

The Rescuer



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Roles in groups

The **Rescuer** is another group role which seems to be almost universal. In most groups there will be a few people like this.

Such a person just cannot resist the urge to rescue another group member who is in distress of any sort – whether uncertainty, embarrassment, anxiety or emotional pain.

Rescuers appear to wish to help the other, but are actually **motivated by their own discomfort** at the sight of another person's discomfort. Their attempts to fix things for the other is motivated by their need to reduce their own anxiety or distress. Rescuers often interrupt the other in what may well be a very useful learning experience.

Rescuers tend to come from families where strong emotions like anger or sadness are feared. They have learned to prevent such strong emotions from surfacing by their rescuing behavior. Sometimes rescuers have had a history of abuse in their own family of origin and the sight of another person's pain reawakens the memory of their own, which can feel almost intolerable.

Sometimes rescuers took on this role in their family of origin to protect one or other parent during marital conflict or to protect a weaker sibling from aggression.

Rescuing behavior includes supplying the answer for another who is struggling to find one for himself, rushing in to comfort another who is upset or trying to focus attention upon the rescuer rather than the person showing signs of upset.

Jokes and changing the subject can also be rescuing behavior.

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The best way for the leader to handle the rescuer is to point out the rescuing behavior whenever it occurs and to invite the rescuer to focus his attention on himself.

The group is likely to welcome the rescuing behavior at first because it reduces their anxiety in the early, tense stages of forming and storming. But the members will rapidly take over a monitoring role because, in a well-functioning group, the members tend to catch on quickly that rescuing sabotages the good working of the group. They will reject it.

Most rescuers will recognise their hidden agenda in rescuing and take on the task of learning to desist, if their rescuing is pointed out with sensitivity.

When I was training to be a teacher, my group included a number of mature-age people returning to study to make teaching their second careers. One of these was a man who rushed in to reassure or comfort any time another member of the group was offended, hurt or angered by what another had said.

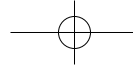
This man was confronted by another man in the group who asked him why he was so scared of strong emotions. The rescuer burst into tears and admitted that he had come from a family where both his parents were physically violent alcoholics. His role in the family had been to distract his parents from their fights which, if allowed to continue, often ended in one of them or one of the children being beaten or injured. If that failed, his next task would be to help the injured party.

Learning that confrontation could be healthy meant that he had to face some traumatic memories, of what had once been realistic fears.

Now try these exercises to ensure that you have understood and can manage issues associated with the rescuer's role.

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Exercise 1 The Rescuer

i. In a group in which you are a member, pick who tends to be the rescuers. What observations made you decide this?

ii. What do you think motivates each person's behavior?
(a) concern for another's well-being?
(b) fear of experiencing another's strong emotion?
(c) fear of experiencing their own strong emotions?
(d) Other?
Specify what observations made you decide this?

iii. How well is each rescuer being managed in the group?
What observations made you decide this?

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Exercise 2 The Rescuer

i. In a group in which you are the leader, decide who are the rescuers. What observations made you decide this?

ii. What do you think motivates these people's behavior?
(a) concern for another's well-being?
(b) fear of experiencing another's strong emotion?
(c) fear of experiencing their own strong emotions?
(d) Other?
Specify what observations made you decide this?

iii. How should these people be managed in the group?
What observations made you decide this?

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