

# What Are Schemas and How Do They Influence Mental Health?

by Melanie Greenberg, PhD  
Licensed Psychologist

## What is a schema?

A schema is a set of beliefs about the world or rules for living. They act as a kind of lens through which we view the world.

“A schema acts as a kind of lens through which we view the world.”

Everybody has them. We develop schemas early in life and they often are accurate representations of our childhood experiences. They may also be derived from the beliefs we hear our parents express.

For example, you may have a rule like “you need to keep your guard up or others will take advantage of you.” You might have developed this schema from hearing a parent say this or because you have had actual experiences in which your caretakers, peers, authority figures or close others betrayed your trust.

## How do schemas influence the way we see the world?

Schemas can influence what you pay attention to, how you interpret situations, or how you make sense of ambiguous situations. Once you have a schema, you unconsciously pay attention to information that confirms it and ignore or minimize information that contradicts it.

“You unconsciously pay attention to information that confirms it and ignore or minimize information that contradicts it.”

nicabm  
www.nicabm.com

For example, if you have a Defectiveness schema, you will pay more attention to the negative feedback you get from others than the positive. You may focus more on the people who reject you than those who like you. You may also be more attentive to your own negative qualities than your positive ones. You may focus on being 10 pounds overweight rather than on your engaging personality.

When there is a situation that is ambiguous and can be interpreted in different ways, you will be more likely to interpret it in ways that confirm the schema. If you feel like you are unlovable, and somebody doesn't get back to you right away, you are more likely to interpret this as proof that they are rejecting you. Somebody without this schema may reserve judgment for a while because the person may be busy.

## When are schemas dysfunctional?

Schemas are not always dysfunctional. Sometimes it can be helpful to have beliefs that summarize your experiences and guide your behavior. Schemas are often accurate representations of our early experiences with caretakers.

“The problem with schemas is that they are often rigid and resistant to change.”

The problem with schemas is that they are often rigid and resistant to change. Schemas are often biased to the negative or represent a kind of fear-based thinking that is unhelpful. When you have this lens, you may impose this view on the world or act in ways that make it come true without realizing it.

For example, if you have a belief that people in your life will abandon you, you may act in a controlling or manipulative way to stop them from doing this. These behaviors may turn the other person off and, ironically, make them more likely to abandon you. If you didn't have the schema and acted in a more relaxed and authentic way, perhaps this wouldn't have happened.

Schemas can also make us more likely to choose people who match the schema but who may not be healthy for us. For example, if you have a Subjugation schema, you may believe you always have to put aside your needs for others. Perhaps this belief may draw you to choose a partner who needs a lot of help or who is exploitative. Over time, you may begin to resent the person or feel bad about yourself for not speaking up.

## What are some examples of maladaptive schemas?

Jeffrey Young and colleagues identified a number of different maladaptive schemas, including beliefs about ourselves, about relationships, or about our ability to achieve our goals and get our needs met.

Some examples are:

- **Abandonment:** The belief that important people in our lives will abandon us or let us down when we most need them
- **Defectiveness:** The belief that we are unworthy, unlovable, undeserving, flawed and so on.
- **Mistrust:** The belief that people can't be trusted, that they have hidden agendas or will exploit us
- **Failure:** The belief that we can't perform as well as other people or meet the standards we set for ourselves
- **Entitlement:** The belief that we are entitled to special treatment and don't have to follow the rules that other people do.

## How can we help our clients overcome their maladaptive schemas?

Schemas take a long time to change because they are entrenched patterns of living or thinking about the world.

You can assess schemas using the Young Schema Questionnaire and by asking clients about their childhood experiences with caretakers. You can listen carefully for when clients express rules for living or describe unhelpful life patterns (e.g., I always choose partners who cheat on me).

The first step is to help clients identify these patterns as schemas and give them a label. Schemas often consist of beliefs or rules that people accept uncritically without really examining them. You can teach clients to evaluate evidence that confirms or disconfirms the schema.

“Help clients identify these patterns as schemas and give them a label.”

Help them consider alternative interpretations or perspectives. You can then help clients examine the effects of these schemas on their lives. What happens when they act as if the schema is true or avoid situations because of the schema?

Sometimes people overcompensate for the schema. A person who feels defective might act arrogantly so as not to show their defectiveness.

You can also help clients to challenge the schemas and try to look at situations from different perspectives. Encourage clients to try out new behaviors or confront situations that the schema is making them avoid.

## Reference

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

Copyright: Melanie Greenberg, Ph.D. 2018. For personal use only. Do not reproduce or distribute without permission.

Used with permission.

## About Melanie



Melanie Greenberg, PhD is a licensed psychologist practicing in California. Dr. Greenberg's work draws from neuroscience, mindfulness, and cutting-edge therapies like Schema Therapy, EFT for couples, and EMDR for trauma.

Dr. Greenberg holds both a masters and a doctorate degree in Clinical Psychology. She worked for more than a decade as a professor in the Clinical Health Psychology Doctoral Program at the California School of Professional Psychology/Alliant University in San Diego.

In addition to seeing clients, she is an author, speaker, and business coach. Her first book, *The Stress-Proof Brain*, was published in 2017.

Over the course of her career, Dr. Greenberg has published more than 50 research articles and conference abstracts in academic journals.

## About NICABM



The National Institute for the Clinical Application of Behavioral Medicine is a pioneer and leader in the field of mind-body-spirit medicine.

As a provider of continuing education for health and mental health care professionals for over 30 years, NICABM is at the forefront of developing and delivering programs with "take home" ideas, immediately adaptable for practitioners to use with their patients.

**nicabm**  
www.nicabm.com