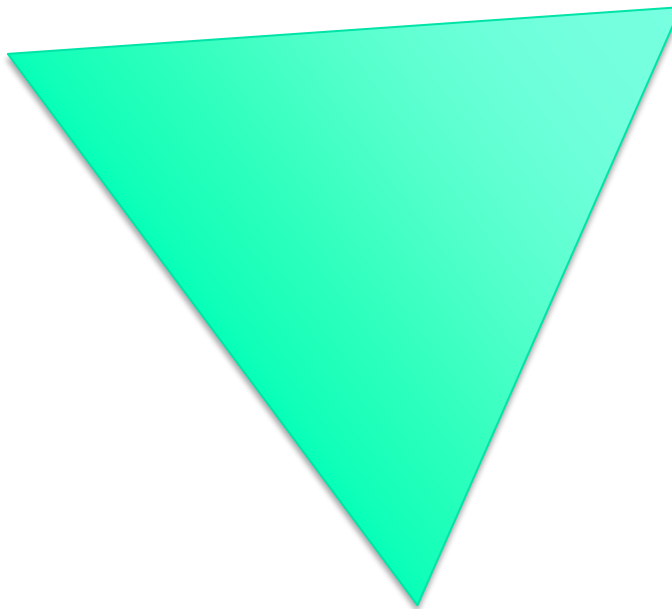
House not  
vacuumed

- **Coercion**: When System 1 considers **Self** as the higher power, it confronts (or sometimes avoids) assertively.
- **Manipulation**: When it considers **Other** to be the higher power, it avoids (and sometimes engages) with deceit and cleverness.
- Both approaches are designed to get Other to change (not Self).

# Triangle Assessment

**Self**

**Other**



**House not  
vacuumed**

In this model, the Reason is an excuse to repeat regular conflict patterns. The approach is tactical.

- Conflict is a reactionary exercise.
  - I notice the dirty floor = chance to repeat an old pattern of conflict.
  - I nag (criticize), you stonewall (assuming I am low power)

OR

- I demand (show contempt), you get defensive.



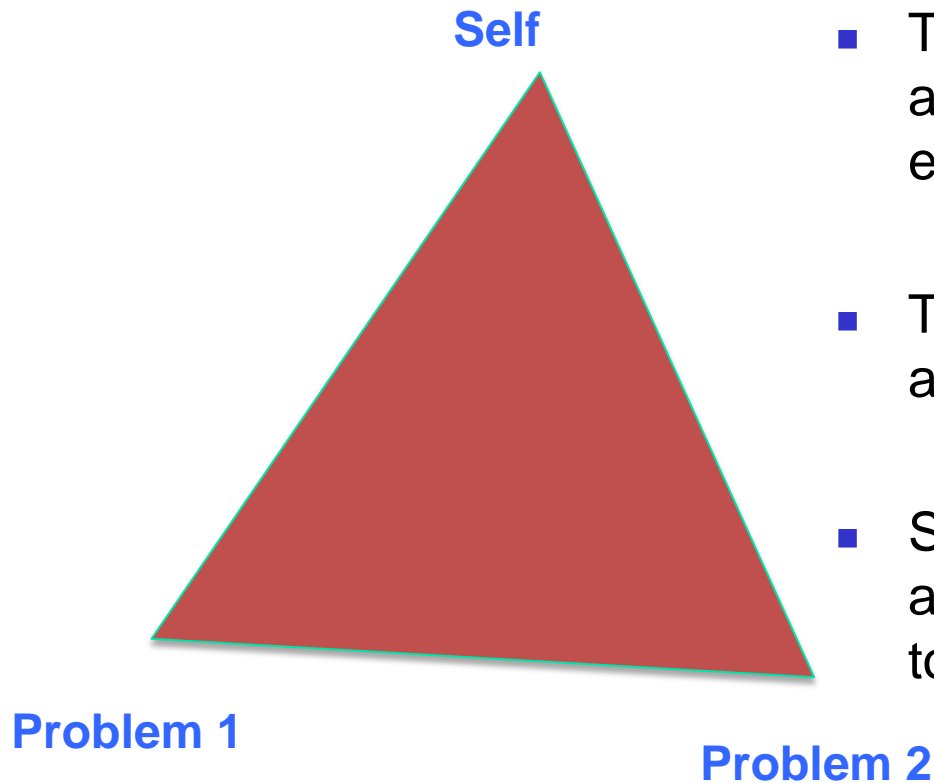
# Spirals

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- These behaviours regularly repeat in families (and the workplace and elsewhere).
- They are destructive spirals. These patterns lead almost inevitably to a Tipping Point and relationship destruction.
- Let's look at the path to the Tipping Point.



