

What are Interpersonal Schemas?

Session 5 Handout

Interpersonal schemas are patterns of thinking and feeling that are formed through experiences with important people in our lives. These patterns reflect our beliefs and expectations about how relationships work.

When we experience trauma, we learn behaviors to keep us safe in that context. Unfortunately, sometimes we continue to use those same behaviors in other situations where those behaviors are not always effective or helpful.

Example:

Jane grew up in an abusive household and saw a lot of violence in her community. She keeps her distance in relationships because that is what has kept her safe in the past. She expects people to be untrustworthy and dangerous as a result of these experiences.

Unfortunately, this may get in the way of her creating healthy relationships with individuals that are trust-worthy.

They are self-fulfilling prophecies. We act in ways that follow our schemas but don't give ourselves opportunities for new experiences or contradictory evidence.

Example:

Jane has a belief that relationships are dangerous. As a result, she isolates, keeps others at a distance, and turns down invitations to social gatherings. Therefore, she misses opportunities to get to know others, which keeps her negative beliefs about others going.

Interpersonal schemas can be changed. This treatment will help explore how to identify old schemas that were appropriate in the past but are getting in the way of effective living now, and how to develop alternative schemas that can lead to positive experiences.

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