Life patterns: an introduction

Why the same painful themes keep coming round.

Most of us have noticed that certain painful situations seem to repeat: the same kind of relationship, the same feeling of being left out, the same crash after pushing too hard. Schema therapy calls the patterns behind these repeats schemas, or life patterns.

What a life pattern is

A deep, long-standing theme about yourself and your relationships, made up of beliefs, feelings, memories and body sensations. For example: "I will be abandoned." "I am defective." "My needs do not matter." It is felt as a truth, not as an idea.

Where patterns come from

Core needs in childhood	Safety, love, acceptance, freedom to be yourself, play, and sensible limits
↓	
Needs not met enough	Through neglect, criticism, loss, over-control, chaos, bullying or abuse, combined with a child's temperament
↓	
A life pattern forms	The child draws a conclusion that makes sense of it all
↓	
Coping style	Ways of surviving: giving in, avoiding, or fighting back
↓	
The pattern repeats	In adult life, the coping keeps the pattern going

Why patterns are so persistent

- **They feel familiar.** We are drawn to what we know, even when it hurts.
- **They filter what we see.** We notice what fits and overlook what does not.
- **Coping styles backfire.** Avoiding closeness prevents the experience that would disprove "I will be rejected".

How they change

1. Recognising the pattern and where it came from.
2. Noticing when it is triggered, as it happens.
3. Meeting the feelings with understanding instead of criticism.
4. Trying new behaviour, and getting the underlying need met in healthy ways.

> **Note**
> A life pattern began as the best explanation a child could find. It was learned, and it can be changed.

Schema therapy was developed by Jeffrey Young.

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickohareterapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.

Core emotional needs

What every child needs, and what you may still be needing now.

Name _____ Date _____

Schema therapy is built on the idea that all children share certain emotional needs. When these are met well enough, we grow up feeling secure and able. When they are not, life patterns form. For each need, note how well it was met when you were growing up, and how well it is met in your life now.

Need	Growing up	Now
Safety and secure attachment: to be loved, protected, accepted and reliably cared for		
Autonomy and a sense of who I am: to be encouraged to do things for myself and to trust my own abilities		
Freedom to express needs and feelings: to say what I feel and want without fear		
Spontaneity and play: to have fun, be silly and be a child		
Realistic limits: to learn self-control and consideration for others		

The need that was least met when I was young

How that still shows up in my life

One way I could begin to meet that need for myself now, or ask for it to be met

The five core needs come from schema therapy, developed by Jeffrey Young.

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.

Eighteen common life patterns

A reference list. Most people recognise a few.

Mark any that ring true. This is not a test or a diagnosis. We will talk through what you notice.

Disconnection and rejection

Abandonment
People I love will leave me or will not be there when I need them.

Mistrust
People will hurt, use or take advantage of me.

Emotional deprivation
Nobody will ever really understand me or meet my needs for care.

Defectiveness and shame
There is something wrong with me. If people saw the real me, they would reject me.

Social isolation
I am different. I do not belong.

Impaired independence

Dependence
I cannot cope with everyday life without a lot of help.

Vulnerability to harm
Disaster could strike at any moment and I could not prevent it.

Enmeshment
I am so caught up with someone close that I have no life or identity of my own.

Failure
I am not as capable as other people and I am bound to fail.

Impaired limits

Entitlement
Ordinary rules should not apply to me. I should get what I want.

Insufficient self-control
I cannot make myself tolerate frustration or finish what is boring.

Focus on others

Subjugation
I have to give in to what others want, or there will be trouble.

Self-sacrifice
Other people's needs must come before mine.

Approval seeking
My worth depends on what other people think of me.

Over-vigilance and inhibition

Negativity
Things will go wrong. I focus on the downside.

Emotional inhibition
I must keep my feelings in. Showing them is dangerous or shameful.

Unrelenting standards
I must meet very high standards, or I will be criticised.

Punitiveness
People, including me, deserve to be punished harshly for mistakes.

The eighteen schemas were identified by Jeffrey Young and colleagues.

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.

Three ways of coping with a life pattern

Giving in, avoiding and fighting back, and how each keeps the pattern going.

When a life pattern is triggered, it hurts. As children we found ways to cope. Those same ways tend to run automatically in adulthood, and each one, in its own way, stops the pattern from changing.

Giving in
Acting as if the pattern were true. Choosing situations and people that confirm it. Feeling the pain directly.

Avoiding
Arranging life so the pattern is never triggered. Staying away from people, challenges or feelings. Numbing with work, drink, food or screens.

Fighting back
Doing the opposite, to prove the pattern wrong. It looks strong from outside and is fragile underneath.

Pattern	Giving in	Avoiding	Fighting back
"I will be abandoned"	Choosing partners who are unavailable	Avoiding close relationships altogether	Clinging, checking, or leaving first
"I am defective"	Putting myself down. Choosing critical people	Hiding the real me. Keeping conversations shallow	Acting superior. Criticising others
"I will fail"	Not trying. Doing things half-heartedly	Putting things off. Avoiding challenges	Driving myself relentlessly
"My needs do not matter"	Doing what everyone else wants	Avoiding situations where I might have to ask	Demanding, or rebelling against every request

Why they keep the pattern going

Each style prevents the corrective experience. If you never let anyone close, you never find out that some people stay. If you never stop driving yourself, you never find out you are acceptable without the achievements.