# One person 2 problems + more

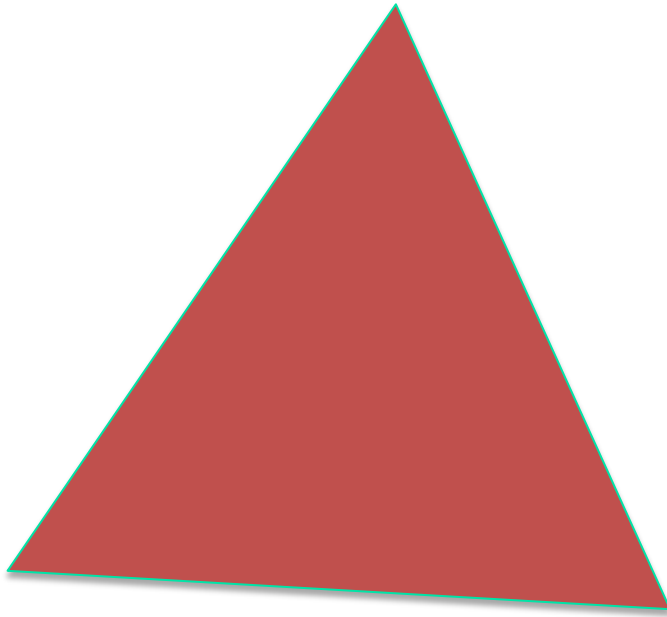


- Triangles can involve one person and two problems (reasons) or even three problems.
- Triangles are how humans simplify and justify their situation.
- System 1 turns the challenges into a binary one where it either moves towards triumph or avoidance.



# Triangle Examples

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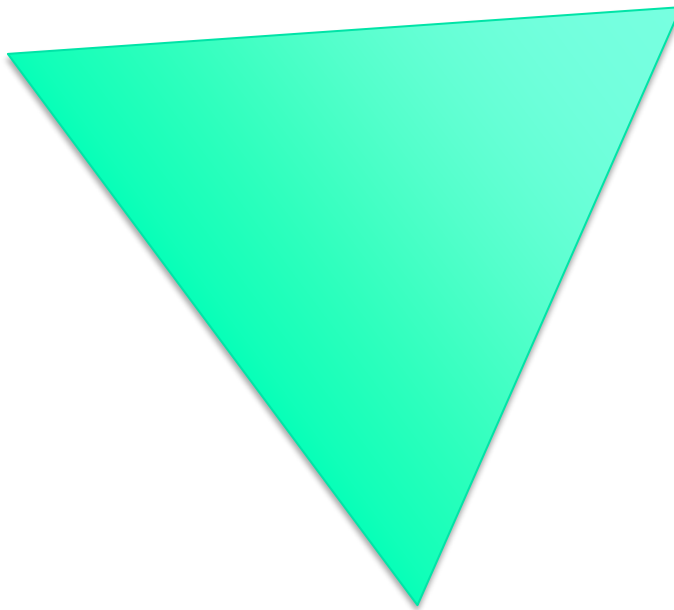


- Two People and one Reason.  
*You didn't vacuum.*
- One Person and two Reasons.  
*My wife died. I am drinking too much.*

While a triangle has three points, the nature of the triangle is simplifying things down to a binary choice or reason to avoid. So where a person has 3 problems, each prevents him/her from dealing with the other 2.

# Allies in Conflict

Ally



Self

- People in triangles look for allies.
- I (Self) am stronger with an ally.
- Since I may fight, I look for supportive allies.
- An Ally lets me justify my behaviour. Their support proves Other is wrong.
- An Ally can be friend, family, or supports like lawyer, doctor, judge, co-worker, etc.

Other



# Victim Villain Rescuer Triangle

A famous triangle.

- A classic way to confront Other.
- Victims use Allies (Heroes) for overcoming Evil Enemies.
- Our legal system is one example of this model.
  - Who is the Hero? The Lawyer? The Judge?





# Allies are also for Avoiding

Allies can also help us avoid.

- They can assist in **not** dealing with the “attack” from Other.
- Ironically, the same are Allies (professional, friend, relative).
- Tactics include delay, adding complications, obfuscation, hiding, etc.





