

## **Unburdening Protectors**

If you've ever attended any of the online groups that I facilitate, or done any one-on-one work with me, you're probably used to hearing the term unburdening floating around inside the conversation. This incredibly important word is used to describe the process we go through to release the burden of responsibility being held in our system by specific parts of our personality, that are generally influenced by the presence of a particular type of schema.

This responsibility is often held with a degree of rigidity that has an absolute, or all or nothing feel to it, and it's this extremely rigid perspective that has us repeating the same behaviours, time and time again, then wondering why we keep doing the same old thing when it's really not helping us to live the life we want to live, or in particular, be the person we want to be. When a schema gets activated, it's tied to the experiences we've had in the past. These experiences are then subconsciously connected to our familiar emotional, and therefore behavioural responses. Basically, we're constantly reacting to the emotional experience that's generated by the story we've created about the current situation.

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**“Our childhood experiences create parts of our personality that carry the burden of responsibility to protect our Vulnerable Child.”**

~Steven Morris RP.

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Sometimes this story is right on the money, and it lines up with everything that's actually happening. When this is the case, our system usually, but not always, responds with parts of our personality using different modes of behaviour that keep us in line with living the life we want to live, and being the person we want to be. On the flip side, dialectically speaking of course, sometimes these stories are out of line with what's actually going on, because they're a representation of our previous experiences rather than the facts about current situation. The stories that are connected these previous experiences are usually generated during childhood, and we are reenacting these early situations, based on a familiarity in the current environment. Often with a rigid behavioural response, that's trying to meet an unmet childhood need in the only way we currently know how.

As I've said a number of times before, we are not looking to remove the schema that we're labeling as ineffective and maladaptive completely from our system. To do this would actually be a somewhat dangerous thing to do, because there may be times when the story we've generated is actually completely accurate for the situation we're in. When this is the case, we work on the mode of behaviour we use in response to the story. Making sure it's one that's effective for us to live the life we want to live and be the person that we want to be. When it's not the case that the story is justified, we want to reflect on the situation and develop our skills for looking at the world from a new and dialectical perspective. This helps us to see the balance between our maladaptive and ineffective stories, and the possibility of an adaptive and effective point of view.

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**“Releasing the burden of responsibility provides the opportunity for our parts to realize they no longer need to protect our Vulnerable Child in the way they once did.”**

~Steven Morris RP.

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First of all, it's really important to have a solid foundation for doing this type of work in place, prior to taking it on. Utilizing the creation of your support network, routine and structure and taking care of your physical wellbeing by practicing the DBT skills of mindfulness and distress tolerance every single day. I will leave links to all the content available on the YouTube channel and website about this subject in the description below. With these things in place, you're working towards Living the Life you Want to Live, and you're practicing the skills that give you the capability to notice the parts of your personality that are in distress, and unblend from their domination within your personality system. Journalling every day gives you the insight for the schemas that are creating a problem in your behavioural responses. So next, we have to link the maladaptive and ineffective stories, to their counteracting effective and adaptive counterparts. On the following page is a chart containing a list of the common connections that with practice, we can actually start to make.

### Connecting our Schema

Early, Ineffective, and Maladaptive Schema	Effective, and Adaptive Schema
Abandonment	Stable Attachment
Emotional Deprivation	Emotional Fulfillment
Mistrust	Reliability
Defectiveness	Self Compassion
Social Isolation	Social Belonging
Vulnerability	Sense of Security
Dependence	Competency
Failure	Sense of Achievement
Self Sacrifice	Healthy Self Interest
Approval and Recognition Seeking	Self Directedness
Emotional Inhibition	Emotional Openness
Unrelenting Standards	Realistic Expectations
Entitlement	Empathic Consideration
Pessimism	Realistic Outlook
Insufficient Self Control	Healthy Self Control
Enmeshment	Developed Self

Now that we have an idea of the stories that we're working with, the schema that they're connected too, and the balanced point of view we are trying to create, we can use the skills of distress tolerance and emotion regulation to do the work we need to do so we can remove the rigid response of our parts to our challenging emotional experiences. This is something we do away from our in the moment experiences though, and it takes a willingness to spend time practicing the skills. First, we have to develop our understanding of whether or not the schema we're working with is something that's an accurate representation of our current situations, or not. We do this by learning how to effectively use the DBT skill of Checking the Facts.

