

Understanding Couples' Schemas Handout

A schema is a core belief about yourself and your relationship. It creates a feeling that something is wrong with you and/or your intimate connection. Schemas are formed in childhood and develop as a result of ongoing dysfunctional experiences with caregivers, siblings, and peers.

Schemas come from repeated messages that we have gotten about ourselves (for example, "You're bad" or "You can't do anything right") or from specific traumatic events. Once a schema is formed, it's extremely stable and becomes an enduring way to see and understand yourself and your relationships.

Schemas are like sunglasses that distort all of your experiences. They color the way you see things, and they influence assumptions and predictions that tell you the schema is true or will turn out to be true. Schemas formed during childhood are triggered throughout your life. Common triggers include conflict, strong needs, and difficult thoughts and feelings. Once a schema gets triggered, it brings up extremely painful feelings (shame, loss, sadness, fear, anger, etc.). Schemas interfere with your ability to feel safe in a relationship, your ability to get your needs met, and your ability to meet the needs of others.

Characteristics of Couples Schemas¹

They are experienced as self-evident truths.

They are self-perpetuating and resistant to change.

They seem to predict the future, particularly what will happen in your relationship, because they create the illusion that you can see what's coming and prepare accordingly.

They're usually triggered by stressful events, typically something painful in your relationship, that activate old beliefs about yourself.

They are always accompanied by high levels of emotion.

¹ Adapted from *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for Interpersonal Problems* (McKay, Lev, & Skeen, 2012).

Thoughts Journal

Event with Partner	Feelings	Thoughts

10 Schemas for Couples

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, 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, that you 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, and 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/grandiosity: the belief that your partner should provide for your needs, and that you have a right to expect his or her constant support.
9. Self-sacrifice/subjugation: 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 in the relationship. And if these standards aren't met, you or your partner are wrong and deserve criticism.

Schema Affect

Schema	Affect
Social isolation/alienation	Loneliness, shame, dejection, embarrassment, isolation, desolate yearning, fear, anxiety
Self-sacrifice/subjugation	Guilt, fear, helplessness, obligation, anger
Entitlement/grandiosity	Anger, disappointment, deprivation, engulfment
Abandonment/instability	Fear, loneliness, jealousy, insecurity, longing, grief
Failure	Fear, sadness, disappointment, helplessness, anger, shame
Emotional deprivation	Loneliness, urgency, deprivation, hunger, helplessness, yearning, sadness, anger
Defectiveness/shame	Shame, sadness, fear, helplessness, anger
Unrelenting standards	Disappointment, discontent, emptiness, fear, dissatisfaction, frustration, shame
Mistrust/abuse	Fear, suspicion, loneliness, caution, doubt, anger, yearning
Dependence	Fear, uncertainty, loneliness, vulnerability, inferiority, doubt, confusion, anxiety

Schema Triggers for Couples

Schemas tend to distort our view of relationships, particularly in situations when each partner's needs are different. When our schemas get triggered, we react in ways designed to protect ourselves from the emotional pain that results. Triggers are unavoidable in our relationships. However, if you can identify the triggers for your main schemas, you'll be one step closer to changing the reactions that fuel fights and conflicts. Here are some of the typical triggers for each schema:

Abandonment/instability: This schema is likely to be triggered for you when your partner is withdrawn, shut down, or unavailable. It can also be activated when your partner is critical, seems dissatisfied with the relationship, or has directly or indirectly threatened to leave.

Mistrust/abuse: This schema is often triggered when your partner says or does something that hurts you, when you perceive your partner as not caring, or when your partner pushes for things that don't seem good for you.

Emotional deprivation: This schema can get triggered if you feel lonely, if your partner seems detached, or if you don't feel understood, protected, or loved.

Defectiveness/shame: Activation of this schema can follow being criticized, or when you feel that you aren't living up to your partner's expectations. Messages that you aren't worthy, or aren't good enough, are also highly triggering.

Social isolation/alienation: This schema can be triggered when you feel different from your partner or your partner's friends or family (in values, interests, tastes, etc.), or don't feel seen and understood. Sometimes it can be activated by feeling alone while sharing the same space as your partner.

Dependence: This can be triggered when facing difficulties or challenges and your partner seems withdrawn and unavailable. Any situation when you need your partner and he or she isn't there—emotionally or physically—can be triggering. Any threat to the relationship can also activate this schema.