# Triangles and Fight/Flight

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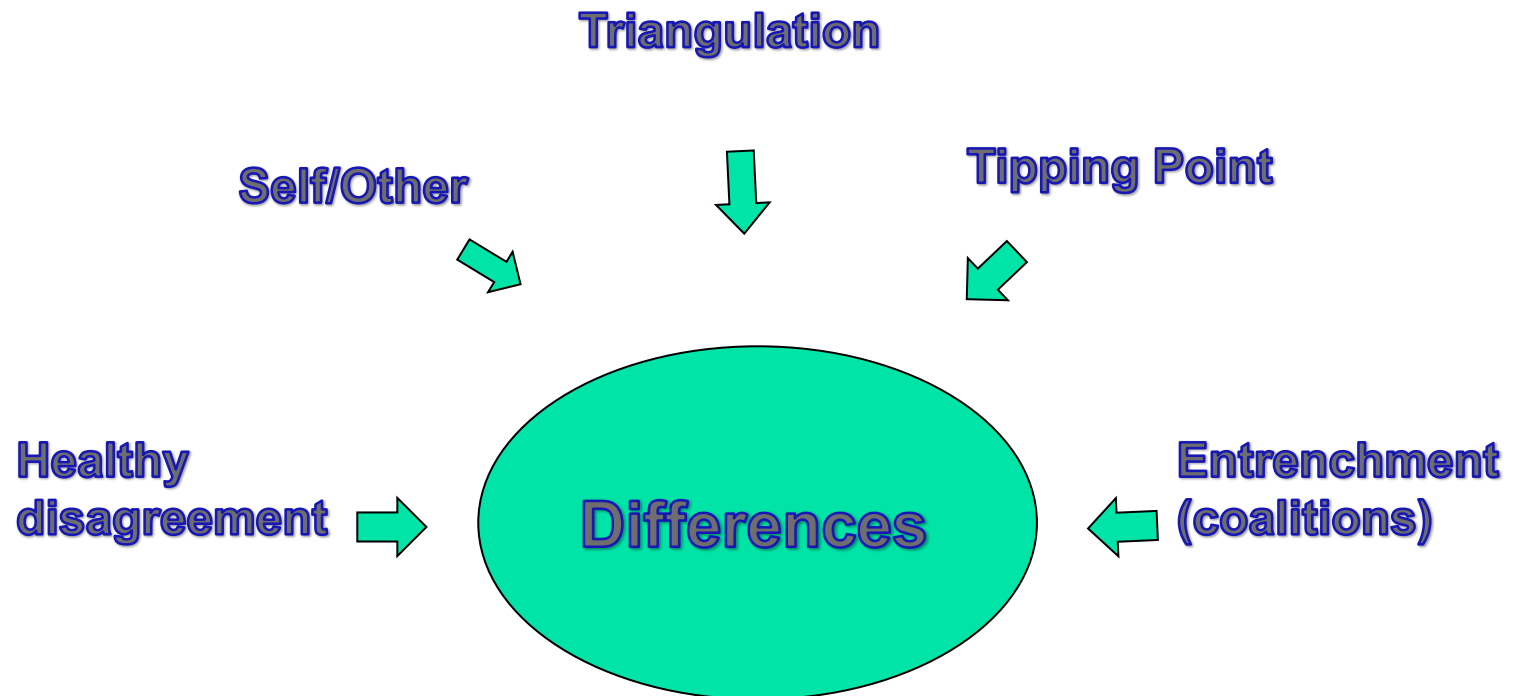
- Our tactics are cyclical and patterned. We take turns.
- Each turn is escalation or avoidance.
- At some time we reach a Tipping Point.





# The conflict journey

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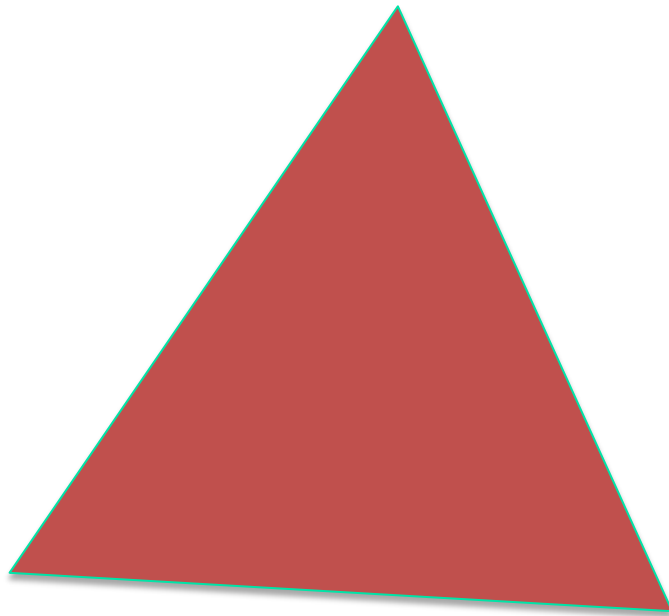


