

HOW OUR CHILDHOOD IMPACTS OUR ADULT RELATIONSHIPS

Our childhoods mold our relationships for the rest of our lives – it's where our “attachment styles” and “love maps” develop, where we learn to do relationships, and where we have our first brush against dysfunctionality. But while it makes sense for us to want to repeat the good, what *doesn't* make sense is that we often end up repeating the bad as well – in fact we're drawn to recreating situations in which we were mistreated, because we hope to rewrite a happy ending. But that comes with a huge price tag, since those pseudo-transferences carry a lot of weight with them – thanks to years of baggage – and we can end up blowing our relationships because of something our parents did. For example, an abandoned child can become a clingy adult who'll push their partners away, thereby recreating the very situation they feared. Such behaviors stem from “schemas”.

Schemas

Schemas are life-traps that keep us forever stuck in repeating self-destructive patterns. They develop in early childhood, and become a central part of our belief system, which defines our sense of self and how we perceive life, because the way we think about different things determines how we feel about them. As such, schemas are very difficult to change – even when we rationally look at something and see it for what it is, our emotional self will continue to tell us that our feelings are valid. Dr. Jeffries Young, author of “Reinventing Your Life” – a must read – has identified eighteen schemas that lead us to repeating the pain of our childhood – a.k.a. “repetition compulsion”. They include:

1. Emotional Deprivation: This trap represents a feeling of emptiness, so the person suffering from it tends to be insatiable in their demands, since no matter what they have, it's never enough to fill that emptiness. It goes to reason that they may cheat, because no one can meet all their demands and bids for affection.
2. Vulnerability: Those who're stuck within this trap are always anxious, since they feel that catastrophe can strike anytime, and they don't have the coping skills or resources to deal with it. As such, their fears are always exaggerated, whether you're talking health, finances, safety, or life control. In relationships, they can react to a harmless flirtation like a full-on betrayal.

3. Subjugation: This trap makes people experience the world in terms of control issues, where they fear everyone else is controlling their life, even when they've willingly handed over the control, in their conviction to please others. Someone in this trap may resent their partner, thanks to their own perception, and could conceivably seek out a secret affair, to regain a sense of control.
4. Mistrust & Abuse: Those who've been mistreated or abused can't relax in their relationships, which feel chaotic, dangerous, and unreliable, so they experience anxiety and depression within them. Ironically, they're drawn to drama!
5. Abandonment: Those who fear abandonment cling to their partners, are jealous, possessive, and obsessed with holding on, but they can also have people lined up as backups, just in case their main person leaves. No matter which side of this equation you find yourself on, it's a tough way to live.
6. Defectiveness: People caught in this trap are overly self-critical, and they feel worthless, unlovable, and shameful, so they go to great lengths to keep their defects hidden; thus, their inner state is rarely visible in their outer persona. Hence, they often feel like they're "imposters" and wouldn't be loved for who they really are. If a betrayal brings everything to light, these people can have an opportunity to take a shot at authentic living.
7. Entitlement: Those stuck in this trap feel they can do whatever they want because they're special; so they're demanding and controlling, they lack empathy, guilt, and concern for others; they consider themselves to be above the law; and they get very angry when others don't cooperate. Many addicts live in this schema, so they can justify their behaviors.
8. Dependence: This trap makes people feel like they can't make it on their own, because they're inadequate (usually because their parents did everything for them), so life feels overwhelming and they end up doing whatever it takes to hold onto their partner; even if it means putting up with abuse and deprivation, while they feel angry about it. If betrayed, they can often be more concerned with how they'll survive without this person, versus focusing on what they've done to them.