Failure: This schema is likely to be triggered by mistakes, criticism, or the message that you aren't living up to your partner's expectations. The suggestion that something is lacking about your accomplishments, talents, competence, or intelligence will also activate this core belief.

Entitlement/grandiosity: This can be triggered when your partner doesn't do what you want or need, or when a partner chooses his or her own needs or desires over yours.

Self-sacrifice/subjugation: This schema can be triggered whenever your partner needs something from you and you feel compelled to give it. It can also be activated by the sense that your partner's needs control you, forcing you to go along whether you want to or not.

Unrelenting standards: This can be triggered when either you or your partner doesn't live up to standards you hold for how to behave in an intimate relationship. This schema can also be activated by criticism, conflict, or feelings of dissatisfaction.

Schema Triggers Log

Triggering Situation	Schema	Emotion	Behavior (What You Did)

10 Common Schema Coping Behaviors in Relationships

The following is a list of 10 common maladaptive coping behaviors that couples engage in when triggered:

1. **Attacking:** blaming, criticizing, aggressive speech, belittling, accusing, imposing intentions
2. **Demanding:** controlling, insisting, making excessive requests, and requiring attention, support, or caretaking
3. **Surrendering:** giving up, giving in, complying, self-sacrifice, being passive or submissive
4. **Clinging:** dependence, seeking attention and help with problems, seeking reassurance
5. **Withdrawal:** silence, disconnection, stonewalling, or retreating emotionally, physically, and sexually
6. **Stimulation seeking:** avoiding by seeking excitement and distraction through compulsive shopping, sex, gambling, risk taking, overworking, and so on
7. **Addictive self-soothing:** avoiding by numbing with alcohol, drugs, food, TV, Internet, and so on
8. **Manipulating:** threats to do or not do something, derailing, seduction, dishonesty, guilt-tripping
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

Values in Relationships

These are examples of values in relationships to help couples clarify key values.

Accepting	Engaged	Persistent
Adventurous	Expressive	Present
Altruistic	Fair	Productive
Appreciative	Firm	Punctual
Assertive	Flexible	Reliable
Attentive	Forgiving	Respectful
Attuned	Forthright	Romantic
Available	Fun	Self-advocating
Committed	Generous	Self-aware
Compassionate	Gentle	Self-compassionate
Composed	Genuine	Self-disciplined
Considerate	Grateful	Sensitive
Consistent	Honest	Sensual
Contributing	Humorous	Sexual
Curious	Independent	Spontaneous
Decisive	Inquisitive	Supportive
Deliberate	Kind	Tactful
Dependable	Loving	Trustworthy
Determined	Loyal	Understanding
Empathic	Mindful	Validating
Encouraging	Patient	Vulnerable

Values Domains Worksheet

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

Values-Based Actions Worksheet

Value	Importance (1–10)	Values-Based Behavior	Thoughts That Act as Barriers (stories, expectations, predictions)	Feelings That Act as Barriers (shame, guilt, fear, helplessness)	When will I practice this new behavior?	Am I willing to have these barriers and still take steps toward my value?
Curious						
Assertive						
Vulnerable						
Independent						

Weekly Triggers Log

Trigger	Thoughts (thoughts, stories, expectations, etc., that acted as barriers)	Feelings (feelings that acted as barriers: shame, fear, guilt, etc.)	Behavior (What did you do?)	Values (What values is this behavior connected to? Was your behavior consistent with those values?)	Values-Based Action (How would you have liked to behave differently?)	Moment of Choice (When did you have a choice to behave differently?)

Monitoring Values Throughout the Week

Thinking about the past week, how consistent have your behaviors been with your values? How consistent have your partner's behaviors been? First, begin by entering each of your values, then rate the importance of each value. For each value, rate yourself on how consistent you have been between 0 and 100 percent, 100 being that all your behaviors have been consistent with this value, and 0 being that none of your behaviors were consistent with this value. Then rate your partner.

Relationship Values	Importance (1–10)	My Consistent Behaviors (0–100%)	My Partner's Consistent Behaviors (0–100%)

Alignment with Values Worksheet

Thinking about the past week, how consistent were *your behaviors* with your values? First, begin by entering each of your values. Then write down actions you've taken during the week that were *consistent* with those values. Include how your partner responded to your behaviors. Next, write down the actions you've taken that were *inconsistent* with those values, as well as how your partner responded. Finally, give *yourself* an overall rating (0–100%) for values-consistent actions for the week.