Taken from Betty Pries, Arc Ministries



# Triangulation as a Journey

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Step 1. PIE

Step 2. Name Blame Claim

Step 3. Other Names Blames  
Claims back (Other vs Self)

Step 4. Find Allies (Triangulate)

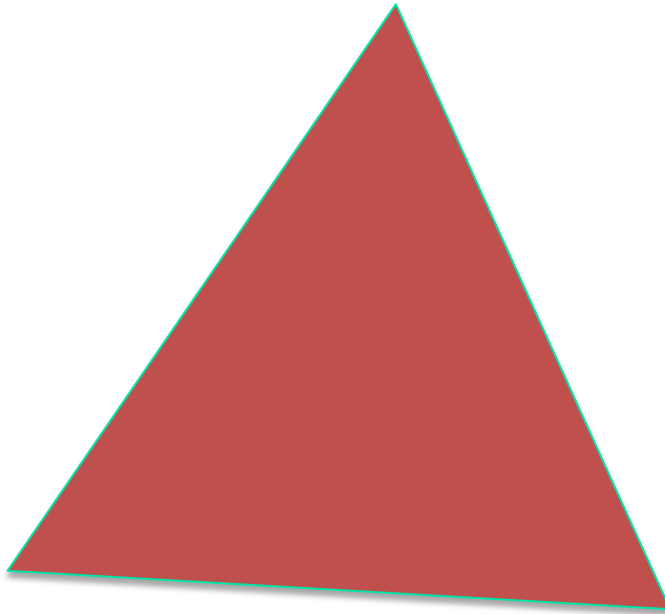
Step 5. Escalate or Avoid

Step 6. Tipping Point.



# Tipping Point

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Entrenchment:

- One side has attacked the other and each now has formed coalitions around the difference.

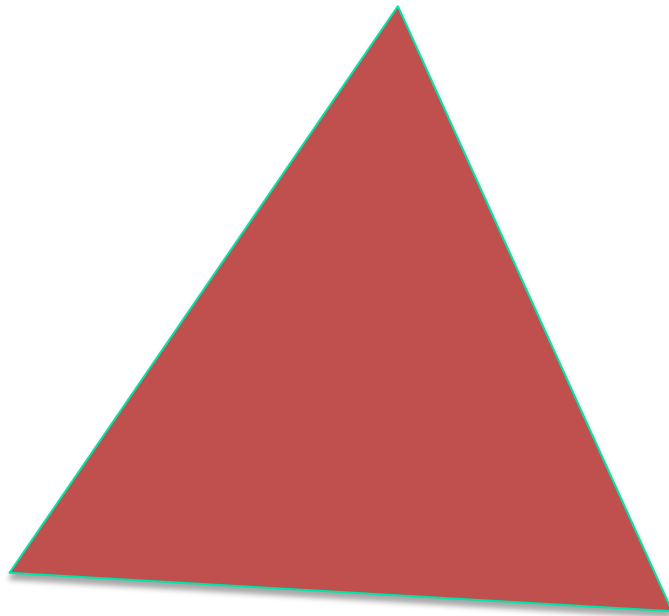
OR

- One side has withdrawn and the differences fester until such time as they explode.



# Triangulation as a Journey

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## Coalitions

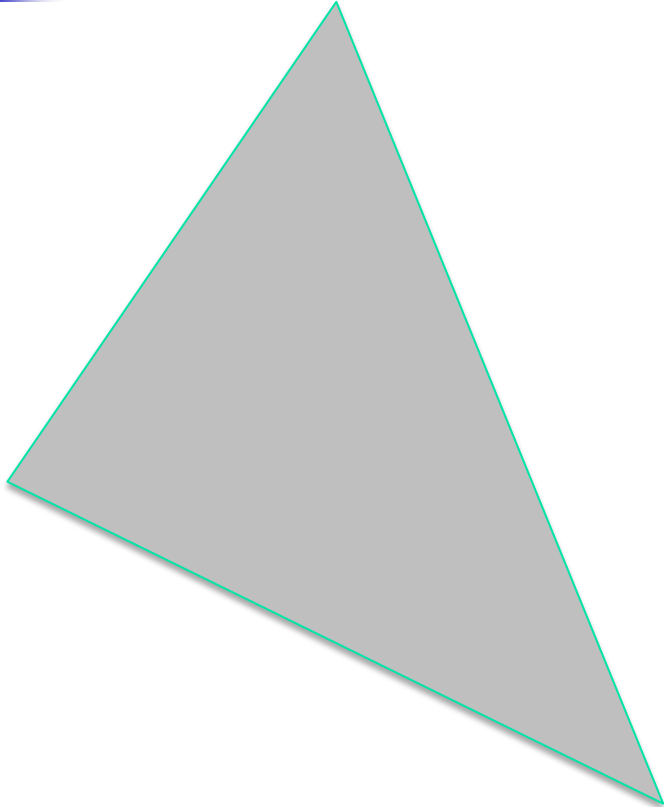
- Community changes.
- Each side has metaphors of good and evil (Thief versus Greedy).
- Each side recruits.
- Neutrals disappear.
- Individuals are untrusting.
- Relationships disintegrate.
- Cultures recreate around the trust issues.



