Introduction to Schemas

> An **early maladaptive schema** is a broad, pervasive theme or pattern; comprised of memories, emotions, cognitions, and bodily sensations; regarding oneself and one's relationships with others; emerging during childhood or adolescence; developed throughout one's lifetime; and dysfunctional to a significant degree.

Domain: Disconnection and Rejection

The expectation that one's needs for security, stability, nurturance, empathy, sharing of feelings, acceptance, and respect will not be met in a predictable manner.

- **Emotional Deprivation**: The belief that the need for emotional support, attention, understanding, empathy, and help will never be sufficiently met by others.
- **Abandonment**: The belief that everyone will leave, creating a sense of loneliness as no one can offer the emotional support, connection, strength, or protection needed.
- **Mistrust/Abuse**: The belief that others will intentionally cause harm by lying, cheating, manipulating, hurting, shaming, or abusing you.
- **Defectiveness**: The belief of being flawed, worthless, bad, incapable, or useless in important aspects of life.
- **Social Isolation**: The perception of being isolated from others, being different from other people, not being part of a group, or having no sense of belonging.

Domain: Impaired Autonomy and Performance

Expectations about oneself and the environment that interfere with one's perceived ability to separate, survive, function independently, or perform successfully.

- **Dependency/Incompetence:** The belief that one is incapable of making decisions and thus requires a large amount of support from others to manage daily life or complete tasks.
- **Vulnerability to Illness/Harm:** The belief that there is a constant risk of illness, harm, or danger that cannot be prevented.
- **Enmeshment:** The strong attachment to others and over-involvement in their lives due to the belief that one doesn't have any social life or interests of one's own—therefore, needing to be close to others.
- **Failure:** The belief that one has failed or will always fail in areas of performance—such as work, school, or sports.

Domain: Conditional Connectedness

An excessive focus on the desires, feelings, and responses of others—at the expense of one's own needs—in order to gain love and approval, maintain one's sense of connection, or avoid retaliation.

- **Subjugation:** The act of giving over control to others, allowing them to make decisions, due to the belief of oneself being weak and others being stronger.
- **Self-Sacrifice:** The belief that the needs of others are more important and must be fulfilled at all costs—to the detriment of one's own happiness or wellbeing.
- **Approval Seeking:** The act of trying excessively to achieve the approval, praise, or attention of others; trying to fit in at the cost of developing one's own true feelings or identity.

Domain: Impaired Limits
Deficiency in internal limits, responsibility to others, or long-term goal orientation. Leads to difficulty respecting rights of others, cooperating with others, making commitments, or setting and meeting realistic personal goals.

- **Entitlement:** The belief that one is superior to others and is more deserving of special treatment or privileges.
- **Insufficient Self-Control:** The difficulty with controlling one's impulses or urges that results in risk taking behaviors or expressing feelings in an extreme manner.

Domain: Over-Vigilance and Inhibition
Excessive emphasis on suppressing one's spontaneous feelings, impulses, and choices OR on meeting rigid, internalized rules and expectations about performance and ethical behavior—often at the expense of happiness, self-expression, relaxation, close relationships, or health. The latest research categorizes emotional inhibition and punitiveness into new schemas: emotional constriction & fear of losing control; punitiveness (others) & punitiveness (self), respectively.

- **Negativity/Pessimism:** The tendency to focus on the negative aspects of life and always expect the worst, while ignoring or minimizing the positives.
- **Emotional Constriction:** A pattern of overcontrol of or disconnection from one's own emotions.
- **Fear of Losing Control:** The belief that something terrible will happen if one fails to maintain control over their emotions.
- **Unrelenting Standards:** The belief that one must work excessively hard to meet very high standards for behavior and achievement to avoid criticism from oneself or others.
- **Punitiveness (others):** The belief that people should be harshly punished if they make mistakes.
- **Punitiveness (self):** The belief that one should harshly punish themselves for mistakes.

> The triggering of a schema is a threat—the frustration of a core emotional need for secure attachment, autonomy, free self-expression, spontaneity/play, or realistic limits; as well as the fear of concomitant emotions—to which the individual responds with a coping style. Maladaptive coping styles keep people imprisoned in their schemas.

Coping Style: Overcompensation (Fight)
One fights the schema by thinking, feeling, behaving, and relating as though the opposite of the schema were true. They endeavor to be as different as possible from the person they were when the schema was acquired. If they felt worthless, they try to be perfect; if they were subjugated, they defy everyone; etc.

Coping Style: Avoidance (Flight)
One attempts to arrange their life in ways that the schema is never activated. They attempt to live without awareness—as though the schema does not exist. They avoid thinking about the schema. They block thoughts and images that are likely to trigger it, and distract or numb themselves when feelings do surface. Many shun whole areas of life in which they feel vulnerable.

Coping Style: Surrender (Freeze)
One accepts the schema as true and feels the emotional pain directly. They act in ways that confirm the schema. When they encounter schema triggers, their emotional responses are disproportionate. They then frequently relate to others in passive, compliant ways that perpetuate the schema.