Relationship Values	Values-Consistent Actions	Outcome (How did your partner respond?)	Values-Inconsistent Actions	Outcome (How did your partner respond?)	Rating for Values-Based Actions This Week (0–100%)

Alignment with Values Worksheet for Partner

Thinking about the past week, how consistent were *your partner's behaviors* with your values? First, begin by entering each of your values, then write down actions your partner has taken this week that were *consistent* with those values. How did you respond to your partner's behaviors? Next, write down behaviors your partner did that were *inconsistent* with those values. How did you respond? Finally, give *your partner* an overall rating (0–100%) for values-consistent actions for the week.

Relationship Values	Partner's Values- Consistent Actions	Outcome (How did you respond?)	Partner's Values- Inconsistent Actions	Outcome (How did you respond?)	Rating for Your Partner's Values- Based Actions This Week (0–100%)

Interpersonal Experiences Log

Event	Schema Emotions	Schema-Driven Thoughts	Sensations	Urges	Did you act on the urge?

List of Needs in Relationships

Safety

Balance
Compassion
Consistency
Predictability
Presence
Privacy
Reliability
Respect/self-respect
Rest
Security
Stability
Touch
Trust

Connection

Affection
Attention
Awareness
Belonging
Celebration
Closeness
Communication
Community
Companionship
Empathy
Guidance
Harmony
Inclusion
Intimacy
Love
Nurturing
Support
Tenderness
Understanding
Warmth

Self-Expression

Authenticity
Clarity
Creativity
Fun
Honesty
Humor
Inspiration
Integrity
Passion
Sexual expression
Transparency

Self-Worth

Acceptance
Appreciation
Challenge
Effectiveness
Equality
Growth
Hope
Meaning
Praise
Progress
Purpose
Reassurance
To know and be known
To matter
To see and be seen
Validation

Autonomy

Adventure
Choice
Discovery
Freedom
Independence
Space
Spontaneity
Stimulation

Realistic Limits

Consideration
Contribution
Cooperation
Fairness
Mutuality
Participation
Reciprocity

List of Feelings When Needs Are Unmet in Relationships

Afraid	Depleted	Flummoxed	Lethargic	Scared
Aggravated	Depressed	Flustered	Listless	Self-conscious
Agitated	Despair	Fragile	Livid	Sensitive
Agonized	Desperate	Frantic	Lonely	Shaky
Alarmed	Despondent	Frazzled	Longing	Shocked
Alienated	Detached	Frightened	Lost	Skeptical
Aloof	Devastated	Frustrated	Melancholy	Startled
Ambivalent	Disappointed	Furious	Miserable	Stressed-out
Angry	Disconcerted	Gloomy	Mistrustful	Stuck
Anguish	Disconnected	Grieved	Mortified	Surprised
Animosity	Discouraged	Guarded	Mournful	Suspicious
Annoyed	Disgruntled	Guilty	Nervous	Tense
Anxious	Disgusted	Heartbroken	Numb	Terrified
Apathetic	Disheartened	Heavyhearted	Outraged	Tired
Appalled	Dismayed	Helpless	Overwhelmed	Torn
Apprehensive	Displeased	Hesitant	Panicked	Troubled
Ashamed	Distant	Hopeless	Perplexed	Turbulent
Baffled	Distracted	Horrificed	Perturbed	In turmoil
Beat	Distraught	Hostile	Pessimistic	Uncertain
Bereaved	Distressed	Hurt	Petrified	Uncomfortable
Bewildered	Disturbed	Impatient	Powerless	Uneasy
Bored	Doubtful	Indifferent	Puzzled	Uninterested
Burned out	Drained	Indignant	Rattled	Unnerved
Cold	Dread	Inhibited	Regretful	Unsettled
Concerned	Edgy	Insecure	Remorseful	Vulnerable
Conflicted	Embarrassed	Irate	Removed	Wary
Confused	Enraged	Irritable	Repulsed	Weak
Contempt	Envious	Irritated	Resentful	Weary
Cranky	Exasperated	Isolated	Reserved	Withdrawn
Dazed	Exhausted	Jealous	Resigned	Worn out
Defeated	Fatigued	Jittery	Restless	Worried
Dejected	Fidgety	Leery	Sad	Wretched
				Yearning