# Random List of Elder Issues

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Added challenges for the elderly:

- Dependency.
  - History & Patterns of how conflict should be handled or avoided.
  - Expectations from children or supports.
  - Financial concerns.
  - Vulnerability.
  - Assumptions by next generation of entitlement.
- 



# Triangle Alert

Allies can be enablers, and get used.

- In particular, high conflict people are skilled at manipulation. They suck allies into their triangles.
- Seniors have strong patterns (expectations), special needs, deteriorating coping skills, and can be demanding.
- Family members also can exploit allies offering support.





# Using Triangles to Advantage

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We can use triangles to:

- See differently for ourselves;
- See differently with others;
- Change processes;
- Change structures.

# A personal Triangle story

I had back surgery.

- I felt better.
- I saw my doctor as my Hero.
- My back was my Enemy.
- Doc said: you need to walk.  
The implant will only help for a while. The real challenge is getting the scarring in the right place.
- I totally changed my triangle.
- Now it is Self, Back and Recovery.
- Not blame; problem solving.



# Lessons from the Back Story

- Lesson 1: even instructors automatically blame.
- Lesson 2: We can reframe our stories so that instead of the Win/Lose Self/Other paradigm, we *compel* ourselves to Engage.
- Lesson 3: We can *confront* the tensions that discourage us from remaining inside the conflict.
- Lesson 4: we can make our story a process instead of about outcomes.





# More Lessons

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The corollary of our lessons.

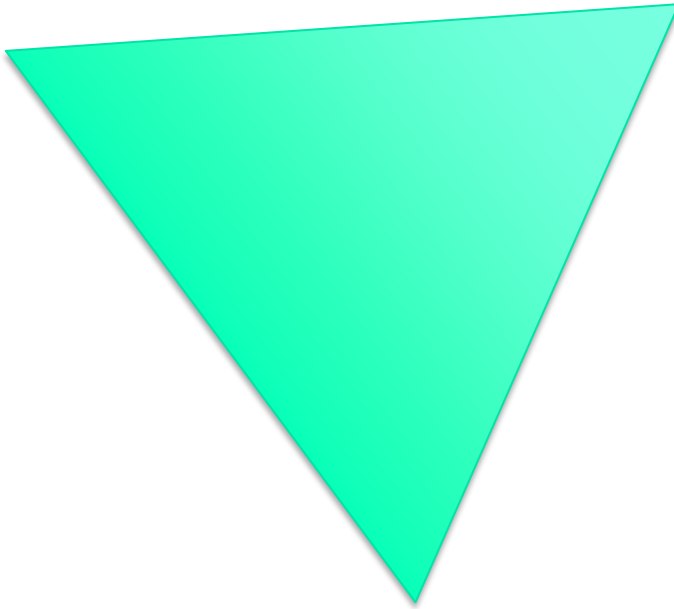
- Assume that people will use blame. This is normal.
- Assume that this is their way of addressing a difference.
- Recognize that instinctively you *will* take it personally. Then you can chose to behave differently.





# Lesson 1, Diagnosis

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See Triangles Everywhere.

