Schema Therapy

A FRAMEWORK FOR OVERCOMING LIFE TRAPS

SARA RIDNER, LSCW, TRAUMA THERAPIST
What are Schemas?

- Schemas (Lifetraps) are MAL-adaptive coping styles. They are unhealthy patterns developed primarily in childhood, that continue and become a part of who we are.
  - Broad pervasive themes or patterns
    - A theme, not just a belief
  - Deeply entrenched patterns, central to one's sense of self.
    - Usually self-perpetuating.
What are Schemas?

- Comprised of memories, emotions, cognitions and body sensations
- Most develop during childhood or adolescence
- Dysfunctional to a significant degree
  - Adaptive vs. Maladaptive schemas
- Erupt when triggered by everyday events relevant to the schema
How Schemas Develop

- The development of schemas are believed to be a result of unmet core emotional needs in childhood.
- Some secondary or conditional schemas develop in adulthood. These are usually due to traumatic experiences. 5 Core Emotional Needs
5 Core Emotional Needs

- Secure attachment to others (includes safety, stability, nurturance, and acceptance)
- Autonomy, competence, and sense of identity
- Freedom to express valid needs and emotions
- Spontaneity and play
- Realistic limits and self-control
How Schemas Develop

- Schemas are developed primarily in early childhood as natural adaptations to family life.

- **The Two factors:**
  - **Temperament** – Who we are and how we are hard wired.
  - **Experiences** – The unique events that occur in lives.

- It is important to distinguish that Schema therapy is not simply blaming the parent.
How Schemas Develop

- Schemas originate through the interaction of child’s innate temperament and early environment results in the frustration, rather than gratification of basic needs.

- Schemas that develop the earliest and are the strongest typically originate in the nuclear family. This is the child’s entire world.

- Adult situations which activate the schema usually represent a drama from early childhood, usually with a parent.
Schemas are **not** the behaviors that one exhibits, instead they are the **thoughts and perceptions** that shape behaviors.

An Event Occurs $\rightarrow$ We interpret that event based on our schemas and perception of the event $\rightarrow$ Perception generates feeling and thoughts $\rightarrow$ Our reaction, responses and behavior is then determined by our thoughts and feelings.
There are 18 schemas which are divided into two types:

- **Unconditional** (Primary) – These schemas are considered permanent and present regardless of the circumstances.

- **Conditional** (Secondary) – These schemas can be more or less prevalent based on the conditions of environment and experiences.

Conditional schemas are often used as tools of the unconditional schemas.
Schemas are grouped into 5 domains

- Domain 1: Disconnection & Rejection
- Domain 2: Impaired Autonomy & Performance
- Domain 3: Impaired Limits
- Domain 4: Other Directedness
- Domain 5: Over Vigilance & Inhibition
Emotional Deprivation

The belief and expectation that you’re emotional needs will not be adequately met by others.

Origins of emotional deprivation schema/ life trap:

- A Parent was cold or unemotional toward you as a child.
- You did not have a sense of being loved, cared for or valued as a child.
- A parent did not give you enough time and attention as a child.
- You lacked guidance and a sense of direction from your parents.
- A parent was emotionally absent (alcoholic/drug addict, had a mental illness such as depression) or worked a great deal when you were a child.
- A parent was emotionally/verbally abuse to you during your childhood.
Abandonment

The feeling of instability/unreliability of those available for support and connection. The belief that you will lose the people you love and be left emotionally or physically alone. The belief/feeling that people will not be able to continue providing emotional support, connection, strength or protection because they are emotionally unstable, unpredictable, unreliable, erratically present, die or abandon you in favor of someone else.

Origins of the abandonment schema/life trap:

- A parent died or left home when you were young.
- A parent was hospitalized or separated from you for a prolonged period when you were a child.
- A parent was unstable or physically/emotionally absent (alcoholic/drug addict, had a mental illness such as depression), or worked a great deal when you were a child.
- Your parents divorced when you were young, or fought so much you were worried that family would fall apart.
- You lost the attention of a parent in a significant way (a sibling was born or your Parent remarried.)
The expectation that others will hurt, abuse, humiliates, cheat, lie, betray, manipulate or take advantage of you in some way. You do not trust people and are constantly on guard. You do not allow people to get to know you for fear you will be hurt in some way.

