Schema Mismatches

→ Enmeshment and Dependency

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What this looks like in couples

Enmeshment/ Undeveloped Self Schema	The Enmeshment schema describes a pattern of emotional involvement and closeness with one or more significant others (often parents) at the expense of full individuation or normal social development. You may believe that you cannot survive or be happy without the constant support of the other. You may also have feelings of being smothered by, or fused with, a strong other, or find it difficult to have a strong individual sense of self. It can be experienced as a feeling of emptiness and floundering, having no direction, or in extreme cases, questioning your existence. Having confidence in yourself can be difficult. In a couple relationship this schema results in being hyper attuned to your partner's needs and preferences, or even feeling their feelings for them - which sounds like a good thing! But often this results in over-interpreting your partner, or in feeling unsure about your own wants and needs. You may have an attraction pattern for someone who is looking for you to be the strong other, then they may "smother you" with their needs. Someone who is used to/expects to have others look after them, without as much capacity to notice your needs. You can also be attracted a partner who doesn't have a clear sense of what is yours and what is their responsibility. How can I know when this schema is activated? A shift in my body, a feeling, thoughts? What image comes to mind? (*e.g.conjoined twins, two magnets stuck together?*)
Dependence/ Incompetence Schema	The Dependence/Incompetence schema describes learning that you are not able to handle everyday responsibilities in a competent manner without considerable help from others (e.g., taking care of yourself, solving problems, exercising good judgment, tackling new tasks, or making good decisions). It often presents as helplessness. It can come from having over-protective caregivers or under-protective caregivers. We all need a safe base, from which to grow into autonomous ad competent adults. But with this schema this hasn't happened - we may have had to be "adult" too young or not been encouraged to "adult". In a couple relationship you may be attracted to a strong and protective person, possibly older or more established in the world. But this dynamic of a "strong" and a "weak" person keeps the relationship out of balance and keeps you feeling like a child. You can also be attracted a partner who doesn't have a clear sense of what is yours and what is their responsibility. How can I know when this schema is activated? A shift in my body, a feeling, thoughts? What image comes to mind? (*e.g. an adult in a child's body, a bicycle with flat tires*)

What can we do?

1. These schemas are ways of staying connected to an important person as a child. Where and when did you learn to be fused with another/dependent on another? Finish this sentence "when I was little I learned that ...", "as a child if I wasn't dependent/enmeshed ... (what might have happened?)"

2. What might be some of the normal steps to independence that each of you missed out on? Did you cope by hyper-independence - by acting as if you don't need anyone ever? Share a key memory related to your schema. What did you learn in that moment?
3. Talk about how these schemas play out in your current relationship - When do these schemas get activated? Where are we fused? I what areas do we need more autonomy?
4. Develop a sign when these schemas get activated - can you have a word e.g. "schemas!", or a sign that you use when you feel the schema getting activated?
5. Share what you need* - In those times when you are tempted to go into your schema mismatch dance, what would you ideally need from your partner? What would they say, or not say? Often people with this mismatch need to learn to say no gently "I love you, but I'm not going to do that for you". "You are my person, but I don't agree with your perspective - it's OK to disagree".

*Needs might be space, attunement to your unique feelings, to be encouraged to give something a try, competence, autonomy, or something else

Make a plan

Here are some individual steps! Build on your own interests. Create small steps in areas that you have handed over. Then as a couple, cheer each other on! Draw up boundaries with parents who may be used to being "in" the marriage emotionally or financially. Enjoy each other's differences as a source of energy in the relationship.

Schemas are great at blocking autonomy!

When you have been enmeshed for a long time it can feel very scary to have some space. Often you have learned that love is all about anticipating the other's needs, sharing everything, having no ideas or opinions other that what "we" think. What would you want to say to that parent who created such enmeshment? Does that bring up guilt when you imagine saying that? What do you need to hear from your Healthy Adult to help with getting space? "I can love someone without becoming them" for example.

A key with this schema is noticig the steps of the dance you have learnt. Is it being hypervigilant to others? Doing things or sharing things that are expected - even if you don't want to? Feeling other people's feelings? Remember that there may be companion schemas that will get activated if you start to change this pattern, perhaps abandonment, mistrust, defectiveness ... so therapy support with schema change.

Dependence/Incompetence can have some benefits that may make it hard to change. There might be financial or emotional benefits to staying "small". Fear can get in the way. It can feel safer to not try things, so you don't fail. Can you share with your partner what some of these challenges to change are? To overcome the fear of changing this schema, it can be helpful to create an image of your future self, who is able to live with more independence. What will be better? What will that feel like to stand on my own two feet? Therapy support may be needed with this.

A note on temperament and trauma

These schemas come from a unique interaction with your natural temperament, neurobiology and environment growing up (which may have included trauma). Often with this kind of schema mismatch, both people are highly sensitive to others and perhaps cautious and tentative.