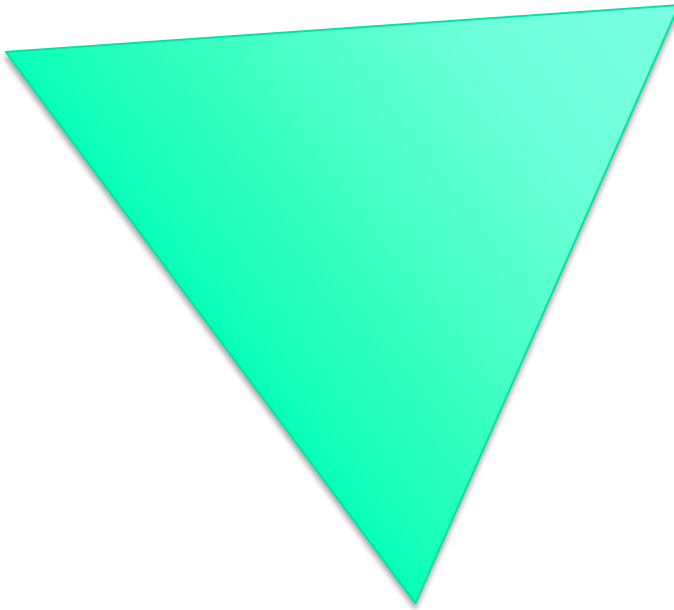
- Recognize Name Blame Claim.
- Recognize Victim Villain Hero.
- Recognize requests to be an Ally.
- Recognize the need to Win,
- Recognize the need to Avoid.
- Recognize Fight or Flight.



# Diagnosis

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Recognizing triangles already opens you to seeing conflict differently.



- Dealing with personal attacks is easier when one knows Why.
- Knowing why people in conflict have trouble in looking forward and why they cannot *engage* with Other is highly empowering.
- A few techniques come next.

# Lesson 2, use System 2

How can we help people to stop triangulating?

- Invite them to use a different part their brain (so they engage).
- Use and encourage
  - Open questions.
  - “And” instead of “But”.
  - Brainstorming.
  - List-making
- Turn the exercise into a process shared with Other. (How can we work together on this?)





# System 2 and More

- In the short term, we get them to use a different part of their brain (System 2).
- In the longer term, we help them form new patterns. This is behavioural change.
- In the longest term, we help them develop new (or reframed) goals and structure within which their relationships can change. This is structural change.



# System 2 and More

- We may start with techniques of engaging System 2, and at the same time, our larger goal is using the conflict as our window into the deeper relational problems,

BECAUSE

- We know the presenting problem is only their excuse for re-entering their deep seated patterns.
- We can use the presenting problem as a way for them to refocus on the short, medium and long futures.



# Blame and High Conflict

Most people have patterns and history that allow them to work with this model; they can get past their blame. Some cannot. They *always* blame.

- Sometimes it's circumstances – they are too deep in grief.
- Sometimes they have personality disorders AND inappropriate tools.
- They work backwards – they ONLY see the Other as the problem.



# Blame and More Blame

For perpetual blamers, my advice is:

- Do not give them advice!
- Instead, however you frame your involvement, allow them to have a choice.
- Telling them what to do will turn you into a target.



# Blame and More Blame

Start with this question:

- Is this someone who won't change, or someone who can't change?
- If the answer is Cannot, your challenges are greater than this webinar.
- Consider using the tools from articles by Bill Eddy, *High Conflict Institute*.



# Simple High Conflict Rules

Expect that at some time you will become the target. Minimize that, by trying to make them make decisions.

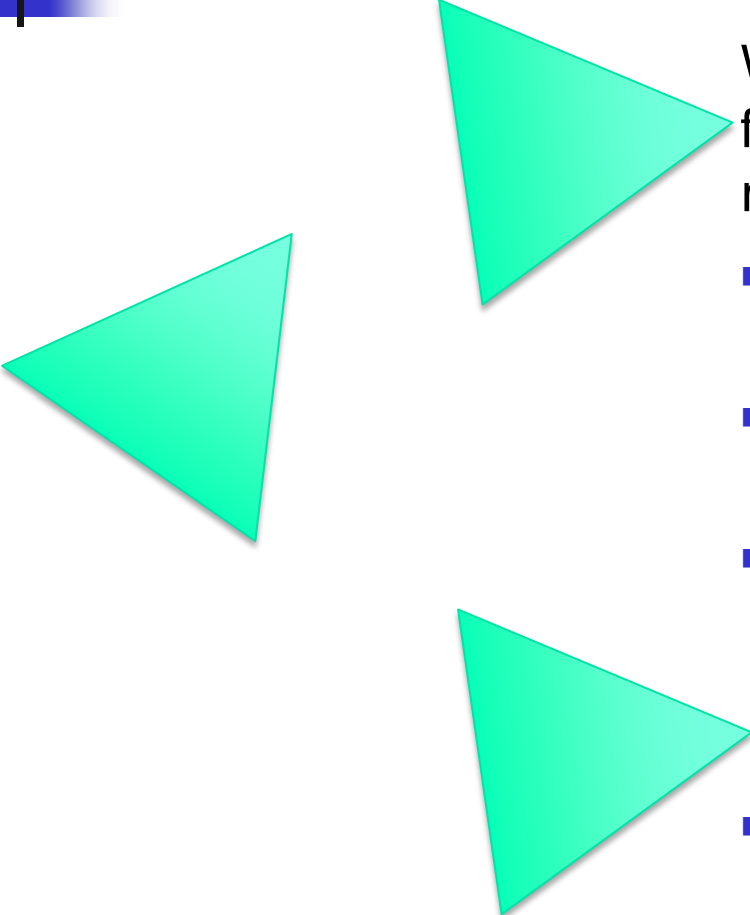
- Acknowledge their emotion (you are frustrated) but do not stay there.
- Focus on the future.
- Always ask them to make a suggestion (what's your offer?)
- State facts, not opinions.
- Give choices, not ultimatums.
- Be brief, informative, friendly, firm.