A fourth option

Noticing the pattern has been triggered, soothing the feeling, and choosing a response that fits the present, not the past. We call this the healthy adult.

The coping style I use most

What it protects me from, and what it costs me

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.

Modes: the different parts of me

Why you can feel like a different person from one hour to the next.

We all have different sides that take over at different times. Schema therapy calls these modes. Knowing which one is in charge helps you understand your reactions and choose what to do.

The vulnerable child

The part that holds the old hurt: lonely, frightened, ashamed, unloved. Triggered when a need is not met.

The angry or impulsive child

The part that rages at unfairness, or acts on impulse to get a need met right now.

The critic

An internalised voice, often from a parent, teacher or peers. It attacks ("you are pathetic") or demands ("not good enough, try harder").

The detached protector

Shuts feelings off. Numb, flat, busy, distracted. "I am fine."

The pleaser

Gives in and goes along to avoid conflict or rejection.

The overcontroller or fighter

Takes charge, attacks, or strives for perfection to stay safe.

The happy child

Playful, curious, spontaneous, connected. Present when needs are met.

The healthy adult

Sees clearly, soothes the vulnerable child, sets limits on the critic and the impulsive side, and takes sensible action.

How modes work together

A trigger touches the vulnerable child. Often, before you even feel that hurt, the critic attacks or a coping mode jumps in to shut it down. From outside, people see the anger, the withdrawal or the people pleasing. They do not see the hurt underneath.

The aim of therapy

1. To recognise each mode when it shows up.
2. To care for the vulnerable child and get its needs met.
3. To stand up to the critic.
4. To thank the coping modes and need them less.
5. To strengthen the healthy adult, so it is in charge more of the time.

The modes I recognise most in myself

When is my healthy adult strongest?

The mode model comes from schema therapy, developed by Jeffrey Young.

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.

My modes map

Describe each of your modes and what brings it out.

Name _____ Date _____

Give each part a name of your own if you like.

Part of me	When it shows up	What it feels, says or does	What it needs
Vulnerable child			
Angry or impulsive child			
Critic			
My main coping mode (detached, pleasing, controlling)			
Healthy adult			

Which part is in charge most of the time?

What could my healthy adult say to my vulnerable child this week?

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.

Pattern diary

A record of one time a life pattern was triggered, and how you responded.

Name _____ Date _____

What happened? (The trigger)

What I felt, in my emotions and body

What went through my mind

What I did, or wanted to do

Which life pattern was this? Which part of me took over?

What does this remind me of from earlier in my life?

What fits the present situation

What belongs to the past

Where is my reaction bigger than today's event?

What my healthy adult would say about it

What my healthy adult would do

What I did in the end, and how it turned out

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.

Strengthening my healthy adult

The part of you that can comfort, protect and decide.

Name _____ Date _____

The healthy adult is the part of you that is wise, kind and firm. It is the part that looks after a frightened child, tells a bully to stop, and gets on with what needs doing. It may not show up often at the moment. It gets stronger with use.

People I know, or know of, who are warm, steady and fair. What do they do and say?

Times I have been like that, perhaps with someone else

How my healthy adult sounds	How it stands and breathes	What it believes about me
Tone, pace, words		

Putting it to work

When this happens	My healthy adult says or does
The critic attacks me	
I feel small, scared or ashamed	
I want to act on impulse or lash out	
I want to shut down or avoid	

One situation this week where I will call on this part of me

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.

What I needed then, what I need now

Linking an old hurt to today's reactions, and answering the need.

Name _____ Date _____

Strong reactions in the present are often linked to something from the past. This exercise traces the link. If it stirs up a lot, stop, and bring it to our next session.

A recent situation where my reaction was stronger than the event seemed to deserve

What I felt

When have I felt like this before? What is the earliest time I can remember?

What I needed back then, and did not get

- [ ] Comfort
- [ ] Praise
- [ ] Someone on my side
- [ ] Protection
- [ ] To be listened to
- [ ] To be believed

What a caring adult would have said or done

What the younger me concluded about myself or about people

Is that conclusion still fair?

What I need now when that feeling comes, and how I, or someone else, could give it to me

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.

A letter to my younger self

Saying what that child needed to hear.

Bring to mind yourself at a particular age, perhaps a time when things were hard. If you have a photograph, look at it. See what that child is wearing, the look on their face, where they are.

Write to them as the adult you are now, who knows what they went through and what happened afterwards.

You might include

- What you can see they are feeling
- That what happened was not their fault
- What they deserved, and should have had
- What you admire about them
- What you know now that they could not know then
- That you are here, and they are not alone any more

The age I am writing to, and what was happening then

Dear

Afterwards

- Read it back slowly.
- Notice what you feel towards that child.
- Do something kind for yourself today. The child you were is still part of you.

If this brings up painful memories, go easy on yourself and bring the letter to our next session.

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.