

# Activating good schemas.

For once, jargon pays off.

Relevant to: Depression:  Anxiety:  Irritability/Anger:  General emotional control: 

**Schemas or, as some people say, schemata, are important theoretical notions. The trouble is, people vary as to exactly what they are, so I'll apologise in advance for trampling on a few toes here, but it can't be helped.**

The most helpful way of thinking of a schema is that it's a set of memories that is triggered by a particular happening. So, supposing you were left to cry as a baby, that probably felt life-threatening to you at the time – you couldn't get out of your pram to go and get yourself something to eat and drink after all. You weren't to know that your parents were following what was considered best practice at the time, or that your apparent abandonment was temporary. So we could refer to this collection of memories as 'an abandonment schema', a jumble of life-threatening memories from before you could even talk.

The trouble is that those memories may persist in the brain, so that now, even as a fine mature adult, if your friends go off for a drink but forget to mention it to you, that same schema (set of memories) can be triggered again. And that is why such an apparently trivial event can have such upsetting consequences: it *feels* life-threatening, even though you are now full grown. Worse still, you can't properly explain it; it's a set of memories from before you could talk after all.

To make matters worse, some people have a *number* of bad experiences in their lives. Times when those around them were unhelpful or hostile. Times when they themselves kept failing at things, or whatever. That means that some people have a whole range of distressing

schemas that can be triggered at any moment, and are. And when someone asks why they are so upset, or worried, or depressed, they have trouble explaining. "I just am" is about the best they can do.

So what's to be done about it? It's very difficult to un-remember a memory after all. Especially if that memory is from before you can really remember anything at all! It's Catch 22: how can you un-remember a memory you can't remember!

The answer is that it's best to sidestep the question and concentrate on activating *good* schemas – good memories. If you *can* activate them, they will displace the unhelpful or upsetting schemas. So, for instance, suppose you walk into a room full of strangers, that may activate a set of 'memories you can't remember' of people laughing at you or ignoring you, in which case you will probably feel quite nervous. If on the other hand you deliberately recollect a memory of being welcomed by a group of people, either as a child or an adult, the chances are you can feel quite different. There isn't room for the helpful schemas *and* the unhelpful ones.

**Continued Overleaf**



What about Chris then? Chris describes waking up some mornings 'feeling terrible' and thinking 'Oh no, I'm going downhill again' simply because that 'terrible' feeling sets off a schema of the last time Chris was seriously depressed and anxious. Of course, Chris thinking like that made it a self-fulfilling prophecy and, sure enough, Chris did go downhill over the next few weeks. This was explained to Chris, and the next time it happened Chris was encouraged to remember times when that feeling had led to something quite different, namely – in Chris's case – a bit less drinking, a bit more exercise and a bit more problem solving. And a very different result. So from then on, whenever Chris woke up like that, Chris deliberately remembered – and felt good about – previous successes and how they were achieved.

So the theory is complicated but the action that has to be taken is simple. Rather like a comedian has a set of jokes for any situation you can mention, then you too develop *a good memory* for any situation. So a comedian will have his mother-in-law jokes, his car jokes and so on, you can have your supermarket good-memories, your work good-memories etc, that you can activate at any time.

TIP: You may find that you get so good at this that you want to drop it and just 'live in the present', and that's absolutely fine. So, you may be walking into your supermarket, deliberately remembering some good supermarket-memory, and find you want to drop that memory and just enjoy your shopping. And that's just fine.

## In session

Discuss the content of this sheet. Especially the idea that there are some memories that distress you even though you can't remember them. And how inexplicable some distress is.

But spend most time on discussing the following:

1. Think of a good memory from a supermarket. (TIP: it doesn't have to be a *fantastic* memory – just bumping into someone you know, will do fine.)
2. Think of a good memory from being with a *group* of people.
3. Think of a good memory from when you first woke up one morning.
4. Think of a good memory about money.
5. Think of someone who usually irritates you, then think of a good memory of being with that person.

TIP: When you think of a memory, it's good to think of all the little details, all the things that *surrounded it* – the feeling, what it made you do, etc. That's what really promotes it to a schema.

## Mythbuster

"Once you've got damaging life experience behind you then there's nothing you can do about it." **Not true.**

It's true that we *are* set up to learn more from bad events than good ones (it keeps us safe). But those of us who take this too far can easily train ourselves to notice and remember the good things too.

TIP 2: If you've not been very successful at thinking of good memories, don't worry: lots of people can't think of memories 'on demand'. The answer is to let them come to you during the week, and *write them down* so you *can* remember them. That way you build up a stock of good memories you can use to displace your unhelpful schemas.

## Project

During the next week, deliberately remember good memories wherever you go: supermarkets, groups of people, work, everywhere. Tell us how you get on, next time.