For example, if I'm working with a schema of social isolation, which revolves around the feelings of loneliness that go with beliefs that we don't fit in and we don't belong. To check the facts away from in the moment activation, I want to explore the question, "is this story justified in every area of my life?" For some people, it might be easy for us to see the evidence against this schema without the support of others. When we look at the people we connect with, we can see that there are some places we do belong, and some that we do not. This is the dialectical perspective we are trying to create. Sometimes we may need to brainstorm with other people, to problem solve our current circumstances, so we can see the counteracting story of social belonging.

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**“It’s not about the story we tell ourselves  
being right or wrong, good or bad, it’s  
whether or not the story is effective for us  
to live the life we want to live and be the  
person we want to be.”**

~ Steven Morris RP.

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If it is the case that it's true and we simply don't belong, or fit in anywhere, which is highly unlikely by the way, then we want to explore why this might be true. Are we looking to fit in with people we have absolutely nothing in common with, and if this is the, why am I persisting with the current plan of action when its causing problems in my system. Maybe we have unrealistic expectations on who we're supposed to fit in with, are we fishing in the wrong pond, looking for a salmon in a pond full of trout, so we need to examine the pond we're fishing in, look at how and where we're building our tribe and how we can shift our expectation to match our actual needs.

If it's the case that it's really not true all the time, which is usually how it is, and in actuality we are accepted, we do belong to a tribe, we're just not seeing it in the moment, then we take the action of completing a RAAVEN skill worksheet to create the narrative we need for Planning Ahead to Build Mastery so we can prepare for the activation of this schema in the future. With the RAAVEN worksheet completed, we now set aside the time to actually do the imagery work required for building sustainable change. This is the key aspect of making the changes we're trying to make. Knowing something doesn't change the way we feel about it when there's a part of our personality holding a specific story.

In Planning Ahead to Build Mastery, we recreate the most recent situation, a particular place in time, when the schema that we're trying to remove the rigidity for, was active in our personality system. We do this by imagining the circumstance in which it last played out, and if we're going to do this effectively, we have to connect with the sensual experience we had at that time to feel as though we are back in the actual moment. What did we see, what did we hear, what smells were in the air, what taste was in our mouth, or what physical sensations were we having at that time. With practice, and a basic capacity to sit in a degree of uncomfortable feelings, this reactivates the part that was present at that time, which begins the behavioural response of that part trying to blend within our system.

When I first started doing this work, it was usually at this point in time when my different protectors would kick in. I would feel a level of distress in my system that had me wanting to just get up and walk away. To do something that would take me out of this uncomfortable emotional experience as fast as it possibly could. If you find yourself getting overwhelmed when trying to participate in this type of activity, know that this is completely understandable and totally ok. Go back to look at the Distress Tolerance skills we explored before. Increase your practice of ACCEPTS and IMPROVE. Spend some time developing the capability to sit in the uncomfortable feelings for a little longer each time and have a healthy distraction or self soothing exercise ready to go when you do.

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**“Practice, practice, and practice the skills  
as often as you can. Then when you think  
you’ve practiced enough, go ahead and  
practice some more!”**

~Steven Morris RP.

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This teaches the part, which is probably filled with fear for what will happen if you sit with the emotional experience that you're trying to sit with, that you can cope with the feelings in a healthy way, and you do have the skills to do this type of work. When the level of distress is tolerable for your system, go ahead and start the process by imagining your system using the STOP skill. Stop, don't react. Take a big deep breath to calm your system and begin rehearsing the use of the RAAVEN skill we previously created to Recognize and Acknowledge the part that's present in the moment. Bring gratitude and appreciation to its purpose, not its story, and validate the feelings fears its reacting too. Educate the part on the facts of the situation, compared to the story its holding, and begin pointing out the evidence you have for the counteracting schema.