Origins of the mistrust/abuse schema/ life trap:

- Someone in your family physically or sexually abused you as a child.
- Someone in your family repeatedly humiliated, teased, demeaned, put you down.
- People in your family could not be trusted. They betrayed confidences, exploited your weaknesses to their advantage, manipulated you, made promises they had no intention of keeping or lied to you.
- Someone in your family seemed to get pleasure from seeing you suffer.
- You were made to do things as a child by threat, severe punishment or retaliation.
- Someone in your family repeatedly told you not to trust people outside of the family.
- People called you names or teased you as a child.
Social Isolation

The belief/feeling that you are isolated from the rest of the world, different from other people and/or not part of any group or community. You feel excluded, rejected, not good enough, alone and like an outsider. You feel lonely even when you are with people. You are nervous around others, you withdraw and isolate.

Origins of social isolation schema/life trap:

- You felt inferior to other children; you were teased, rejected or humiliated by other children.
- You felt different than other children, even within your family.
- Your peers excluded you from their group.
- Your family moved a great deal when you were a child and you were never able to form lasting relationships/friendships.
- Your family was different than other families.
Defectiveness

The feeling that one is defective, bad, unwanted, inferior or invalid in important respects; or that one would be unlovable to significant others if exposed. May involve hypersensitivity to criticism, rejection, and blame; self-consciousness, comparisons, and insecurity around others; or a sense of shame regarding one’s perceived flaws.

Origins of the defectiveness schema/life trap:
- Critical, demeaning, rejecting or punitive parent
- Do not feel worthy of love or respect (even by parents)
- Blame self for being rejected, i.e., criticized is deserved
- Internalized “voice of the critical parent”
- Often paired with mistrust/abuse because of high rates of abuse and Punitiveness in this schema
- External: made to feel less attractive by family or peers
The belief/feeling that you have failed, will inevitably fail or that you are inadequate relative to your peers (Career, school, sports, etc.) You do not feel your successes are justified. You believe you are stupid, inept, untalented, ignorant, lower in status, less successful than others regardless of your outward successes.

Origins of failure schema/ life trap:

- A parent was very critical of your performance in school, sports, etc. as a child. A parent told you that you were stupid, dumb, never succeed, etc.
- One or both parents were very successful and you came to believe you could never live up to their high standards, therefore you stopped trying.
- You believed one or both parents did not care about whether you succeeded or they felt threatened when you did well.
- You were not as good as other children, either at school or in sports; you felt inferior.
- You were unfavorably compared to siblings. You believed as a child you could never measure up to your siblings.
Dependence

The belief/feeling that you are incapable or unable to handle everyday responsibilities or take care of yourself without considerable help from others. You feel incompetent and inadequate. You are indecisive and lack trust in your own judgment. You depend on others to take care of you and make decisions for you. You lack self-esteem and confidence.

Origins of dependence schema/life trap:

- Your parents were/are overprotective and treated you as if you were/are incapable of taking care of yourself.
- Your parents made/make almost all your decisions for you.
- Your parents took care of the details in your life so you never learned how to take care of yourself as an adult.
- Your parents did your schoolwork for you as a child. You had no chores/responsibilities during your childhood/adolescence.
- You were/are rarely apart from your parents and have little sense of yourself as a separate person.
- Your parents criticized or questioned your opinions and competence in everyday tasks.
- Your parents made you feel so safe that you never had a serious rejection or failure until you left home.
Vulnerability

The belief/feeling that catastrophe will strike at any time and that you will be unable to prevent it or deal with it. You are continually tense, you believe if you let down or relax your guard something bad will happen. You view the world as a dangerous place. Can manifest in 3 categories: Health/Illness/Medical Catastrophes, Emotional Catastrophes, External Catastrophes.

