Working at the Root: Schemas, Emotional Memory, and Transformational Change

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Talk therapy can provide meaningful support, helping people understand their patterns, make sense of their history, and develop tools for managing stress and cultivating self-compassion. For many challenges, it brings meaningful and lasting change.

But not all patterns respond to this kind of work. A person may understand their reactions, practice mindfulness or supportive self-talk, and still find themselves weighed down by shame, stuck in procrastination, struggling with anxiety, or caught in harsh self-criticism. Others may avoid emotion or hold back in relationships, even when those relationships are safe. Despite insight and effort, familiar responses often resurface, repeating emotional patterns that were shaped long ago.

This is often where traditional talk therapy reaches its limits. The problem isn't usually a lack of insight, effort, or skill. Emotional learning, stored as schemas in implicit memory, likely sustains the pattern. Schemas are organized templates of experience, expectation, and meaning held in memory (Young et al., 2003; Lane et al., 2015). They continue to shape how we feel, think, and respond, often unconsciously, until they're brought into awareness and revised.

Understanding Schemas

Schemas are emotionally encoded expectations about the self, others, and the world. They usually form early, outside conscious awareness, in response to repeated or emotionally significant experiences (Young et al., 2003). A child whose needs were met inconsistently might come to expect that others will disappear and learn to never fully rely on anyone. Another might learn that showing feelings means being too much and begin hiding their emotional life.

Once formed, schemas guide what we notice, how we interpret events, and how we respond. They shape emotion and behavior automatically, usually without our knowing.

Schemas organize experience and help protect us. Even schemas that cause pain or limitation in the present often served a protective function when they first formed.

We may not hear these schemas as inner dialogue, but we often live by their logic. When they are brought into words, they might sound like:

“If I show anger, something bad will happen.”

“I have to take care of everyone.”

“My emotions are too much.”

“People who love me leave.”

“I’m only safe if I’m alone.”

“I have to be perfect to be noticed.”

Brief reflection: *Do any of these schemas resonate with you? What might your version sound like?*

These emotional patterns develop through repeated experience. For example, constant criticism leaves a child feeling fundamentally wrong. Having to be the stable one creates the sense that one’s own needs aren’t important.

These emotional learnings often remain active well into adulthood, shaping perception and response long after the original context has changed.

While schemas can result from obvious trauma, they just as often arise from more subtle, repeated experiences—misattunement, chronic invalidation, perfectionistic or conditional expectations, or unmet needs that gradually shape our emotional responses and prime our reactions.

Implicit Memory and the Limits of Insight

But why are these schemas so resistant to change, even when we recognize them?

Schemas reside in implicit memory, which shapes emotional and behavioral responses without conscious thought (Lane et al., 2015). Because of this, they are not easily changed through insight alone.

A person may understand that they’re safe now or that their needs are valid—and still feel anxious, ashamed, or braced for rejection. This reflects a key truth about emotional memory: it doesn’t automatically update through logic or reflection (Ecker & Bridges, 2020).

One reason is neurological. Rational thought and emotional memory are processed in distinct neural systems. Insight happens in the thinking brain (prefrontal cortex), while emotional memories live in subcortical structures like the amygdala and hippocampus. Because these systems operate semi-independently, rational understanding doesn’t always shift emotional response. This disconnect often shows up as “I know I’m safe, but I still feel terrified” or “I know they love me, but I feel certain they’ll leave.” The knowing happens in one brain system while

the feeling lives in another.

> ***Brief reflection:*** *What's an example from your own life of knowing one thing intellectually but feeling something different emotionally?*

Many therapies help people identify limiting beliefs and develop ways to manage reactions—and these approaches are often effective. But when a pattern persists, it's often because the emotional learning hasn't yet been reached. From the nervous system's perspective, these responses still make sense.

The Neuroscience of Change: Memory Reconsolidation

Until recently, it was believed that emotional memories, once formed, were permanent. But research over the past two decades has shown that under certain conditions, emotional memories and the schemas they support can be revised. This process is called memory reconsolidation (Alberini & LeDoux, 2013; Ecker & Bridges, 2020).

Memory reconsolidation is a natural neurobiological process through which emotional learnings can be updated. When an emotional memory is reactivated and followed by an experience that clearly contradicts it, the brain enters a window of plasticity during which the original learning can be modified or even erased.

Bruce Ecker has helped bridge neuroscience and clinical practice by outlining how the findings on memory reconsolidation can be applied to psychotherapy (Ecker, 2018; Ecker & Bridges, 2020).

