

Introduction to The Vulnerable Child

At the core of your personality is a vulnerable child. This is not just the case for you alone, in my opinion, and from the perspective of a Schema Therapy approach, there is a vulnerable child at the core of every single one of us. All 8 billion people, wandering around on this third rock from the sun called earth, have a history to our lives. We have stories about what happened to us, and we carry around a vault filled with incidents and encounters that we generally refer to as our past. Out of all these experiences, the things that we are exposed to when we are children are probably the most impactful. It is at this impressionable time of our lives that the Vulnerable Child is created. The more shameful, sad, guilty, or lonely we felt in our formative years, the more Vulnerable the child is at the core of our personality system. Whether these emotionally impactful experiences were true in actuality, or just a perception that we created due to our limited understanding at that time, is completely irrelevant.

All of these experiences are valid because they come together in the creation of our emotional vulnerabilities, and so, when the Vulnerable Child is activated in our system, we experience the distress associated with any, and all, of our unmet childhood needs. They come to the forefront as the possibility of experiencing the intense emotions we were previously exposed to. Things like guilt, shame, sadness, and loneliness become a very real possibility, and our system goes into a state of fear. As a result, we are often left with feelings of worthlessness, a sense that we are unlovable, and a general feeling of pessimism and fragility. When in this mode, we feel the helplessness of a young child, and we may often look to others for help and protection from the overwhelming emotional experience that we're having. Our system goes into high alert, seeking the support, or behaviour, it desperately wants to meet the unmet need, and keep the Vulnerable Child safe from the experience of its perceived fragility.

“Understanding my underlying issues meant stepping into my biggest fears, turning towards the things I had been running from for most of my life, choosing not to escape from my perception of reality, and facing the responsibility of living the life I wanted to live.”

~Steven Morris RP

Coming to grips with why I was living an addictive lifestyle ultimately meant understanding the Vulnerable Child at the centre of my personality. This was one of the most challenging parts of my own recovery journey. Each of us spends a considerable amount of time running away from the stories that this particular part of our personality holds onto. These stories are linked to our unmet childhood needs, and they generate our core beliefs about how life is, who we are, and who other people will be if we don't pay attention to their behaviours. Living the Life I want to Live means accepting these vulnerabilities as a part of who I am, facing the things I am afraid of, and

stepping into the feelings I am constantly avoiding. Running from fear of shame, guilt, sadness and loneliness was driving my addictive behaviour, keeping me stuck in a cycle of using. When we put structure and schedule into our daily activities it activates the stories we have about our world and creates the opportunity for growth through behavioural change.

Our personality system is set up to protect our vulnerable child, it is driven to keep it safe from the emotional impact of the stories we have created over time. These stories do have some basis in “reality” as they exist because of our own unique experiences. Generally, these stories have no foundation in the actuality of our current circumstances though, as we are usually reacting to our tales from the past, not dealing with the situation we are currently in. In essence, we are constantly living into our past. Understanding the Vulnerable Child is probably the most important part of our recovery journey, it is the key to changing our addictive and compulsive behaviours. Whether this child is sitting in guilt, shame, sadness, or loneliness will surface as we go through the work, and **doing** the work is the only way to change.

Next, let’s check in to see how you relate to this Mode. Answer the questions below based on your personal experiences and the rating scale provided.

Never 0	Sometimes 1	50/50 2	Often 3	Always 4
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Description	Score
It is not unusual for me to feel fundamentally inadequate, flawed, or defective, and I often find myself sitting in the guilt and shame from my past actions.	
At certain points in time, I struggle with feeling a deep sense of sadness, and sorrow about how lonely I am. I feel like I lack a deep connection with others.	

Based on the scores you gave for the questions above, and the way you relate to the description provided on the previous pages, how Relevant is the Vulnerable Child Mode to you in your life? Add the two scores together to calculate your prevalence score. On a scale of 0 – 8, 0 being not present at all, and 8 being present in my life every day, rate your experience of the Vulnerable Child mode.

My Vulnerable Child Mode has a prevalence score of ___/8.

On the next page, take the time to explore your experience of the Vulnerable Child Mode, see if you can identify how you feel when this mode is active, how you are thinking when this mode is active, what you do when this mode is active, and what situations you might need to be aware of that can activate this mode of behaviour in your personality system.

- a. When I am in the Vulnerable Child Mode, I am experiencing the following feelings (List the emotions and feelings you experience in the Vulnerable Child Mode, focus on the emotions you are most uncomfortable with, the feelings you are most afraid of).

- b. When I am in the Vulnerable Child Mode, I am having the following thoughts (List the things you are thinking when you are blended with the Vulnerable Child Mode, be specific, focus on thoughts of sadness, loneliness, guilt and shame, not the reaction to these feelings, the thoughts that you have when you sit with these uncomfortable experiences)

- c. When I am in the Vulnerable Child Mode, I behave in the following ways (List the things you do, the way you act, and how you react when in the Vulnerable Child Mode).

- d. The following situations are likely to be involved in triggering my Vulnerable Child Mode (List situations you are aware of that have activate this mode of behaviour in the past).

- e. When I am in the Vulnerable Child Mode, I can use the following skills to support me with the emotional distress I am experiencing in my personality system. List the different skills of Dialectical Behaviour Therapy you can use to manage the emotions being held by the Vulnerable Child. Try to list the skills in the order they will be effective for you to use. Start with Mindfulness, then focus on Distress Tolerance, and then look at Emotion Regulation.

- f. The ways I can practice these skills to develop them as part of my ability to cope with the emotional experience of my own Vulnerable Child are as follows: Describe the way you can practice these skills, what would it take to implement them into your daily routines?