# Change the Triangle Systems

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We have met people's different triangles, friends, family, supports, awkward relationships, or enemies.

- You can make a chart of how these triangles link.
- You can figure out which are the most toxic.
- Consider how those triangles can be changed, i.e. removing triangles; adding new ones; or how the triangles themselves can be relabeled.
- This might be valuable for the elderly.

# Change the Triangles

Within the triangles:

- Work on how to attack the problem(s) rather than people.
- Work on how the allies can help.
- Invite Each to stop seeing it as Us against You.
- Discuss the question of power, integration, future focus, and other tools so the triangles become problem helpers instead of problem aggravators.

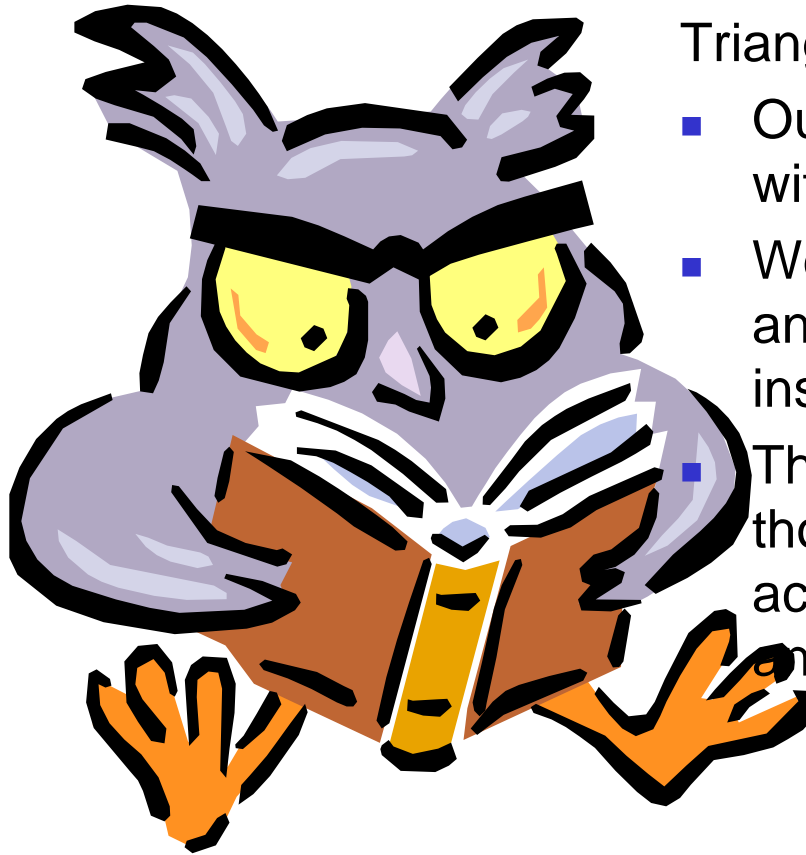






# Summary

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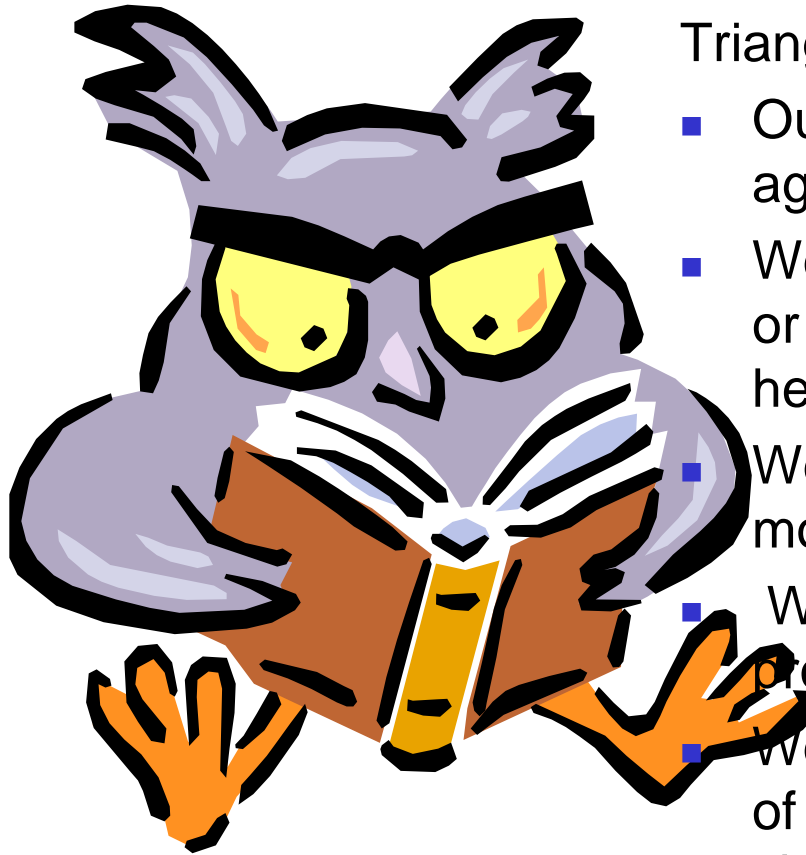
Triangles are how we work.

- Our instincts use triangles together with blame.
