

Schema of Self Sacrifice

When the schema of Self Sacrifice is activated in our system, we tend to fall into a behaviour mode of sacrificing our own needs and desires for the sake of pleasing or meeting the needs of others. In essence, we allow people to control us by only doing the things that they want to do, or fixing the things that they need to fix, never bringing attention to the things that we might want or need in the relationship dynamic. Most of the time, but not always, we do this for one of 3 reasons. First out of guilt and shame because we've hurt other people in the past by putting ourselves first in our interpersonal relationships. Second, we do it out of fear that we're going to be "punished" or abandoned if we disobey the direction of those around us. Third we do it because we believe that we won't be able to cope with the emotional experience that gets activated in our system if we don't attend to the other persons needs.

Primarily, the stories connected to the Schema of Self Sacrifice begin in childhood, if this is the case, it is usually activated by the feeling that someone close to you, probably a parent figure or a care giver of some kind, left you feeling as though you had to please them to meet your emotional needs. It might even be that you had to fix other peoples problems to keep the peace in the environment. As an adult, we may find ourselves repeatedly entering relationships with what might be seen from the outside as dominant or controlling people. Inside of these relationships we suppress our own wants and needs to please the other person, keep the peace, or to give up control of our decisions to them. On the other side of the continuum, we might find that we enter relationships with needy people who are too damaged to give back to you in return. As a result, we are constantly fixing their problems, while slowly building resentment for the situation we find ourselves in.

“I was constantly having to meet the needs of others before my own, which left me filled with resentment because I never did the things that I wanted to do.”

~ Steven Morris RP

When I sobered up, the schema of Self Sacrifice was responsible for a dominant story in my system. I often thought of myself as someone who was easy to get along with, quite flexible, and willing to accommodate other peoples needs at the drop of a hat. For a while I saw this as an asset to my personality as it helped me to get along with other people in difficult circumstances. As I worked my own recovery, I began to see that there was an underbelly to this story that left me having difficulty setting boundaries with others, and limiting the demands that others made on me. I found it difficult to say no to others, regardless of how unreasonable the request, and as a result, I had a hard time asking for the things I needed inside of my relationships.

The schema of Self Sacrifice is often connected to the feelings of guilt, shame sadness and loneliness, along with the fear of what these emotions will do to us if we allow our parts to experience them. If this is you, as a child, you may have experienced too much responsibility for the physical or emotional well being of someone else in your family. Your level of Self Sacrifice is almost like a virtue to you, and it is true that taking care of others has many admirable qualities. You are empathetic, and probably a Highly Sensitive Person (HSP). The problem is that the relationship dynamic that you create lacks reciprocation, and whenever you step out of the role of sacrificing your own needs, you are filled with a sense of guilt that drives you back into the behaviour.

Generally, the Schema of Self Sacrifice is driven by an overwhelming sense of fear. Meeting the needs of others was at one time an involuntary action, something that we did to meet our own emotional childhood needs. Now, when this Schema is active in our system, it leaves us feeling like we really have no choice in the matter, and it's the only option we have. We must sacrifice our own needs in order to remain safe from rejection, loneliness, guilt and shame, or something else that we're afraid of experiencing. As a child, if we learned to self sacrifice to avoid punishment or abandonment of some sort, there can be a part of our personality that's constantly filled with anger. This might be difficult to see at first, because of judgments around anger being wrong. To build empathy and compassion, keep in mind, this part is simply trying to protect the vulnerable child that's connected to these experiences.

Next, let's check in to see how you relate to this schema. 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
Description				Score
I often feel like I have no choice but to give into other peoples wishes otherwise they will retaliate or reject me in some way. I find it hard to advocate for myself.				
Sometimes, I feel like I have to fix other peoples problems, even at the expense of my own wants and needs, and I find it hard to say no to the requests of 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 schema of Self Sacrifice 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, rate your experience of the schema of Self Sacrifice.

My Schema of Self Sacrifice has a prevalence score of ___/8.

On the next page, take the time to explore your experience of the Schema of Self Sacrifice, see if you can identify how you feel when this schema is active, how you are thinking when this schema is active, what you do when this schema is active, and what situations you might need to be aware of that can activate this way of thinking in your personality system.

- a. How does the schema of Mistrust impact your life when it's present in your system, what are the stories that show up for you, how do you know that it's present in your thoughts and feelings?

- b. How do you currently cope with this schema when it is activated in your system, in other words, what do you do when you feel this way, how do you normally behave?

- c. What are some new things you can do to cope with this schema when you are aware of its presence in your system, what would help you process the story in a healthy way? (Try to think in terms of the skill we learn in DBT)

- d. What would be a more balanced way of seeing the world when this schema is activated in your system, what would you say to someone you knew who was dealing with this type of story?