9. Failure: This trap feeds on itself, since the fear of failure becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, so those caught up in this trap end up sabotaging themselves, by escaping what they need to do, and overcompensating in areas that don't matter as much; such as, being seductive, flirtatious, athletic. I had a client who was so afraid of running into erectile issues with his wife that he spent a lot of time sending dick pix to random strangers on line, looking for some sort of validation. Eventually, he got caught and his wife left him – she was perfectly willing to work with his erectile dysfunction, but not with what he'd done. His comment to me was, "I screwed up my marriage ... and for what? I didn't even get laid!"
10. Unrelenting Standards: The primary feeling within this trap is one of pressure, since those caught in it fear that nothing they do is ever good enough, even though no one's ever said that to them; so they end up being high achievers. Their partners thereby often end up on the back burner, and may look for excitement or validation elsewhere.
11. Social Isolation: Those stuck in this trap feel lonely, because they always seem to feel like they don't fit in, so they keep comparing themselves to everyone, and worry about what others will think, since they fear they're constantly being judged. While this person may fall prey to online indiscretions, they rarely have the confidence to take it offline.
12. Enmeshment: This trap causes individuals to be enmeshed with their partner, for fear of an inability to be happy or survive without their constant support. It often starts with parental enmeshment, which can hinder the development of individual identity. Ironically, while this trap harbors a desperate need for another, those caught within it can often feel smothered by them, leading to a feeling of emptiness, with no individual sense or direction; so much so that they may question the purpose of their existence.
13. Insufficient Self-Control: People struggling with this schema have difficulty with self-control, containing their emotions and impulses, and tolerating frustration around achievement of goals. So they often try to protect themselves by placing a lot of emphasis on avoiding discomfort – physical, emotional, mental – at the expense of personal fulfillment or integrity. What goes hand in hand is conflict avoidance, which can create a buildup of relational issues, making the relationship vulnerable.

14. Self-Sacrifice: This schema involves people focusing on meeting the needs of others, at an expense to their own needs and gratification, to avoid causing pain to others, or experiencing guilt from feeling selfish. But when one does that all the time, they're often left with a sense of resentment towards those who they're taking care of (as is the case with codependency.) In case of addictions, resentment can often lead to entitlement.
15. Approval-Seeking: This life-trap involves an excessive emphasis on gaining approval, recognition, admiration, or attention from others. So one can become overly focused on money, status, achievement, at the expense of being their authentic selves, leading satisfying lives. This focus on external validation can be quite costly to the sense of self.
16. Negativity: People caught within this trap minimize the positive aspects of their lives, and focus on the negative aspects – pain, loss, disappointment, guilt, resentment, unresolved issues, mistakes, betrayal, and potential wrongs. So they live in a state of constant fear and catastrophizing, displayed via chronic worry, vigilance, complaining, or indecision. So can you imagine what could happen to such an individual if they were to actually face betrayal, for real?
17. Emotional Inhibition: This schema causes individuals to inhibit their spontaneous feelings, reactions, actions, etc., to avoid losing control, thereby causing shame or disapproval by others. So people end up inhibiting their “negative emotions”, positive impulses, and vulnerability, and try to communicate “rationally”, without listening to their feelings or expressing their vulnerability. This pretty much puts a kibosh on textured relationships, sexual excitement, playfulness and the joy that accompanies those. As such, many partners start to seek those elsewhere.
18. Punitiveness: Those who struggle within this trap feel that people should be punished harshly for making mistakes. They have perfectionistic standards and a tendency to be angry, intolerant, punitive, and impatient with anyone – including themselves – who doesn't meet expectations, or breaks rules. Naturally, they have a really hard time forgiving mistakes, even within extenuating circumstances. If their partner cheats, chances of forgiveness are rather low, but vigilance and punitiveness can become standard fare.

FYI, many people have more than one schema.

The good news is that these life-traps can be changed. An excellent guide for gaining a full understanding into that is, Dr. Jeffrey Young's book, "Reinventing Your Life", or Google Schema Therapy in your area.

A trained professional will help you:

1. Label and identify your life-traps.
2. Understand the childhood origins of your life-trap, so you can stop blaming yourself.
3. Build a case against your life-trap – disprove its validity at a rational level.
4. Write letters to your parents, or others who helped create your life-trap (you won't be sharing them with anyone other than your therapist).
5. Examine your life-trap pattern in careful detail.
6. Break the pattern.
7. Keep trying (since it won't happen all at once).
8. Forgive your parents for their own life-traps.

Love Maps

Love Maps are unconscious lists of traits we want in an ideal partner, as well as our non-negotiable deal-breakers. We get used to our father's sense of humor, or our mother's brand of affection, or we want to avoid certain unlovable characteristics of those around us. So when we meet a potential partner, we determine if that person is right for us – often subconsciously – in less than *three* minutes, based on this mental list.

