Triangle of Conflict Worksheet

Part 1. The moment I am mapping

Item	Entry
Client name or initials	
Clinician	
Date	
Session number	

The moment or pattern

Include: what the client said and did, in the client's words where possible, and whom the client was talking about.

Why this moment matters

Include: how the moment connects to the problem that brought the client to therapy.

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Part 2. The triangle of conflict

Start with what I could see and hear, then note what I infer lay beneath it.

Corner	What the client said or did	What I infer
Defense (D) How the client kept the feeling or the anxiety away, such as joking, going vague or changing the subject.		
Anxiety (A) What the feeling stirred up, such as anxiety, guilt, shame or emotional pain.		
Feeling (F) The adaptive feeling underneath, such as grief, anger, closeness, joy or pride.		

How strong the anxiety was

How strong was the client's anxiety when the feeling came close? Circle a number.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
No anxiety										*Very strong*

How the three corners connect in this moment

Include: the sequence I saw, such as a feeling rising, anxiety following and a defense taking over.

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Part 3. The triangle of person

Note where the same conflict shows up with people in the client's life now, with people from the past and with me.

Corner	Where the pattern shows up
Current persons (C) Partner, friends, coworkers, children and others in the client's life now.	
Past persons (P) Parents, siblings and others from early life.	
Therapist (T) How the pattern shows up with me in the session.	

Links to explore

Include: what connects the two corners, and a tentative way I might put the link to the client.

Link	What connects them	How I might put it
C and P		
C and T		
T and P		

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Part 4. Plan for the next session

Where I will start

Include: the corner of the triangle of person and the corner of the triangle of conflict I will address first.

Words I might use

Include: a tentative, plain-language way to name the defense, the anxiety or the feeling.

Signs to watch for

Include: signs that the client's anxiety is rising or that the defense is returning, and how I will adjust the pace.

Questions for supervision

Include: my own reactions to the client, and questions about this pattern.

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Clinician guide: using the triangle of conflict

- **When it fits.** Use the worksheet after a session to map a moment when a feeling seemed to come close and then slip away, or before a session to plan an intervention. Malan presents the two triangles as a way to represent almost every intervention a therapist makes (Malan, 1995).
- **Map what is visible first.** Note the defense, then the anxiety, then the feeling. Malan's general procedure interprets them in that order, because the hidden feeling is the most disturbing corner and is approached gradually (Malan, 1995).
- **Start with the person the client brings.** Work first with the corner of the triangle of person the client opens with, usually someone in their current life, and make a link to the past or to the therapy relationship once the conflict is clear (Malan, 1995). In McCullough's model, patterns begin with past persons, continue with current persons and are often enacted with the therapist (McCullough et al., 2003).
- **Look for balance.** People always need some defenses, and some anxiety or inhibition is always needed to modulate feelings. McCullough and colleagues intervene when defenses or anxieties are excessive or maladaptive (McCullough et al., 2003).
- **Use it as a map.** Malan calls his sequence a rough guide, and the triangles can be worked in another order, for example when feelings about the therapist come up early (Malan, 1995). Revise the worksheet as the work goes on.

Adapted from the description of Malan's two triangles in Malan (1995) and McCullough et al. (2003). The layout and wording are original.

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Completed example: Daniel (a fictional client)

Daniel, 38, is a high school science teacher in weekly psychodynamic therapy. He came because his partner says he goes cold when she is upset. His therapist, A.M., a psychologist, filled in the worksheet after his sixth session, on December 4, 2026. Daniel, his therapist and every detail of the case are invented.

Part 1. The moment I am mapping

Item	Entry
Client name or initials	Daniel
Clinician	A.M., psychologist
Date	December 4, 2026
Session number	6

The moment or pattern

Daniel described his principal giving the department head role to a colleague. He laughed, said “It’s no big deal,” and spent several minutes on lesson plans. When I said it sounded disappointing, he said, “I feel stupid for caring.” His eyes filled for a moment, and he moved on to his weekend plans.

Why this moment matters

His partner says he goes cold when she is upset. This moment shows the same pattern with disappointment at work.

Part 2. The triangle of conflict

Corner	What the client said or did	What I infer
Defense (D)	Laughed, said “It’s no big deal,” went into detail about lesson plans, then changed the subject.	Minimizing, intellectualizing and moving away from the feeling.
Anxiety (A)	“I feel stupid for caring.”	Shame about wanting recognition.
Feeling (F)	His eyes filled when I named the disappointment.	Disappointment and grief, and perhaps anger at being passed over.

How strong the anxiety was

How strong was the client’s anxiety when the feeling came close? Circle a number.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	**7**	8	9	10
No anxiety										*Very strong*

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How the three corners connect in this moment

When I named the disappointment, shame came up, and he moved to his weekend plans.

Part 3. The triangle of person

Corner	Where the pattern shows up
Current persons (C)	Goes quiet and flat when his partner is upset. Tells his principal everything is fine.
Past persons (P)	His father told him to stop sulking when he cried as a boy.
Therapist (T)	Apologized for “wasting time” when he got emotional, and checked the clock.

Links to explore

Link	What connects them	How I might put it
C and P	Keeping feelings small with people who matter, as he learned to with his father.	“I wonder if keeping it small with your principal is something you learned early, with your dad.”
C and T	Apologizing to me for feelings, as he plays them down at work.	“Just now, when the disappointment came up, you apologized to me. I wonder if it feels risky to let me see it.”
T and P	Expecting me to react the way his father did.	Hold for a later session, once the link with his father is clear to him.

Part 4. Plan for the next session

Where I will start

With his principal (C), naming the laugh and the move into lesson plans as ways of keeping the disappointment small (D).

Words I might use

“I notice you laughed as you told me that. I wonder if the laugh keeps the disappointment at a distance.”

Signs to watch for

Laughing, going vague or checking the clock. If his anxiety climbs, slow down, ask what he notices in his body and return to the feeling when he is steadier.

Questions for supervision

I felt a pull to reassure him and move on. How can I stay with his disappointment without rushing to reassure him?

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In the seventh session, A.M. started with the moment about his principal. She named the laugh and the move into lesson plans and asked what made the disappointment hard to show. Daniel said that showing it felt weak. A.M. kept the link with his father for a later session, once the conflict with his principal was clear to both of them.

References and further reading

Books for clinicians

Malan, D. H. (1995). *Individual psychotherapy and the science of psychodynamics* (2nd ed.). Butterworth-Heinemann. ISBN 978-0-7506-2387-2.

McCullough, L., Kuhn, N., Andrews, S., Kaplan, A., Wolf, J., & Hurley, C. L. (2003). *Treating affect phobia: A manual for short-term dynamic psychotherapy*. Guilford Press. ISBN 978-1-57230-810-7.

Research

Rice, T., Shapiro, M. A., & Hoffman, L. (2025). The triangle of conflict: Applications of a core intervention from manualized psychodynamic psychotherapy. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 64*(12), 1362–1365.

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