

Schema of Vulnerability

When the schema of Vulnerability is activated in our system, the primary feeling we are left with is an underlying sense of fear and anxiety. Sooner or later, it is inevitable, that something bad is going to happen. This can often be most active when things are going well, noticing that “this won’t last forever,” then searching around for the bad things in our lives just to prove this theory to be right. Basically, our thoughts revolve around a rigid belief that a catastrophe is about to strike, and we sit in the general sense of anxiety and fear that when this bad thing happens, we lack the ability and the resources to deal with it. As a result, we spend our days sitting in a fear-based system, usually in some kind of hypervigilance, scrambling around, trying to prepare for the impending doom. These beliefs can cause us to both exaggerate the risk of danger in our environment and minimize our ability to cope with things.

What we personally fear depends upon the content of our own unique experiences with feeling this sense of Vulnerability, but it generally revolves around the following things. Health and wellness, where we worry obsessively about our own physical health. Physical danger, where we live in constant fear of the world being a dangerous place where catastrophe is just around the corner. Poverty, where we are always worried about money and live with the constant fear that we will go broke and end up on the street. Losing control, where we fear going “crazy,” losing our mind, having a nervous breakdown, or experiencing uncontrollable panic attacks. This particular schema revolves around the unmet childhood need for safety in the family environment, and it is strongly linked to a childhood experience of chaos and unpredictability.

“One of the reasons I used alcohol obsessively was to escape from anxiety. This constant state of fear was fueled by beliefs that catastrophe was about to strike at any moment.”

~ Steven Morris RP

The schema of vulnerability is one that’s often misunderstood and yet regularly experienced in ways that most people are not aware of. As I previously mentioned, the dominant stories associated with this particular schema leaves our system filled with fear and anxiety at the relative certainty that catastrophe is about to strike at any given moment, and a belief that we lack the skills and resources to deal with it. At certain times in my life, this was definitely true for me, as I often found myself expecting the worst possible outcome and sitting in the anxiety of hypervigilance associated with this expectation. Inside of my mind, I would connect the dots to this catastrophic ending, exaggerating the possibilities of risk and danger, while at the same time minimizing my ability to cope with the emotions that would get triggered if the situation did indeed play out the way I was expecting it too.

For many people, the fear of catastrophe revolves around 4 different categories of vulnerability, and it is often the case that we experience more than one of these categories depending on our previous life experiences. Fear of losing our health and wellbeing, the possibility of danger or falling into a state of poverty or losing control of our mind, or our situation are where our fears exist. If we believe that our health and wellbeing is a vulnerability, we may have been labeled as a hypochondriac because we're constantly worried about the state of our health, despite the fact that doctors tell us that there is nothing seriously wrong. The vulnerability to danger leaves us exaggerating concern for our own personal safety and the safety of those we love. It has us viewing the world as being fraught with danger at every turn.

Poverty is a vulnerability that is sometimes labeled as the so called “depression mentality” named for people who were children during the great depression. People who struggle with this vulnerability are always worried about money, sometimes unrealistically afraid that they will go broke and end up on the street. While the fear of losing control revolves around the belief that we are losing our mind or “going crazy,” and it often result in the manifestation of panic attacks. Working with this schema starts with the ability to create internal safety, which is actually the hardest thing for us to do.

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 feel like I worry more than the average person about danger, that I will get sick or that some harm will come to me, and I am waiting for the bad thing to happen.				
I worry that I, or my family, will lose money and become destitute or dependent on others. Even when things are going well, I am waiting for things to go wrong.				

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 Vulnerability 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 Vulnerability.

My Schema of Vulnerability and Instability has a prevalence score of ___/8.

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