Origins of vulnerability schema/ life trap:

- Your parents were phobic or frightened about specific areas of vulnerability when you were a child.
- Your parents were overprotective of you, particularly around issues concerning danger of illness. Your parents continually warned you of dangers as a child.
- Your parents did not adequately protect you as a child. Your childhood environment was not safe.
- You were often sick as a child.
- You experienced or witnessed a serious traumatic event during your childhood.
- One of your parents experienced a serious traumatic even and perhaps died.
Enmeshment

Excessive emotional involvement and closeness with one or more significant other, usually parents, at the expense of full individuality and normal social development. The belief/feeling that you cannot survive or be happy without the constant support of the person enmeshed/fused with. You lack identity outside of the person enmeshed/fused with; you do not know where one person begins and the other ends.

Origins of enmeshment schema/ life trap:

- You were/are rarely apart from you parents and have little sense of yourself as a separate person.
- Your parents were/are overprotective and treated you as if you were/are incapable of taking care of yourself.
- A parent lived vicariously through you as a child.
- You did not have friends growing up; you spent most of your time with a parent.
Entitlement

The belief/feeling that you are superior to other people; entitled to special rights and privileges and are not bound to rules/laws; you do not expect to pay the normal consequences for your actions. You feel you should be able to do or have whatever you want. You focus on being superior or successful in order to achieve power or control. You are highly competitive or dominating of others. You feel you did not have a good childhood, therefore you feel entitled to be treated well as an adult.

Origins of entitlement schema/ life trap:

- One or more parent did not provide sufficient discipline/ your parents spoiled or indulged you as a child.
- You were allowed to get away with irresponsible behavior as a child without consequences.
- One or more parents appeared superior or highly successful.
- You were ill as a child and therefore dependent on your parents. You feel you did not have a good childhood and therefore you demand or feel people owe you a high level of care/respect.
Insufficient Self-Control

You refuse or have difficulty exercising appropriate self-control/discipline. You are impulsive and react without thinking of possible consequences. You have a low frustration/anger tolerance.

Origins of insufficient self control:

- One or both parents did not exercise sufficient control or discipline with you as a child.
- You were not taught impulse control as a child; your parents allowed you to act out impulses without imposing realistic negative consequences.
- You lacked responsibility as a child and were not forced to complete tasks such as schoolwork and appropriate chores.
- One or both parents had difficulty controlling emotions and impulses
Subjugation

You feel controlled by others; you feel coerced into surrendering control to others usually to avoid anger, retaliation or abandonment, you believe/feel your own desires, opinions and feelings are not valid or important to others. The choices you make are dictated by their effects on other people. You do not have a clear sense of what you want or need. You feel guilty if you do not please others. You have an underlying feeling of anger because you believe you must please others. You feel everyone has rights but you. You often feel “trapped.”

Origins of subjugation schema/ life trap:
- Parents tried to control or dominate almost every aspect of your life as a child and throughout adolescence.
- A parent threatened or got angry when you would not do things their way.
- A parent did not allow you to make your own choices as a child.
- A parent always talked to you about their personal problems, you were in the role of a listener or care taker as a child.
- A parent would make you feel guilty or selfish if you would not do what they wanted as a child.
- A parent was like a martyr—they selflessly took care of everyone else and denied their own needs.
- You had to be very careful of what you did or said as a child because you worried about a parents reaction.
Self-Sacrifice

Excessive focus on voluntarily meeting the needs/wants of others at the expense of your own needs/wants. You feel responsible for the well-being of others. You do this to avoid feeling guilt from feeling selfish, to prevent causing pain to others, or to maintain connection with others. You are sensitive to other’s pain.

