Schema Modes

People are more than 1 thing. All of the thoughts, feelings and behaviours we have mean we can be different at different times. Various schemas being active can cause us to feel, think and behave in associated ways depending on if the schema is healthy or maladaptive (see sheet of 18 maladaptive schemas for details).

At the beginning of our lives, we are dominated by whoever takes care of us and the messages they give us determine how we feel about things. Our understanding of these messages continues throughout our lives in these schema modes. This is not to say that caregivers intentionally made us feel these things. Even the best caregivers aren't perfect and the still developing mind will interpret through the eyes of a child, lacking context and full understanding.

Parental Modes	Description	Associated maladaptive schemas.
Nurturing Parent	Being made to feel safe and loved by the caregiver.	None, this tends to strengthen the healthy adult when it emerges.
Demanding Parent	The moral lessons, expectations and responsibilities we are taught by caregivers. The things we "should" and "must" do. The things we must be and achieve.	Unrelenting Standards, self-sacrifice.
Punitive Parent	The caregiver criticises, restricts, or punishes you or others for doing something "wrong".	Punitiveness, subjugation, defectiveness, mistrust/abuse (as an abuser or fear of being abused).

As we age into childhood, we think more for ourselves, our identity emerges more along with more modes. The child modes stay with us throughout our life after this. Again, the messages we get and our interpretation of them will determine our schemas and how these modes activate in later life.

Child Modes	Description	Associated maladaptive schemas.
Happy Child	Feels loved, carefree, connected, contented.	None, this mode is our state of not thinking, just experiencing and enjoying.
Impulsive Child	This mode seeks to have immediate desires for pleasure met without thinking of practicalities, consequence or others thoughts and feelings.	Entitlement, lack of self-discipline.
Angry Child	A mode of aggression, where we defend ourselves in response to mistreatment or core needs not being met.	Abandonment, mistrust/ abuse, emotional deprivation, subjugation. This can also be a way to control negative feelings in vulnerable child.
Vulnerable Child	A mode that experiences unhappiness, insecurity or anxiety. Activated by negative schemas (especially negative beliefs about ourselves). These are determined by our interpretation of life events.	Abandonment, mistrust/abuse, emotional deprivation, defectiveness, social isolation, dependence/incompetence, vulnerability to harm or illness, enmeshment/undeveloped self, negativity/pessimism

The vulnerable child is an important schema mode. It is our negative beliefs and fears. Our brain likes to know these to try and manage them but sometimes the way we interpret things make us feel more negative than we are or cope in unhelpful ways. These coping mechanisms become modes of their own which we go into to manage the distress of vulnerable child mode. These try to manage the negative feelings of the vulnerable child so are useful in short bursts to feel better but in the long term can be unhelpful. The most common are detailed below but any mindset that provides immediate relief without actually challenging (or even reinforcing) the negative schema is a maladaptive coping mode.

Maladaptive Coping Mode	Description
Compliant surrender	Gives in to the schema, becomes compliant and dependant. Giving in is a relief but it can reinforce the negative schema by making us feel it is right and we can't fight it.
Detached protector	Attempts to emotionally withdraw through avoidance, isolation and trying to disconnect from others. This may be to distance from the feelings or so we don't bother people. This also gives relief but leads to our emotional needs not really being met and so the negative schema goes unchallenged.
Overcompensator	Trying to control negative feelings by being so good or perfect that negative schema never activate. This may help motivate us but as nobody can be perfect all the time setting unrealistic goals will just activate the schema when they can't be met.
Self-aggrandiser	Managing negative schemas by telling ourselves how great or special we are. In very small does this helps us stay out of vulnerable child but being consumed by it inhibits real personal growth.

There is a way to manage the vulnerable child that will allow us to achieve personal growth and actually challenge negative schemas- the Healthy Adult mode. This is the final schema mode to emerge, often developing in puberty to adulthood (hence the name). This mode is fair minded, calm, affirming and nurturing. It is what you would imagine a healthy adult version of yourself to be. It is the main aspect of your "true self" and the mode that should be in overall control.

The emergence of this mode and how much it can control our mindset is determined by many factors. Negative events may reduce how loved and safe we felt and strengthened vulnerable child or other maladaptive modes to the point where Healthy Adult is not in control very often. But since Healthy Adult is capable of growth and change this doesn't need to be the case forever. In fact, the actual goal of all psychotherapy is to help the Healthy Adult develop and take control.

The Healthy Adult has 3 functions- 1) It nurtures, affirms and protects the Vulnerable Child. This meets our emotional needs and actually challenges and can change maladaptive schemas. 2) It can limit the Angry or Impulsive Child modes in a fair and well-disciplined way. It doesn't judge, it just points to a better way. 3) It moderates the Maladaptive Coping and Dysfunctional Parent modes. It embraces who we are and knows we can cope with our feelings.

In a perfect world you would only have your Healthy Adult mode. This is your true self, disciplined but fair, positive self-esteem but not aggrandising, life isn't perfect but you trust yourself to cope and do the right thing. When feeling distress, consider what mode you are in, search for our Healthy Adult and how you will manage these in that mode.