Attachment Styles

Humans are born with limited capacities for self-regulation. As such, infants rely upon their primary attachment figures to develop coping strategies, making their attachment style literally a memory of their best adaptive behaviour – running towards or running away from attachment figures, being a case in point. What that means is, if our parents are consistent, responsive, attuned and reliable, we can develop healthy coping mechanisms. But trouble starts when that doesn't happen. So, what exactly does that look like?

When we're kids and our basic needs aren't met, we protest. But when our protests are unsuccessful, we come to feel that something is wrong with our needs, versus realizing that the problem lies in our caregivers not responding

adequately. So, we end up internalizing their failures and experience them as our own failures. At that point, we turn to our adaptive ability to disconnect from our painful experiences, or the threat of anxiety provoking experiences. Over time, if our core needs aren't met consistently, we actually develop an *adaptive style*, which accommodates parental acceptance and rejection, to maximize attachment with our caregiver. But these adaptive survival styles foreclose various aspects of self love and self care, to maintain parental love. That said, *while these adaptive styles may have helped us as kids, they are maladaptive for us as adults*, and their persistence causes distortions and ultimately disconnection – all of which becomes part of attachment styles, leading to different styles of affect-regulation.

So, what are those primary attachment styles?

Secure:

Characteristics:

- neither overly clingy nor distant – can tolerate both connection & disconnection
- comfortable with emotions but not preoccupied by them
- can ask for what they want
- able to handle conflict without apprehension, resentment or distress

Contributing Factors:

- well nurtured by empathetic parents
- parents were reliable, consistent, and made them feel safe

Core Fears:

- none to speak of

Regulation Style:

- able to self-regulate, but also comfortable receiving soothing

Insecure-Ambivalent:

Characteristics:

- anxious and insecure – fearful of getting close and crushed if relationship ends
- have difficulty knowing what they want/need – and don't feel they deserve to have those met
- often people pleasers – to obtain outside validation & avoid abandonment

Contributing Factors:

- ambivalent parents flipped from rage to tenderness, so they never knew

what to expect

- possibly liable mother who could've neglected them

Core Fear:

- “If I express my need I’ll be rejected and abandoned.”

Regulation Style:

- can neither self-regulate, nor be soothed by another (though they seek proximity) – always distressed

Insecure-Avoidant:

Characteristics:

- give up on a secure connection
- see love as conditional – feel they can only rely on themselves
- find intense emotions unfamiliar, unpleasant and uncomfortable, so try to minimize them
- may pull away or sabotage their relationship, if they start to feel too close to someone
- need to be in control – stridently independent, can be manipulative, ruthless & successful

Contributing Factors:

- parents neglected and ignored them
- mothers took little interest in them, turned away from their cries and possibly used them for self-care

Core Fears:

- helplessness, weakness, dependency, failure

Regulation Style:

- auto-regulation vs interaction - prefer to manage their upsets on their own

Avoidant-Dismissing:

Characteristics:

- aren't in touch with their attachment needs – feel disconnected with their physical & emotional selves
- can't relate to people
- don't know what normal looks like, so tend to idealize their families
- feel shame around needing anybody – find dependency repulsive
- have a strong need for control

Contributing Factors:

- come from disengaged & disconnected families that discouraged emotions

Core Fear:

- “I will die or fall apart if I feel.”

Regulation Style:

- prefer auto-regulation, to avoid connection (feels uncomfortable)
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Disorganized:

Characteristics:

- paralyzed by conflict between clinginess & avoidance - fear both rejection & engulfment, flip-flop all over the place
- have difficulty setting limits or saying “no” directly – can be passive-aggressive
- most confusing/distorted upbringing, so have identity deficits & possibly mental illness (like BPD) & psychosomatic issues

Contributing Factors:

- their mothers often have a history of trauma & attachment failure, so they can be harmful to their kids vs protecting them
- inconsistent parenting can create dependency, confusion, pressure

Core Fear:

- “If people really knew me, they wouldn’t like/love me.”

Regulation Style:

- can neither auto-regulate, nor accept soothing from others

For relational compatibility, we need attachment style compatibility. For example, couples who share a high need for love and a low need for power will tend to be happier together versus couples who share a high need for power and a low need for love, no matter how compatible they might appear in all other parts of life. This is why a seemingly well-matched, financially secure couple can still end up being very unhappy, whereas a financially struggling, superficially mismatched couple can stay happy forever.