List of Feelings When Needs Are Met in Relationships

Absorbed	Ecstatic	Interested	Rested
Affectionate	Elated	Intrigued	Restored
Alert	Empowered	Invigorated	Safe
Amazed	Encouraged	Involved	Satisfied
Amused	Energetic	Joyful	Secure
Appreciative	Engaged	Lively	Serene
Aroused	Enthralled	Loving	Sexy
Astonished	Enthusiastic	Mellow	Silly
Awed	Entranced	Moved	Stimulated
Blissful	Equanimous	Open	Surprised
Calm	Excited	Openhearted	Sympathetic
Centered	Exhilarated	Optimistic	Tender
Cheerful	Expectant	Passionate	Thankful
Clearheaded	Exuberant	Peaceful	Thrilled
Comfortable	Fascinated	Playful	Touched
Compassionate	Fulfilled	Pleased	Tranquil
Confident	Glad	Proud	Trusting
Content	Grateful	Refreshed	Vibrant
Curious	Happy	Rejuvenated	Warm
Delighted	Hopeful	Relaxed	
Eager	Inspired	Relieved	

List of Pseudo-Feelings

Abandoned	Misunderstood
Abused	Neglected
Attacked	Patronized
Belittled	Provoked
Betrayed	Rejected
Bullied	Taken for granted
Cheated	Threatened
Cornered	Tricked
Criticized	Unappreciated
Diminished	Uncared for
Dismissed	Unheard
Disregarded	Unimportant
Ignored	Unloved
Inadequate	Unseen
Incompetent	Unsupported
Insulted	Unwanted
Intimidated	Used
Invalidated	Violated
Manipulated	Wronged
Minimized	

Consequences vs. Threats

Consequences	Punishments and Threats
Neutral tone of voice	Angry tone of voice
Using leverage to set consistent limits	A consequence that is not followed through with is a threat
Boundary is clearly expressed beforehand	Not stated ahead of time
Compassionate but firm stance	Hostile stance
The function is to protect yourself and create safety	Functions to change or control your partner
Provides choices (e.g., we can have dinner together at the agreed-upon time or you can have dinner alone if you are more than 15 minutes late)	Unwilling to give a choice, unwilling to hear no
Reasons for boundaries are given	Reasons are arbitrarily related to the problem
Are logically connected to the problem behavior	Are not logically connected to or do not follow the problem behavior

Barriers to Empathic Listening

All of these strategies function as barriers to effective listening because they all attempt to minimize, reduce, or influence the experience of the speaker. When these tactics are used, they don't allow the listener to fully understand and validate the speaker's perspective.

Explaining. You can recognize that partners are defending, overexplaining, or justifying their position when they come up with reasons and rationalizations as to why they are not at fault. These defensive tactics may minimize the speaker's feelings and needs. "I couldn't call you because..." "I tried my best to show up on time, but..." "I didn't know that the event was so important to you."

Reassuring. This strategy replaces listening with behavior that functions to console or reassure the other. The purpose is to make it better and lessen the pain. This can be experienced as minimizing or belittling the emotional response. "I do care about you," "It's not your fault," "Your boss is not going to fire you," "There's nothing to worry about," "It will be okay."

Interrogating. Interrogating functions as a barrier when the listening partner is more concerned about getting the facts right and understanding his or her own perspective rather than understanding the speaker's viewpoint. Here partners ask a lot of questions, trying to reason and rationalize out of the emotion. "What time did you expect me to call you?" "Why does your boss's opinion of you matter so much?" "Why do you care if your brother doesn't come to dinner?" "Why is it necessary for us to be on time for everything?"

Problem solving. Problem solving can also be useful. However, this technique is usually effective after individuals feel heard and understood. When partners move on to problem solving prematurely, it often functions to avoid staying with the speaker's emotions. In this barrier, a partner jumps into giving advice or trying to problem solve rather than listening. "You shouldn't let your boss talk to you that way," "You should tell Jenny that it's none of her business," "We can tell your mom that she can babysit next week."

Placating. Partners are placating when they agree with everything without truly listening. They're more preoccupied with pleasing the other person, smoothing things over, or avoiding conflict rather than understanding. They take responsibility, apologize, or comply in order to have the conversation end, which blocks true understanding.

