

How Schemas Work Handout

A maladaptive schema is essentially a belief about yourself and your relationship to the world. The core sense and feeling is that something is wrong with you, with your relationships, or with the world at large. Schemas are formed in childhood and develop as a result of ongoing, dysfunctional experiences with parents, siblings, and peers during childhood, and continue to grow as children attempt to make sense of their experience and avoid further pain. Schemas come from repeated toxic messages that we get about ourselves from our early experiences (i.e. "you're bad," or "you don't do anything right") or specific traumatic events. Once a schema is formed, it's extremely stable and becomes an enduring pattern that is elaborated throughout one's life. Schemas are like a pair of sunglasses that distort all of our experiences and reality, they color the way we see things and make assumptions and predictions that tell us our schemas are true or that they will turn out to be true. These schemas that were formed in childhood now get triggered over and over again throughout our adult life by stressful interpersonal events and thoughts and feelings that come up for us. Once a schema is triggered it brings up specific powerful, automatic, and conditioned thoughts and feelings about ourselves that can lead to depression, panic, loneliness, anger, relationship conflict, inadequate work performance, addictions, and problematic decision-making. Schemas interfere with our ability to feel safe and satisfy basic needs in relationships to others.

Characteristics of Early Maladaptive Schemas

- *They are experienced as a priori truths about oneself or one's environment.*
- *They are resistant to change and are self-perpetuating.*
- *Schemas help predict the future—what will happen in relationships—and, because they create the illusion that one can see what's coming, are extremely difficult to give up.*
- *Schemas are usually triggered by stressful events—something painful in a relationship that activates old beliefs about the self.*
- *Schemas are always accompanied by high levels of affect—shame, fear, hurt, despair.*

Ten Schemas for Couples Handout

1. **Abandonment/instability:** the belief that your partner is unreliable, and that he or she will disconnect or leave.
2. **Mistrust/abuse:** the expectation that your partner will harm, betray, abuse, or neglect you.
3. **Emotional deprivation:** the expectation that your need for emotional support will not be met.
 - a. Deprivation of nurturance—the absence of attention.
 - b. Deprivation of empathy—the absence of understanding.
 - c. Deprivation of protection—the absence of help.
4. **Defectiveness/shame:** the belief that you are somehow defective, inferior, or unlovable.
5. **Social isolation/alienation:** the belief that you don't fit; don't belong with anyone. The sense of being alone while together, being unseen and not understood.
6. **Dependence:** the belief that it would be hard to survive emotionally without your partner, that you would not be able to take care of yourself outside the relationship.
7. **Failure:** the belief that you will fail in your relationship (and key aspects of life).
8. **Entitlement:** the belief that your partner should provide for your needs; that you have a right to expect his or her constant support.
9. **Subjugation/self-sacrifice:** the belief that you must always place your partner's needs over your own—either because your partner's needs are more important or because you fear rejection.
10. **Unrelenting standards:** the belief that you, and your partner, must meet high standards of performance—in life and the relationship. And if these standards aren't met, you or your partner are wrong and deserve criticism.

Schema Coping Behaviors in Relationships

1. **Attacking:** blaming, criticizing, aggressive speech, belittling, accusing, imposing intentions
2. **Demanding:** controlling, insisting, requiring attention, support, or care-taking, guilt tripping, excessive requests, reassurance seeking
3. **Surrender:** giving up, giving in, complying, self-sacrifice, being passive or submissive
4. **Clinging:** dependence, seeking attention and help with problems, reassurance seeking
5. **Withdrawal:** retreating emotionally, physically, sexually; silence, disconnection, stonewalling
6. **Stimulation seeking:** avoiding by seeking excitement and distraction through compulsive shopping, sex, gambling, risk-taking, overwork, etc.
7. **Addictive self-soothing:** avoiding by numbing with alcohol, drugs, food, TV, Internet, etc.
8. **Manipulating:** threats to do or not do something, derailing, seduction, dishonesty
9. **Punishing:** taking away, passive-aggressive procrastination, lateness, complaining
10. **Discounting:** suggesting or asserting that the other person's needs are unimportant, minimizing, defending, explaining, justifying

Trigger	Feelings	Thoughts about myself	Thoughts about My partner	Schema	Schema Coping Behavior (SCB)	Outcome of SCB

Trigger	Schema feelings that act as barriers: (ashamed, afraid, guilty, helpless)	Schema thoughts that act as barriers: I.e. Thoughts stories, expectations, predictions	Schema Coping behavior: What did you do?	Value: what value is this connected to? Was your behavior consistent with your value? Y/N	How would you have liked to behave differently?	What was the moment of choice to behave differently?

Value	Rate Importance (1-10)	Values-based behavior	Schema thoughts that act as barriers: I.e. Thoughts stories, expectations, predictions	Schema feelings that act as barriers: (shame, guilt, fear, helplessness)	When will I practice this new behavior?	Am I willing to have my schema pain if it means that I get closer to my value?

Domains	Importance (0-10)	Values	Values-based Actions
Communication			
Sex			
Parenting			
Money			
Affection			
Work			
Conflict			
Decision Making/ Negotiation			
Friendship/ Extended Family			
Shared Activities			

Examples of values in relationships:

In my relationship I want to be...

- Kind
- Assertive
- Spontaneous
- Genuine
- Loving
- Patient
- Humorous
- Honest
- Self-disciplined
- Consistent
- Reliable
- Flexible
- Sensual
- Sexual
- Appreciative
- Expressive
- Vulnerable
- Sensitive
- Compassionate
- Fair
- Loyal
- Committed
- Trustworthy
- gentle
- considerate
- decisive
- forthright
- grateful
- fun
- engaged
- present
- curious
- inquisitive
- supportive
- encouraging
- validating
- accepting
- romantic
- available
- generous
- tactful
- cooperative
- empathic
- attentive
- attuned
- understanding
- respectful
- mindful
- forgiving
- altruistic
- firm
- persistent
- deliberate
- vulnerable
- independent
- productive
- contributing
- adventurous
- determined
- self aware
- composed
- punctual
- dependable