

Interpersonal Schemas, Trauma & Military Service

Session 5 Handout

What is an Interpersonal Schema?

Interpersonal schemas are emotionally-charged beliefs formed in the context of important relationships throughout life.

Interpersonal schemas reflect ideas and feelings about the self and others and how relationships between self and others should or will play out.

Interpersonal Schemas as Self-fulfilling Prophecies

People's expectations about relationships can lead them to behave in ways to prepare for the imagined outcomes. Interpersonal schemas can be self-fulfilling even though the result is one that the client does not want.

For example, a client may expect to suddenly lose others in relationships. He thus is less willing to engage with others and behaves in a self-protective manner by maintaining distance and avoiding intimacy.

Others interacting with him will be unaware of his basic assumption and are likely to interpret his behavior as lack of interest or openness to interpersonal contact. As a result most people will not initiate or pursue involvement with him. He, in turn, will see this as confirming evidence of his inability to form long-lasting relationships.

Interpersonal Schemas Tend to be Limited and Rigid

Individuals with PTSD tend to have negative expectations in relationships and a limited and rigid repertoire of interpersonal schemas. This is problematic because interpersonal schemas are self-fulfilling. **Also, because individuals with PTSD tend to have few interpersonal schemas, they are limited in their options about possible ways to interact with people.** It is generally useful to clarify, in as concrete terms as possible, the differences between the experiences from which the schema was developed and the current situation. This helps keep the client from sliding into the trap of thinking the present is identical to the past or that he is doomed to repeat the past.

Types of Experiences that Influence Interpersonal Schemas

Pre-military Experience. Soldiers come from diverse backgrounds and families. Some may have entered the military with relationship schemas that were formed within warm and loving families, whereas others came from families where abuse was present or warm emotions were

not expressed. These pre-existing relationship schemas can influence the way in which they interpret new interpersonal situations. For example, if a soldier grew up in an abusive home, he may find that his views of people as untrustworthy and dangerous are reinforced during his combat service.

Military Experience. The experience of trauma in the military can profoundly change many soldiers' willingness to trust and be vulnerable with another person. Entering into the intense and unique environment of the military during late adolescence, many soldiers quickly form uniquely strong bonds with one another.

Relationships as unpredictable and impermanent. However, if these strong bonds become disrupted by circumstances (death, injury, change in unit status), many soldiers understandably became more cautious about investing themselves in such close friendships. Many of these soldiers learn that relationships are impermanent and that it is painful to trust or become attached to someone since it is quite possible that this relationship will be severed in some sudden or unpredictable way.

Relationships as a source of guilt and shame. Further, if, looking back, the soldier feels he has made a mistake or let others down in some way during combat, he may develop strong feelings of inadequacy and that expectation that he is likely to let others down in the future. Not only did these soldiers experience great and sudden losses of friends and comrades, they were perpetrators of killing as well. They may fear losing control of their anger or other emotions in relationships and causing harm, either physically or emotionally, to those closest to them. These interpersonal schema difficulties can be exacerbated when returning veterans don't feel safe sharing their experiences with civilians and family members.

Relationships as a source of betrayal. There are also events in the military that lead to strong feelings of betrayal. Military sexual trauma (MST) is an example in which a person is assaulted by those who are expected to provide safety and loyalty. The experience of MST can bring not only depression and shame but also a strong sense of betrayal. Other forms of betrayal may come about when leadership does not do a good job and a soldier is left to feel that promises were not kept.

Post-military Experience. After return from duty, veterans or military service members may feel that they cannot talk to others who have not had their experience. They may believe that the ways in which they interact with people as a result of their experience is unique to them. Alternatively, some veterans may share their feelings, and they may get feedback that is negative about their actions, or negative about being in the military. Thus, new post-military schemas may be "If I share my military experiences, then others will judge me harshly, reject

me or view me in a negative light.” It is also possible that veterans fear that if they share their feelings and experiences that they will “contaminate” loved ones with negative feelings. “If I share my feelings, other people will feel bad or be hurt by what I say.”

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