To support this process in therapy, three conditions must be met:

Reactivation

The emotional schema must be brought into direct experience—not just named, but felt in the present moment—emotionally alive, not just intellectually remembered.

Mismatch

While it's active, the person must encounter a new experience that contradicts the old expectation in a meaningful way. This contradiction can come through relational warmth, new embodied experiences of safety, moments of self-acceptance, or shifts in perspective that offer a more accurate or compassionate understanding. It can also occur through a process where memories and inner experiences are "rescripted," which involves the enactment of alternative events and responses through the imagination and sometimes through physical movement.

Revision

The mismatch must be held in awareness long enough for the nervous system to register and revise the original learning.

While not the only mechanism of change, memory reconsolidation is a known process capable of producing transformational shifts in emotional memory.

When these conditions are met, change is often deep and stable. The old reaction no longer needs to be managed—it simply stops arising.

How Therapy Can Support Reconsolidation

Experiential psychotherapies that support memory reconsolidation vary in method, but they share a common structure: they bring emotional schemas into present-moment awareness, evoke a new experience that contradicts the old learning, and allow the nervous system to absorb this mismatch in a way that updates emotional memory (Ecker, 2018).

Experiential therapies that support this process include:

- Coherence Therapy
- Internal Family Systems (IFS)
- Emotion-Focused Therapy
- Accelerated Experiential Dynamic Psychotherapy (AEDP)
- Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)
- Somatically oriented approaches (Hakomi, Sensorimotor Psychotherapy, Somatic Experiencing)

Despite their different languages and methods, these approaches share a capacity to reach emotional learning at its roots.

IFS offers a clear illustration. IFS identifies ‘parts’—distinct aspects within us that hold protective strategies or emotional burdens. Many of these parts hold emotional schemas shaped by early or overwhelming experiences. A part might believe that being seen means being hurt, or experience itself as fundamentally bad. When the client turns toward that part with curiosity, care, and presence, it generates a meaningful contradiction—a part that expected rejection now encounters warmth. This kind of relational mismatch is a powerful entry point to reconsolidation.

In IFS, the client’s own compassionate presence is a primary disconfirming experience that allows the emotional schema to soften and update (Ecker, 2018). Of course, a trusting and connected therapeutic relationship is another source of corrective or positively disconfirming experiences.

Additional steps, like retrieval (helping the part leave the old scene), rescripting (imagining a new outcome), or unburdening (a ritual release where the part lets go of the emotional weight it has carried), can deepen the mismatch and support integration.

For instance, a client who felt crushing shame whenever making mistakes traced this to a young part holding the memory of being humiliated for errors in childhood (reactivation). As they turned toward this part with curiosity, the part was able to experience unexpected compassion.

The client also helped the part see how different things are now—that the people in their current life, including the therapist, respond to mistakes with understanding rather than humiliation. Together they recalled a recent mistake that resulted in support rather than shame (mismatch). Holding both realities together—the part's expectation of humiliation and this new evidence of safety and acceptance—allowed the original learning to update (revision). The client may have known on some level that mistakes don't lead to humiliation anymore, but through this process, that knowing could reach and update the part that had been holding the original fear.

Instead of challenging beliefs through reasoning alone, experiential approaches help people contact and engage the emotional truths that drive protective responses. In the presence of safety, new experience, and sustained attention, those emotional patterns can begin to change.

A client who learned, implicitly, that needing something means being weak may discover an emotional imprint that drives withdrawal or silence. When that emotional memory is met with warmth, acceptance, and alternative, disconfirming perspectives, the old expectation begins to loosen. Through repeated and meaningful contradiction, new ways of feeling and responding become possible—because the emotional memory itself has been revised.

Closing Reflection

When patterns persist despite insight, the cause is often unrevised emotional learning. These schemas formed in context, helped us adapt at some point in our lives, and may remain active in implicit memory long after conditions have changed.

Experiential approaches that support memory reconsolidation offer a way to reach the emotional learnings that keep old patterns in place. By engaging these schemas directly, and introducing new, contradictory experiences, therapy can shift how those patterns live in the nervous system.

This depth of change typically unfolds over time, requiring patience and trust in the therapeutic relationship. While some shifts can happen quickly, lasting transformation often emerges

through steady, compassionate engagement with these deep patterns.

This depth of work isn't always necessary. But for patterns that haven't shifted through insight, engaging emotional memory is key. Reaching emotional memory allows change to take root at the source, transforming not just our thoughts, but the very schemas that shape our experiences.

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