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
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Needs not met enough	Through neglect, criticism, loss, over-control, chaos, bullying or abuse, combined with a child's temperament
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A life pattern forms	The child draws a conclusion that makes sense of it all
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Coping style	Ways of surviving: giving in, avoiding, or fighting back
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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.

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