

Schema Mismatches

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Defectiveness/Failure
and Unrelenting
Standards/Punitiveness

Ruth Holt, Schema Couples Therapy Australia

What this looks like in couples

Defectiveness /Shame and Failure Schemas

The Defectiveness schema tells you that you are defective, bad, unwanted, inferior, or invalid; or that you are unlovable to people if exposed. You may be hypersensitive to criticism, rejection, and blame and be self-consciousness, comparing, and insecure around others; or have a sense of shame regarding your perceived flaws.

The Failure schema is a very strong belief that you have failed, will inevitably fail, or are fundamentally inadequate compared to others in areas of achievement (school, career, sports, etc.). Often involves beliefs that you are stupid, inept, untalented, ignorant, lower in status, and less successful than others, etc.

In a couple relationship you may find it very difficult to talk about mistakes or difficult issues because you can feel so attacked and worthless. You may turn away from your partner when they try to emotionally support you. You may have an attraction pattern for someone who is critical and harsh, further fuelling your sense of "not good enough" and perhaps repeating a pattern of fault finding that you grew up with.

What is 1 way I know when this schema is activated? A shift in my body, a feeling, thoughts?*

Unrelenting Standards and Punitiveness Schema

Unrelenting Standards makes you strive to meet very high internalised standards of behaviour and performance, usually to avoid criticism. It feels like pressure or difficulty slowing down; and can be hypercritical towards yourself and others, getting in the way of relaxation, health, self-esteem and your relationship. Unrelenting Standards typically presents as perfectionism, rigid rules and "shoulds" or a preoccupation with efficiency.

Punitiveness schema is the belief that people should be harshly punished for making mistakes. You can have a tendency to be angry, intolerant, punitive, and impatient with people (including yourself) who do not meet your expectations or standards. Usually includes difficulty forgiving mistakes in yourself or others due to a reluctance to consider extenuating circumstances, or a difficulty allowing for human imperfection, or difficulty empathising with feelings.

In a couple relationship you may get focussed on "fixing" problems, be critical and stuck on what's wrong. These schemas will make it difficult to relax with your partner or to forgive your partner. You may be attracted to someone who is as focussed on what's wrong with them as you are, creating a harsh climate, where there is no place for fun.

What is 1 way I know when this schema is activated? A shift in my body, a feeling, thoughts?*

What can we do?

1. Talk together about where you learnt your schemas - Were they modelled in your family or by a person growing up? Who's voice are you hearing in this schema? Finish these sentences "when I was little I learned that ..." and "It was never OK to ..."

2. Build a culture of appreciation. Often couples with this mismatch are running on a low bank balance of affirmation. Before you talk about challenges in your relationship spend a week (or more) noticing and sharing 1 thing you appreciate about your partner each day. Repeat this step!
3. You will need to re-learn the way you talk about hard things. Share how these schemas impact you in the relationship - use "I" much less than "you". Be very gentle as these schemas can take this step to a nasty place! Look out for schema activation* and pause the conversation.
4. Share what you need - In those times when you feel defective, ashamed, critical or harsh, what would you ideally need from your partner? What would they say, or not say?

Make a Plan

Write down what you want to do differently next time this schema mismatch happens - you could even have a note written with the words from step 4 above to remind you what to say. If you feel too flooded in that moment make a commitment to handing the note to your partner in a gentle way.

Schemas are great at blocking connection!



Even when you have a plan to make you relationship more affirming your schemas will get in the way! When your partner tries to affirm you the Defectiveness or Failure schema will get activated and block it from getting in. Your critic might start telling you more of your faults and you might argue back, which will probably discourage your partner and they may stop trying (leaving you feeling more worthless than before). See if you can catch this and take a big deep breath and let it in. If you are the one trying to affirm your partner and can see the critic blocking your attempts (perhaps they look down, shrug, contradict you) you can interrupt the pattern and hold their hand, look them in the eye or say gently "I don't agree with your critic, can you let my words sink in?"



One of the challenges with Unrelenting Standards and Punitiveness schemas is that they have often "helped" you to achieve, so it's hard to see how they can be unhelpful. You may want to use them in some spheres of life, but when they are directed at your partner the research tells us they are toxic for your relationship, even your health. Your partner will be much more receptive to your ideas if you are gentle and it feels safe. Ask what would help them to feel good enough/safe/acceptable with you?

Try picturing your partner the age they were when they learnt their Defectiveness/ Shame or Failure schema. What is it about that little person that melts your heart? Can you remind yourself of that picture the next time you try to correct, critique or chastise? You have the power to be a healing or harming person for your partner, so use it wisely!

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, by temperament, sensitive, but may cope with that sensitivity by attacking or by surrendering (or both!). When trauma has been part of your history, it is important to get support from your therapist to work through the impact of that, before trying the steps above.