Origins of self sacrifice schema/ life trap:

- You experienced too much responsibility as a child for the physical or emotional welfare of a parent, sibling or of some other close person.
- You had a parent who was chronically ill or depressed; you were responsible for taking care of their needs/wants.
- A parent was like a martyr-they selflessly took care of everyone else and denied their own needs.
Domain 5: Over Vigilance & Inhibition

- Emotional Need not being met: Spontaneity and play.
- Excessive emphasis on suppressing one’s spontaneous feelings, impulses, and choices OR on meeting rigid, internalized rules and expectations about performance and ethical behaviors—often at the expense of happiness, self-expression, relaxation, close relationships, or health.
Domain 5: Over Vigilance & Inhibition

- Typical family of origin is grim, demanding, and sometimes punitive: performance, duty, perfectionism, following rules, hiding emotions, and avoiding mistakes predominate over leisure, joy and relaxation. There is usually an undercurrent of pessimism and worry- that things could fall apart if one fails to be vigilant and careful at all times.

- This domain includes Negativity/Pessimism, Emotional Inhibition, Unrelenting Standards, Punitiveness
Emotional Inhibition

The inability to express feelings/emotions, spontaneous action or communication usually to avoid disapproval by others, feelings of shame or losing control or impulses. You have difficulty feeling vulnerable and expressing your needs and wants. You emphasize rationality/intellect and disregard emotions/feelings. Common areas of inhibition/restraint involve: Inhibition of anger/aggression; positive impulses such as joy, affection and play.

Origins of emotional inhibition schema/ life trap:
A parent was cold, unemotional or stoic. A parent was like a martyr-they selflessly took care of everyone else and denied their own needs.

- A parent only expressed one emotion, usually anger.
- You were punished for expressing certain emotions as a child.
- A parent emotionally/verbally abused you as a child.
The belief that you must strive to meet very high internalized standards of behavior and performance. You feel driven to be perfect at whatever you do. You place unrealistic expectations on yourself and others. You are often unable to relax and take pleasure in life. You feel a great deal of pressure and anxiety in your everyday life and often obsess about the next thing you have to do. You are a perfectionist; detail oriented and is rigid in your rules on how things should be.

Origins of unrelenting standard schema/ life trap:

- A parent’s love for you was conditional on your meeting high standards as a child.
- A parent only gave you affection, approval or attention when you were successful or perfect as a child.
- One or both parents were models of high, unbalanced standards.
- One or both parents used shame or criticism when you failed to meet their high expectations as a child.
- A parent was in the military and had very rigid rules on how things should be in everyday life.
Approval Seeking

Excessive emphasis on gaining approval, recognition, attention or praise from other people because of your insecurities. You focus on fitting in with others. Your sense of self is dependent on the reactions of others. You fear rejection and seek acceptance.

Origins of approval seeking schema/ life trap:

- A parent was very critical of you; you did not receive praise as a child.
- A parent was emotionally/verbally abusive to you as a child.
- You felt inadequate in school therefore excelled in sports, music, etc. to gain approval from peers as a child.
- A parent was focused on status and appearance when you were a child.
Negativity/Pessimism

A pervasive, lifelong focus on the negative aspects of life such as death, loss, pain, suffering, disappointment, conflict, guilt, resentment, etc. while minimizing positive or optimistic aspects of life. You expect negative outcomes in life and are frequently indecisive with chronic worry.

Origins of negativity/pessimism schema/life trap:

- You experienced a major loss or tragedy in your past and have not fully grieved/accepted the loss.
- You had/have a disability that prevents you from experiencing life to the fullest.
- You experienced a series of failures in school, sports, etc. as a child.
- You were ignored by a family member as a child.
- You never felt approval or recognition from family members as a child.
- A parent was depressed, sad, ill and/or negative when you were a child.
Punitiveness

The belief that people including yourself should be harshly punished for making mistakes. You have difficulty forgiving mistakes in yourself and/or others. You have the tendency to feel angry, intolerant, and impatient with people, including yourself, who do not meet your expectations or standards.