The negotiation aspect of the RAAVEN skill is once again to ask for this parts permission to experience the new thing we are asking it to experience. Which in the example I used earlier is about asking the part to let us proceed with caution, without it flooding our system with its usual behavioural reaction, so we can demonstrate to this part that we do belong, we do fit in, and we are accepted by others. If it's the situation we are imagining is one where we don't fit in, and we actually don't want to because these particular people are not part of our true authentic tribe, point out the reasons why we don't fit in, and why they aren't a part of our tribe, but bring the part back to the areas of life where we do.

The DBT skill of Paying Attention to Positive Events points these things out to the parts involved with this particular story and builds the Self Trust we are trying to build. Using these skills from a Wise Mind perspective, is an essential aspect of the process. When this mindfulness exercise is practiced with compassion and consistency, it informs the part in question that it no longer needs to protect the vulnerable child in the way it previously did. Removing the rigid belief that the schema it was reacting too is 100% accurate, 100% of the time.

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**“Emotion regulation starts with validation,  
when a part doesn't feel like its been  
heard and understood, its not in a space  
to receive the education we are trying to  
provide.**

~Steven Morris RP.

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One of the statements I hear all the time is that “I know this to be true, but it doesn't change the way I feel about it.” To make this new dialectical perspective something the parts in our system feels, not just something they know, we rehearse this activation over and over again, putting in the practice we need to build self trust. Remembering all the time that when you think you've practiced this skill enough, practice the skill some more to over-learn the process and increase the probability of it activating when we need it the most. When practiced with consistently, future activations of this once dominant schema become less and less impactful. Instead, when the facts don't line up with the story, our system kicks into action with this new healthy adult response. The part of our personality that holds the old schema trusts that the story it once believed was simply just a fact, 100% of the time, is no longer as rigid as it once thought to be.

## RAAVEN Example Worksheet

### Recognize and Acknowledge:

**I am noticing that there is a part of me that's...**

Feeling responsibility to protect my Vulnerable Child from loneliness and sadness.

**I hear you and I see you in my system.**

### Appreciate and Accept:

**I appreciate you because you...**

From your perspective you think that this is the only way to stop the feelings of social isolation from causing those feelings of sadness and loneliness

**Thank you, I appreciate the fact that you are doing this for me.**

### Validate:

**I completely understand why this is because...**

Growing up we didn't feel like we were a part of the family because we had different interests to everyone else, and we didn't feel like we could share these interests.

**It's totally ok that you feel this way, there is absolutely nothing wrong with your emotions, and you're allowed to feel the way you do.**

### Educate:

**In actuality, what's happening is...**

While this was definitely true in the past, we are no longer in that time, or with those people as often as we were. In fact, we have left that place completely, grown up, and we have lots of people we do feel connected to now.

### Negotiate

**Moving forward, I would like to...**

Notice where we feel the way we do right now and recognize your feelings as important and completely valid. At the same time, we can take the time to recognize the places where we do fit in and the people we are connected to away from the current situation.

**If you allow me to do this, I will show you...**

The feelings of belonging that we do experience all the time, and give you the time and space to sit with those feelings.

### RAAVEN Worksheet

**Recognize and Acknowledge:**

I am noticing that there is a part of me that's...

I hear you and I see you in my system.

**Appreciate and Accept:**

I appreciate you because you...

Thank you, I appreciate the fact that you are doing this for me.

**Validate:**

I completely understand why this is because...

It's totally ok that you feel this way, there is absolutely nothing wrong with your emotions, and you're allowed to feel the way you do.

**Educate:**

In actuality, what's happening is...

**Negotiate**

Moving forward, I would like to...

If you allow me to do this, I will show you...