- We can catch ourselves, or others, and develop ways of engaging instead of fighting or fleeing.
- There are useful tools to help us be thoughtful in conflict, so long as we accept that we will feel tension and anxiety or adrenaline or other stress.



# Summary

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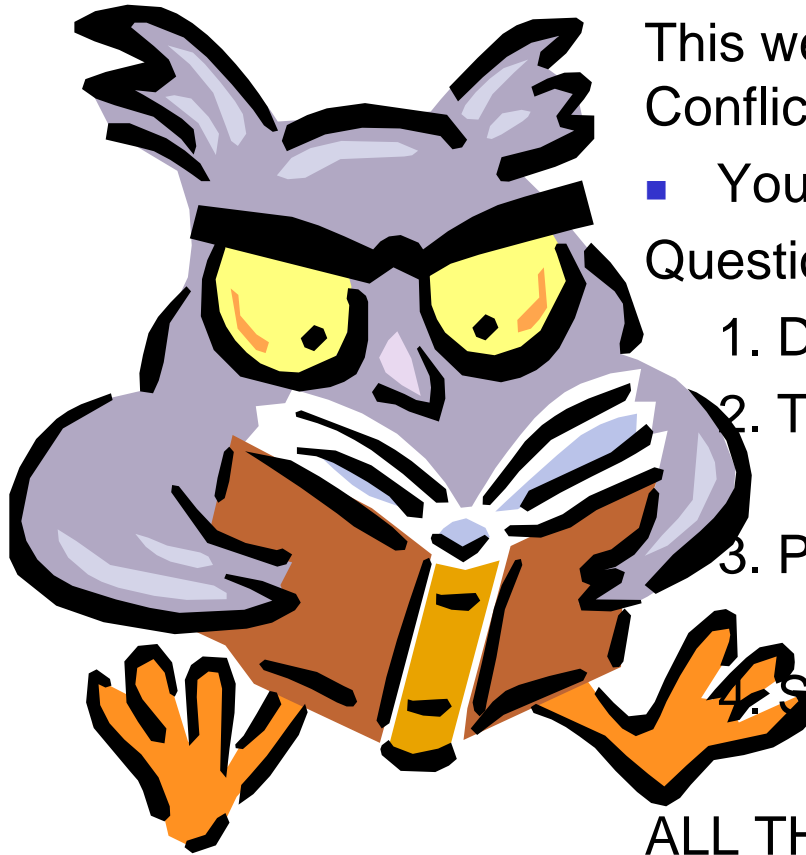


Triangles are how we work.

- Our other instinct is to find allies against the opponent.
- We can either change our triangles or help others change theirs, by helping people in or out of triangles.
- We can encourage some allies to move out and others move in.
- We can try to change the way the problem is described.
- We can see ourselves as being part of their triangles and their challenges and opportunities.



# Summary



This webinar is a triangle - You Me and Conflict.

- You can Avoid, Fight, or Engage.

Questions to help you engage:

1. Diagnosis. How should I look at this?
2. Technique. How can others (and I) engage when we feel tension?
3. Process. How can we turn this into problem-solving?
4. Structure. How can we change the triangles?

ALL THE BEST!