

Introduction to The Schema of Enmeshment

When the Schema of Enmeshment is activated in our system, our sense of individuality starts to blur. It becomes increasingly difficult to know where we end and where someone else begins. We struggle to identify our own thoughts, feelings, preferences, or desires without considering how they might impact the person we are emotionally connected to. At the core of this schema is the belief that love and connection require closeness to the point of fusion, that being emotionally tied to someone means we must align with them completely. We lose the ability to recognize, and then stand in, our own values and beliefs, without fearing that it will upset the balance of the relationship.

This schema is often misinterpreted as love or loyalty. But beneath the surface lies a deep fear of rejection, abandonment, or emotional disconnection. To avoid these threats, we learn to suppress our individuality. We hold back our opinions, silence our preferences, and bend ourselves around the needs and expectations of others. The cost of maintaining peace becomes the gradual erosion of our sense of self.

“I would adjust my values or priorities to match the people around me, not out of manipulation, but because a part of me believed that love required sameness, and any difference might lead to disconnection.”

~Steven Morris RP.

The roots of Enmeshment often trace back to childhood relationships with caregivers who were emotionally intrusive, overly involved, or boundaryless in the name of love. These early dynamics can be subtle. A parent may treat the child like a confidante or best friend, seek emotional reassurance from them, or expect the child to mirror their worldview. Autonomy may be discouraged, or worse, punished. Over time, the child learns that love and closeness require self-abandonment.

The Schema of Enmeshment wasn't the contextual framework for some of my dominant stories, but it definitely showed up as part of a cascading effect from the more primary schema of Defectiveness. When active, it often pulled in other overriding Schema, things like Social Isolation, Failure, and Abandonment. The maladaptive, ineffective beliefs connected to these stories created a deep need to be accepted and valued. This need would sometimes push me to blur the lines of my identity to maintain closeness with other people.

I would adjust my values or priorities to match the people around me, not out of manipulation, but because a part of me believed that love required sameness, and any difference might lead to disconnection. I'd shift certain things that I liked, wanted to do, or was into, just so I felt the same as the person I was trying to get close to.

I didn't live in this schema all the time, but when it was triggered, it was often subtle. I'd soften my opinions, stay quiet about my needs, or prioritize someone else's emotional comfort to keep the connection intact. Looking back, I can see that these behaviours weren't just about getting along. They were ways I tried to avoid activating the shame of feeling defective, the pain of feeling unwanted, and the fear of ultimately being abandoned.

“We may become overly responsible for someone else's emotions or defer to their views, even when they conflict with our values.”

~Steven Morris RP

When this schema is active, we often find ourselves struggling with decisions, unsure if our preferences are truly our own. We feel anxious or guilty when prioritizing our needs. We may become overly responsible for someone else's emotions or defer to their views, even when they conflict with our values. Over time, this fusing creates internal tension, resentment, and disconnection from the self. We may, avoid conflict at all costs, believing disagreement will lead to abandonment, feel responsible for other people's emotional wellbeing, lose sight of personal goals or interests in the pursuit of harmony, or fear individuality, because it feels like a threat to the relationship. The result is often a deep internal loneliness, even in relationships that seem close from the outside.

Recovery from Enmeshment is about reclaiming our individuality without abandoning connection. At The Liberation Place, this begins with values clarification. We explore the questions: Who do I want to be in the important areas of my life? What do I believe in? What matters to me? Using DBT skills, we learn to slow things down and build awareness. STOP gives us space to notice when we're blending with someone else's emotional state. Checking the Facts helps us assess whether the threat of rejection is real or a product of old stories. Planning Ahead to Build Mastery allows us to practice small, values-aligned actions that reinforce selfhood.

RAAVEN supports us in developing an internal narrative that separates love from self-sacrifice. We begin by recognizing the part that is afraid to stand alone. We acknowledge its fear of conflict or abandonment, and we appreciate that this part has been working hard to keep us safe. Through validation, we let it know that its fears make sense. We then educate this part about the strength that comes from authenticity and negotiate a committed action that reflects who we want to be.

Living the Life I Want to Live means being in relationships that allow for difference, not just sameness. It means choosing closeness that doesn't require us to disappear, and it means trusting that we can belong, not because we conform, but because we have the courage to show up as ourselves.

Next, let's check in to see how you relate to this Schema within your own personality system. 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 responsible for other people's emotions and find it difficult or even unsafe to make decisions or express needs that might upset or disappoint them.				
When I am not actively involved in someone else's life, their emotions, or needs, I feel lost, empty, or unsure of who I am.				

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 Enmeshment to you in your life? Add the 2 scores together to obtain 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 Enmeshment.

My Schema of Enmeshment has a prevalence score of ____/8.

On the next page, take the time to explore your experience of the Schema of Enmeshment. 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 Enmeshment impact your life when it is 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?
