The Dangers of Triangulation, by Arleen Maiorano, LCSW, LP

Harville Hendrick, the founder of Imago Therapy, poses a question: "Would you rather be right or be in a relationship?" This question helps us understand the problems that can be caused by triangulation, which is often an attempt to enlist friends, colleagues and/or family members in our quest to be “right” when we feel “wronged." There is often strength in numbers, so when we feel powerless we seek allies. We act outside of the relationship, instead of inside, which is the only place where healing communication can take place.

Most of us know the intense feelings that overcome us when we are in the midst of a fight with a romantic partner, a parent, a boss, or any other figure with whom we have an intense and often dependent relationship. Aspects of these relationships often trigger, or in the case of a parent re-trigger, a confirmation of our world view that we are being unjustly treated, unfairly accused, ignored, devalued, etc. We then feel a combination of self-righteousness, powerlessness, and rage, and this is often felt by both parties, each feeling “right” and each feeling “wronged,” and an escalation can happen so quickly that we find ourselves unable to respond with awareness and good judgment.

At these times, we may triangulate, confirming familiar negative thoughts or feelings with a friend, family member, or even with a therapist; we may even triangulate with ourselves, by withdrawing into a private self-congratulating mental dialogue. If we confirm our negative world-view, we will feel morally superior and may even feel safe, but we will not develop a partnership. This is the opposite of being in a relationship. It is like being alone—either with yourself, or with someone who is offering you a mirror image of yourself--and it only serves to confirm your childhood emotional world-view and set of expectations.

**For example (to a friend):** "Don't you agree that *I'm right?* Can you believe how badly he/she acted? Isn't he/she unbelievable?  
**Instead of:** "I know you're trying to support me, but I should really bring these feelings back to my relationship and see if I can work them out there. It's too easy to confirm all my negative feelings."

In Gestalt Therapy, we would call this emotional place of “rightness” a polarity: we tend to re-create and re-experience early family dynamics in our relationships, continually finding ourselves stuck in one side or the other, often having the same fight with the same person with the same words, as if we are in a Shakespearean play and we have memorized our lines. We tend to go to our friends and colleagues after these moments, to confirm our sense of injustice. But, paradoxically and sadly, we then also confirm our belief that we are powerless; that the world is unfair; and that the people we love will always let us down.

This is at odds with the Gestalt/Imago/Relational perspective, which is based on the premise that we most fully embrace our authenticity in relationships, and facilitate mutual healing, when we meet someone at the boundary of contact. We then can attempt to understand our partner’s perspective and invite him/her to understand ours; even more important, we can attempt to understand the mutual and co-created dynamic that emerges from our interaction. The two wounded inner children can meet, and instead of fighting for survival in the only way they have known, they can begin to collaborate and build a safer and more caring partnership which acknowledges and validates the feelings of both partners. This is the ultimate healing potential of a relationship: we get a second chance to be part of a loving and supportive partnership, instead of repeating what we have always known and being disappointed all over again. We get to do it in a different, better way. We have to talk to each other to do this, however, and not to someone else, unless that someone else has the wisdom to be empathic to both sides and send us back to our relationship to do the work that needs to be done. But, to be clear, then we would not be triangulating.