Boundary Violations & Emotional Incest

A lot of what happens to us ties into boundary violations as kids, which act like emotional incest and impact our adult relationships. There are four types of boundary violations:

1. Enmeshment – where parent child boundaries are completely blurred and kids become extensions of their parents.

2. Intrusiveness – where parents are constantly in their children’s faces, with an opinion and advice for everything they do. While enmeshment is more a seamless equality, intrusiveness is based in a hierarchy which keeps kids from becoming independent adults with their own identity and self-image.
3. Role Reversal (Parentification) – where parents look to their kids for support in a way that kids end up acting as the responsible adult and visa-versa. The situation overwhelms the child, ignores their needs, and leaves them emotionally unfulfilled, even as they're expected to nurture their parents in ways that they can't handle, because of their developmental stage. This generally happens in cases where the parent is involved in substance abuse or has a mental health problem.
4. Spousefication – where the parent looks for companionship from a child, using them as a substitute for a partner who isn't available to them. This is a weird dynamic that borders on abuse, especially when the child is used as a sounding board for complaints against the other parent – it's most common in cases where the parents split up. The alliance can make them feel like a couple, with similar loyalty to each other, making it difficult for them to have intimate relationships with appropriate partners. At the other end of the spectrum, Spousefication can involve hostility against a child, based on perceived similarities between them and the other parent, referred to as the “spill-over effect”.

Healthy parent-child relationships maintain appropriate boundaries. Adults are adults and kids are kids. Everyone recognizes that everyone else is an autonomous human being. All boundary violations are harmful, with dire consequences that carry over into adult relationships, where kids don't know how to have their needs met and may keep falling back into the ugly and all-too-familiar dynamic with their parent. Sadly, a lot of dysfunctional families indulge in boundary violation and emotional abuse and incest – it's rampant nowadays, with very little written about it.

Emotional incest occurs when a child feels responsible for a parent’s emotional well-being, because the parent does not know how to have healthy boundaries. What often happens is that 'Daddy's little princess' or 'Mommy's big boy' becomes an adult who has good friends of the opposite sex that they can be emotionally intimate with but would never think of being sexually involved with, and in fact feel dreadfully betrayed by their sexual interest; the people who

excite them sexually are those whom they don't like and can't trust - it's an unconscious way of not betraying mommy or daddy by having sex with someone who they are emotionally intimate with and truly care about as a person. This dynamic wreaks havoc on marriages, since sexual intimacy becomes nearly impossible. And if one's spouse has had sex with others (prior to or during the marriage), they can't help but personalize the rejection.

Unfortunately, we're powerless to behave any differently because of our programming and training, just as our parents were powerless, and their parents before them, etc. etc. That "critical parent" voice in our head is the disease talking to us. We need to stop buying into that and start accepting our needs so that we can change our patterns and become emotionally honest. Otherwise, we'll remain forever trapped in codependent situations, where we depend upon external sources for self-worth and self-definition. It's a war against ourselves, which makes it impossible to love ourselves and trust our feelings, so we end up denying parts of ourselves and thus are unable to know who we are.

Here's an analogy: Soldiers are forced to deny their emotions in order to survive. This emotional denial works to help them survive, but later on it can result in devastating delayed consequences, referred to as "Delayed Stress Syndrome." Codependence is a very vicious and powerful form of Delayed Stress Syndrome. The trauma of feeling like we aren't safe in our own homes makes it very difficult to feel like we're safe anywhere. Feeling like we weren't lovable to our own parents makes it very difficult for us to believe that anyone else could ever love us. If not healed, these early childhood emotional wounds and the subconscious attitudes adopted because of them, dictate the adult's reaction to and path through life - he or she will walk around looking like and trying to act like an adult, while reacting to life out of the emotional wounds and attitudes of childhood, thus repeating the patterns of abandonment, abuse, and deprivation that they experienced in childhood. A large part of what we identify as our personality is in fact a distorted view of who we really are due to the type of behavioral defenses we adopted to fit the role or roles we were forced to assume, due to the dynamics of our family system. There are four types of such defenses which we adopt to different degrees and in different combinations, where we can swing from one extreme to the other within our own personal spectrum. The four types are:

1. Aggressive-Aggressive Defense: This person, basically the counter-dependent, is the one whose attitude is "I don't care what anyone thinks." This is someone who will run you down and then tell you that you

deserved it. This is the "survival of the fittest" hard-driving capitalist, self-righteous religious fanatic, who feels superior to most everyone else in the world. This type of person despises the human "weakness" in others because he/she is so terrified and ashamed of her/his own humanity.

