



# SCHEMA THERAPY – AN INTRODUCTION

**F**our main theoretical concepts in Schema Therapy are: *Early Maladaptive Schemas* (or simply 'schemas'); *Coping Styles*; *Modes* and *Basic Emotional Needs*:<sup>[1]</sup>

**1** In cognitive psychology, a *schema* is an organized pattern of thought and behaviour. It can also be described as a mental structure of preconceived ideas, a framework representing some aspect of the world, or a system of organizing and perceiving new information.

In schema therapy, a *schema* specifically refers to an **Early Maladaptive Schema**, defined as:

*"a pervasive self-defeating or dysfunctional theme or pattern of memories, emotions, and physical sensations, developed during childhood or adolescence and elaborated throughout one's lifetime. Often they have the form of a belief about the self or the world."*

For instance, a person with an **Abandonment schema** could be hypersensitive (have an "emotional button" or "trigger") about their perceived value to others, which in turn could make them feel sad and panicky in their interpersonal relationships.

**2** *Coping Styles* are a person's behavioural responses to schemas.

There are three potential coping styles:

- i) In "**avoidance**" the person tries to avoid situations that activate the schema.
- ii) In "**surrender**" the person gives into the schema, doesn't try to fight against it, and changes their behaviour in expectation that the feared outcome is inevitable.

- iii) In "**counterattack**", also called "overcompensation", the person puts extra work into not allowing the schema's feared outcome to happen.

These maladaptive coping styles (overcompensation, avoidance or surrender) very often wind up reinforcing the schemas.

Continuing the *Abandonment* example:

Having imagined a threat of abandonment in a relationship and feeling sad and panicky, a person using an avoidance coping style might then behave in ways to limit the closeness in the relationship to try to protect themselves from being abandoned.

The resulting loneliness or even actual loss of the relationship could easily reinforce the person's Abandonment schema.

Another example can be given for the **Defectiveness schema**:

A person using an avoidance coping style might avoid situations that make them feel defective, or might try to numb the feeling with addictions or distractions.

A person using a surrender coping style might tolerate unfair criticism without defending themselves.

A person using the counterattack/overcompensation coping style might put extra effort into being superhuman.



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**3** *Modes* are mind states that cluster schemas and coping styles into a temporary "way of being" that a person can shift into occasionally or more frequently.

For example:

A ***Vulnerable Child mode*** might be a state of mind encompassing schemas of Abandonment, Defectiveness, Mistrust/ Abuse and a coping style of surrendering (to the schemas).

**4** If a patient's ***Basic Emotional Needs*** are not met in childhood, then schemas, coping styles, and modes can develop.

Some basic needs that have been identified are:

- ⇒ Connection
- ⇒ Mutuality
- ⇒ Reciprocity
- ⇒ Flow
- ⇒ Autonomy

For example, a child with unmet needs around connection—perhaps due to parental loss to death, divorce, or addiction—might develop an Abandonment schema.

**The goal of Schema Therapy is to help patients meet their basic emotional needs by helping the patient learn how to:**

- ⇒ heal schemas by diminishing the intensity of emotional memories comprising the schema and the intensity of bodily sensations, and by changing the cognitive patterns connected to the schema;
- ⇒ replace maladaptive coping styles and responses with adaptive patterns of behaviour.

Techniques used in schema therapy including limited reparenting and Gestalt Therapy Psychodrama Techniques such as imagery re-scripting and empty chair dialogues.

See *Techniques in Schema Therapy*, below.

## References & Further Reading

[1] Young, Jeffrey E; Klosko, Janet S; Weishaar, Marjorie E (2003). *Schema therapy: a practitioner's guide*. New York: Guilford Press. ISBN 9781593853723. OCLC 51053419

*Gestalt Therapy*: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gestalt\\_therapy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gestalt_therapy)

*Techniques in Schema Therapy*:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schema\\_therapy#Techniques\\_in\\_schema\\_therapy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schema_therapy#Techniques_in_schema_therapy)