Derailing. Derailing commonly happens in conflict. Partners derail the conversation when they change the subject or steer it in another direction. It functions as a barrier because it moves the conversation in a different direction than the speaker intended. The speaker's agenda gets sidetracked.

Correcting. This behavior refocuses the conversation toward getting the facts “right” and examining minutia rather than understanding the partner’s experience. “I called you at 5:15, not 5:25,” “That happened on Tuesday night, not Friday.” This often feels confusing and distracting for the speaker and invalidates his or her emotional response.

Judging. Partners are judging when they make global evaluations about the speaker and use it as justification for not listening to the whole message. “You’re never satisfied with anything,” “You’re selfish,” “You’re too sensitive.” Partners are also judging when they only respond to parts of the message that confirm their own beliefs.

Identifying. Partners are identifying when they connect what the speaker is saying back to themselves and launch into a story about their own experience. “I felt exactly the same when you abandoned me on my birthday last year,” “Well, what about that time when you called me a jerk?” “My mom also intrudes on our relationship.” The focus then turns to the listener’s concerns rather than what the speaker is attempting to convey.

Mind reading. Partners are engaged in mind reading when they respond to what they believe the speaker’s intentions are rather than what the speaker is actually saying. When partners are mind reading, they attend to assumptions about what the speaker “really means” or what his or her hidden motives are.

Shared Interests Worksheet

My interests	My values and needs	My partner's interests	My partner's values and needs	Shared interests, values, and needs

Time-out Guidelines

When a time-out has been called:

1. Stop immediately. When one partner calls a time-out, the discussion should end immediately. The time-out should be respected, and there should be no further explaining, defending, rebuttals, or last words. Everything stops.
2. Leave immediately. The partner who initiated the time-out should leave the location and make actual physical space from the other partner. If partners are physically unable to leave (because they're in an airplane or a car, for example), they should stop all talking and interaction for the agreed-upon period of time.
3. Use the time-out effectively. The break shouldn't be used to escalate anger and ruminate about the issues. Rather, the focus should be self-reflection and taking responsibility for one's experience. A time-out is more effective when partners use the time to identify values, feelings, and needs.
4. Always return at the agreed-upon time. If a partner doesn't return at the agreed-upon time, the time-out will backfire and make things worse. If one partner was left feeling scared and confused, he or she will have difficulty adhering to future time-outs, and the process won't be effective in the long run.
5. Return to the issue. Time-outs don't mean the end of the discussion; a time-out just means postponing the discussion until both partners are able to be more effective.

During a time-out:

Defuse from schema-driven thoughts. Observe and let go of these thoughts and return to the present-moment experience.

Use self-compassion. Practice being kind to yourself, and be willing to observe emotional pain. This pain gives you information about what you feel and what you need in the relationship. You shouldn't try to manage or control the pain with blaming thoughts or judgments.

Physicalize the experience. Imagine your feelings have a physical form. Ask yourself where in your body does this pain feel most intense? What color, shape, size is it? How intense is it? Notice any movements or subtle shifts. Practice emotion exposure and/or use the Exposure Worksheet to stay mindfully present with any difficult emotions during a time-out.

Observe action urges. Notice any urges to use old SCBs or try to suppress the pain. Notice any urges to control or change your experience, or to try to change your partner.

Clarify values. What are your most important values in this moment? What do you want to stand for when this pain shows up? What values can help guide your actions and clarify how you would like to proceed?

Utilize problem solving. Use the time-out to gain understanding of the conflict by identifying your feelings and underlying needs and using problem-solving skills. Use the Problem-Solving Worksheet to make your time-out more productive.

Exposure Worksheet

To be used during a time-out.

What sensations am I experiencing in my body right now?

Where in my body does this experience feel most intense?

How intense does this experience feel physically in my body on a level from 0 to 10?

Describe the experience:

Color:

Shape:

Size:

Movement:

What are my fears about this time-out?

What are my thoughts or beliefs about this time-out? What is my prediction about this conflict?

What are my values?

Problem-Solving Worksheet

To be used during a time-out.

What schemas got triggered for me?

What is my typical response to this schema? What coping behaviors do I tend to engage in?

What was the specific trigger?

What are my feelings?

What are my needs?

What are my values regarding this conflict?

What would a values-based request look like?

When _____

I felt _____.

I need _____.

Would you be willing to _____?