2. Aggressive-Passive Defense: This person will run you down and then tell you that they did it for your own good and that it hurt them more than it did you. These are the types of people who aggressively try to control you "for your own good" - because they think that they know what is "right" and what you "should" do and they feel obligated to inform you. This person is constantly setting him/herself up to be the perpetrator because other people do not do things the "right" way – i.e., his/her way.
3. Passive-Aggressive Defense: This person smiles sweetly while cutting you to pieces emotionally with her/his innocent sounding, double-edged sword of a tongue. These people try to control you "for your own good" but do it in more covert, passive-aggressive ways. They "only want the best for you," and sabotage you every chance they get. They see themselves as wonderful people who are continually and unfairly being victimized by ungrateful loved ones - and this victimization is their main topic of conversation/focus in life because they are so self-absorbed that they are almost incapable of hearing what other people are saying.
4. Passive-Passive Defense: This is the person who spends so much time and energy demeaning himself/herself, and projecting the image that he/she is emotionally fragile, that anyone who even thinks of getting mad at this person feels guilty. They have incredibly accurate, long-range, stealth guilt torpedoes that are effective even long after their death. Guilt is to the self-sacrificing martyr what stink is to a skunk: the primary defense. These are all defense systems adopted out of a necessity to survive. They are all defensive disguises whose purpose is to protect the wounded, terrified child within.

These are broad general categories, and each of us can combine them to various degrees and develop behavioral defenses to protect ourselves.

Codependence

Codependence is an incredibly powerful, insidious, and vicious disease. It is so powerful because it's ingrained in our core relationship with ourselves. As little kids we were assaulted with the message that there was something wrong with

us. We got this message from our parents who were assaulted and wounded in childhood by their own parents, who were assaulted and wounded by theirs, and so on; and society only added to it, thereby instilling the belief that being human is shameful. Codependence is insidious because it's so pervasive. The core emotional belief that there's something wrong with us affects all of the relationships in our life and keeps us from learning how to truly love. Codependence is vicious because it causes us to hate and abuse ourselves – we were taught to judge and shame ourselves for being human, so we feel that we're not worthy or lovable.

The way to stop this cycle is two-fold and simple in theory but extremely hard to implement on a moment-to-moment, day-to-day basis in our lives. The first part has to do with removing the shame from our inner process. This is a complicated and multileveled process that involves changing the belief systems that are dictating our reactions to life (this includes everything from positive affirmations to grief/emotional energy release work, to support groups, to meditation and prayer, to inner child work, etc.) so that we can change our relationship with ourselves and start treating ourselves in healthier ways. The second part is simpler and usually harder. It involves taking 'the action.' 'The action' refers to doing things to change the behavior that's giving us a reason for the shame. Just saying 'no' - or 'yes' - to the behavior in question is like not eating or not exercising. Even though that may work sometime in the short run, by using shame and judgment to get ourselves to change a behavior, it will fail us in the long term. For that we need alignment with our goal of having a more loving relationship with ourselves so that we can be happy – it's much more powerful. This involves setting a boundary for the little child inside of us, who wants instant gratification and instant relief, out of the Loving adult in us who understands the concept of delayed gratification. (If I exercise every day I will feel much better in the long run.) True pride comes from action taken. It is false pride to feel good about ourselves in comparison because of looks, talent, and intelligence or for being forced to become spiritual, healthy, or sober. Those are gifts. True pride is taking credit for the action we have taken to foster, nurture, and maintain those gifts.

Bottom line, our childhoods control our adult relationships more than we ever realized. So unless we're willing to see what that looks like, we'll remain forever trapped in the same dissatisfying relationships over and over again, with different faces. Einstein's definition of stupidity was doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. To escape that, we need to recognize our own wounds, traps, and attachment styles, and those of our

partners, and work on them, so we can have a fighting chance for a satisfying relationship, instead of repeating our parents' relationships.