

Schema Modes



Our schemas play out as different aspects of our personality called schema modes. Schemas being active can cause us to feel, think and behave differently ways depending on if the schema is healthy or maladaptive (see the list maladaptive schemas for details).

At the beginning of our lives, we are dependent by whoever takes care of us and our understanding of how they feel about us and the world determines how we feel about things. This plays out throughout our lives in the 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	Feeling safe and loved by our caregiver.	None, this tends to strengthen the healthy adult when it emerges.
Demanding Parent	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 schema modes stay with us throughout our life. Again, the messages we get from others 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	We seek 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 reacting to needs not being met and protect the vulnerable child.
Vulnerable Child	A mode that experiences unhappiness, insecurity or anxiety. Activated by negative schemas	Abandonment, mistrust/abuse, emotional deprivation, defectiveness, social isolation, dependence, vulnerability, enmeshment, pessimism

The vulnerable child is an important schema mode. It contains 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.
Detached protector	Attempts to emotionally withdraw through avoidance, isolation and disconnection from others to protect ourselves from negative feelings in vulnerable child. This also gives relief but leads to our emotional needs not really being met.
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 small doses this helps us stay out of vulnerable child but being consumed by it inhibits 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. Picture in your mind your “true self”, the part of you unburdened by maladaptive schemas. That is the healthy adult. Your true self has always existed inside you but that aspect of you may not get to be in control very often.

The emergence of the healthy adult and how much it can control our perception is determined by many factors. Unmet emotional needs create maladaptive schemas so strengthen vulnerable child or maladaptive modes to the point where healthy adult is not in control very often. But since the healthy adult is capable of growth and change this doesn't need to be the case forever. The ultimate goal of all schema therapy is to the development of the healthy adult to enable that aspect of you to be in control much more of the time.

The Healthy Adult performs 3 emotional functions- 1) It nurtures, affirms and protects the Vulnerable Child. This actually meets our emotional needs in a way that maladaptive modes cannot. 2) It can limit the Angry or Impulsive Child modes in a fair and well-disciplined way. As healthy adult we don't judge ourselves, we just acknowledge there is a better way to meet our emotional needs. 3) Healthy adult moderates the maladaptive coping and dysfunctional parental modes. In healthy adult we embrace who we are and trust ourselves to cope.

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 and respond to your emotional needs as the healthy adult.