Origins of punitiveness schema/ life trap:

- You were harshly punished for making mistakes as a child.
- A parent would verbally, emotionally or physically abuse you for making mistakes.
- You did not receive affection and approval as a child, the only affection you received was negative.
- A parent was a perfectionist.
- A parent was very critical of you as a child.
- Internalized “voice of the critical parent”
- Often paired with mistrust/abuse because of high rates of abuse or mistrust in this schema
- External: made to feel less attractive by family or peers
How We Cope with Schemas

There are 3 primary coping styles where behaviors are exhibited:

- Surrender
- Counter Attack
- Escape / Avoid
Coping Style: Surrender

- **Surrender** – Beliefs, actions, or thoughts that reflect the schema to be true.
  - Example: Self-Sacrifice: Engage in self-denial; does too much for others and not enough for themselves.
  - Example: Unrelenting Standards: Attempts to perform perfectly; sets high expectations and standards for self and others.
Coping Style: Counter-Attack

- **Counter Attack** – Actions and thoughts fight against the identified schema.
  - Example: Self-Sacrifice: Become angry at significant others for not reciprocating or not showing appreciation; decides to do nothing for others anymore.
  - Example: Unrelenting Standards: Throws out high standards all together and settles for below average.
Coping Style: Escape/Avoid

- **Escape / Avoid** – Though drug and alcohol use may be the simplest examples of this method, others include procrastination, or distraction.
  - Example: Self-Sacrifice: Avoids close relationships.
  - Example: Unrelenting Standards: Avoids taking on work tasks; procrastinates.
Utilizing Schema Therapy

- Schema therapy integrates elements of cognitive therapy, behavior therapy, object relations, and gestalt therapy into one unified, systematic approach to treatment.
- Schema therapy has recently been blended with mindfulness meditation for clients who want to add a spiritual dimension to their lives.
- There are 2 phases of Schema Therapy
Phase I: Assessment and Education

- Goals of Phase One: Assessment and Education
- Identify and educate patient about central life schemas
- Link schemas to presenting problems & life history; explore origins of schemas
- Bring patient in touch with emotions surrounding schemas
- Identify dysfunctional coping styles
Phase II: Change

Goals of Phase Two: Change, Empathic Confrontation, Reality-Testing

- Cognitive: Restructure thinking related to schemas; develop healthy voice to create distance
- Experiential: Practice experiential exercises to vent anger & grieve for early pain, to empower patient
- Therapy Relationship: Focus on therapy relationship to provide limited reparenting, and to heal schemas & coping styles triggered in sessions
- Behavioral Pattern-Breaking: Assign and rehearse behavioral and interpersonal changes related to presenting problem; break dysfunctional life patterns
Benefits of Schema Therapy

- Schema Therapy was developed to treat personality disorders, chronic depression, and other difficult individual and couples problems.
  - Can be used to treat a variety of client populations.
  - Can be adapted for many different acuity levels.
  - Can be altered to fit the emotional needs and health of each client.

- It gives patient’s the “why” behind their behaviors and thought patterns which can bring a sense of empowerment and motivation for change.
Utilizing Schema Therapy Safely

- It is important to remember that not all clients are ready for schema therapy.
- Appropriate settings vs. inappropriate settings.
- Importance of appropriate clinical background and experience.
- Referring out when schemas bring up emotions or experiences that are not in the clinicians area of practice.
Implications for Clients

- Client’s schemas will affect their treatment. Schemas can:
  - Interfere with ability to follow suggestions of the program
  - Cause a lack of skills or self-confidence
  - Create an unwillingness or inability to comply with treatment expectations
  - Create extreme avoidance
  - Create distorted thinking
  - Strengthen self-defeating patterns
  - Cause difficulty in the formation of the therapeutic alliance.
Implications for Clinicians

- It is important for clinicians to know and understand their schemas— as these are the ‘lenses’ through which we view clients.
  - Self-awareness helps prevent bias in client interactions
  - Can help prevent burnout
Resources for Further Information:

- **Reinventing Your Life** by Jeffery E. Young, Ph.D., Janet S. Klosko, Ph.D.

- **Schema Therapy: A Practitioner’s Guide** by Jeffery E. Young, Janet S. Klosko, Marjorie E. Weishaar

- http://www.isst-online.com - International Society of Schema Therapy

- www.schematherapy.com