

The Schema of Social Isolation

When the schema of Social Isolation is activated in our system, we are left with the belief that we are completely disconnected from other people, and this can sometimes even feel like we are don't have a safe place to settle anywhere at all in the world. It's extremely common for this schema to show up as feeling like we're different in some way, like we're not part of the group or the community that we're trying to connect with, or we generally feel like we don't belong in the conversation. The creation of this schema can be due to a number of different reasons. For example, growing up we might've felt different to other children, either at school or within our own family of origin. It might also be the case that our family was different to the other people in our neighbourhood in some way, and we felt judged and left out because of this. In some cases, this schema exists because of our own genetic passive nature and temperament in childhood. This means as children, we're constantly doing what other people want us to do, and we never really develop any significant interests of our own.

These behaviour patterns can leave us feeling like we have nothing to offer in terms of conversation, so we're "socially isolated" from the people around us, even though, in actuality, we're not physically alone. This particular schema is strongly linked to a number of different unmet childhood needs that usually revolve around attachment to others. When we have the general sense that we don't fit in, like we don't belong, or that we're different in some way, it creates behaviour patterns as adults that keep us staying on the outskirts of social gatherings. We never feel comfortable to be ourselves, and we sometimes don't even engage at all as a way to keep us safe from the possible judgement from others. When we do get involved in conversation, even just listening in to others speak, we often only hear the differences in their stories, never making the connection to ourselves, or hearing the similarities in any way. This just confirms the particular stories connected to this schema and keeps us trapped in the rigidity of belief that we just don't fit in.

“Growing up, I often felt like I didn’t belong, like I was different, and couldn’t fit in with the people I was supposed to fit in with.”

~ Steven Morris RP

Social isolation is a schema that a lot of people identify with when they live inside of an addictive lifestyle. This story can manifest in many different ways, and for a variety of different reasons. For most of us, it usually leads to some form of avoidant behaviour, as social interaction becomes a representation of a space that isn't safe. Whatever our story might be, underneath the schema of social isolation lies a sense of loneliness that is extremely difficult for us to deal with, and it's often the root cause of those addictive, obsessive, or compulsive coping mechanisms we are desperately trying to work on, right now.

Loneliness is caused by a lack of connection to others. Making a connection with another human being requires a certain level of vulnerability, a willingness to step into the possibility of rejection. If social isolation is a dominant schema, this is an incredibly difficult thing for us to do, because of the narrative that opening up, means we have to be to be vulnerable, which triggers parts of our personality that genuinely believe that if we do this, people are going to see all the things that make us different. This belief is set in a rigidity that's 100% sure that vulnerability is a weakness that will only lead to rejection, which is the thing we fear the most because it activates all of the pain that's associated with the loneliness, sadness, guilt and shame we're trying to avoid in the first place.

Many of us have a negative point of view when it comes to who we are in the perception of other people, which stems from a lack of acceptance for self. Practicing the skills of unconditional self acceptance helps to debunk the social isolation schema and allows our defensive parts to step back from their fear-based responses. When I explored my own beliefs associated with this schema, I found that I was usually projecting my own self criticisms onto my beliefs about others. Theorizing that they saw in me what I saw in myself. However, when I looked at the evidence that I was basing this on, I was able to see the psychological filters I had in place that were keeping me stuck in the very behaviour's I was currently trying to change.

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
In social settings, parties, group functions, or meetings of some kind, I often feel like I don't belong, like I am different, Like I can't relate, or like I don't really fit in.				
Sometimes, when there is a possibility for me to engage with people, I sit back because of feelings that I'm dull, or boring, and I don't know what to say.				

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 Social Isolation 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 schema of Social Isolation.

My Schema of Social Isolation has a prevalence score of ___/8.

On the next page, take the time to explore your experience of the Schema of Social Isolation, 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 Social Isolation 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?
