

Understanding the Schema of Insufficient Self-control

Some of us never learned how to stay. Not emotionally. Not physically. Not long enough to feel what was hard for us to feel, or to follow through on what matters most. When discomfort hits, whether it's stress, boredom, shame, or grief, our system scrambles for the exit. We don't do this because we're weak. We do it because parts of us were never taught how to hold discomfort without collapsing or acting out. At The Liberation Place, we see this not as failure or defiance, it's not a character defect or a personality flaw, it's a survival strategy. The Schema of Insufficient Self-Control forms when structure felt like punishment, limits felt like rejection, or emotions felt too overwhelming to sit with. So instead of building tolerance, our system learned to escape. And it often learned to do it Fast.

"Lurking in the background, fuelling everything we do, is the Punitive Critic, who brings shame to the system, reinforcing a deeper sense of failure, which then fuels more impulsivity."

~Steven Morris RP

Escape then becomes a pattern. A Problem with Instant Gratification. Impulsivity, avoidance, procrastination, emotional blowups, or quitting before the work is done. Not because we don't care, but because the personality system doesn't believe we can stay. This schema often emerges in systems where there was inconsistent discipline, emotional invalidation, or over-accommodation. If we weren't supported and taught how to sit with discomfort, whether it was emotional, physical, or relational, we didn't develop the muscle of self-restraint. We developed ways to relieve the pressure fast, usually through immediate gratification, avoidance, or release.

When the schema is active, parts of us begin to resist structure. They push back against limits. They choose short-term relief over long-term growth. In the system, this might sound like:

- "I'll just do it later."
- "I can't help it."
- "This is too hard, I need to get away."
- "It doesn't matter anyway."

These are not excuses. They're internal signals. They tell us that a part of our system feels trapped or overwhelmed and doesn't believe we have the capacity to stay. Without awareness, we follow those parts into patterns that sabotage the very things we say we want, health, recovery, intimacy, even direction. For a long time, this schema was the context for one of my most familiar stories. I often tell people, as a child I ate candy alcoholically. In early adult life, and especially during the height of my alcohol use, I didn't just struggle with discomfort, I ran from it as fast as I could. If I was angry, I'd lash out or distract myself. If I was overwhelmed, I'd quit. If I was sad, I'd numb. My system didn't know how to sit still in the emotional storm.

When I was sober, this pattern didn't vanish, it just shifted. I found myself procrastinating, avoiding structure, breaking the promises I made to myself. At the same time, constantly wondering, "Why can't I just do the thing that I really want to do?" I was dominated by my inner critics, loud and shaming. Telling me I was undisciplined, weak, and a fraud. That voice didn't motivate me. It shut me down even further.

**"When we stop labeling ourselves as "weak" or
"undisciplined," we can begin to see what's
really happening."**

~Steven Morris RP.

Looking back, I can now understand that I wasn't resisting effort, I was resisting pain. I didn't believe I could survive the emotional weight of doing hard things without the instant relief I'd always relied on. What looked like laziness was actually a system full of parts who didn't yet know how to stay present with emotional discomfort.

And that's what I had to change.

It wasn't about willpower. It was about building emotional muscle. About learning to pause, to breathe, to sit with urges without acting on them. To show those parts of me, especially the ones that thought everything would fall apart if I didn't escape, that we could actually stay.

This isn't about forcing discipline. It's about growing up emotionally. Teaching our parts that we no longer need to be led by urges or fear. That we can show up, stay grounded, and follow through, not perfectly, but consistently enough to become someone we can trust.

This is not about control. It's about capacity.

It's not about punishment, it's about presence.

And it's not about shame, it's about choice.

Living the life we want to live doesn't come from doing what feels good in the moment. It comes from doing what's meaningful, even when it doesn't.

That's the kind of freedom we're here to reclaim.

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 frequently choose short-term comfort or relief, even when I know it will sabotage my long-term goals, values, or self-respect.				
I often feel overwhelmed by frustration, boredom, or emotional discomfort, and struggle to stay present without distracting, avoiding, or reacting impulsively.				

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 Insufficient Self-control 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 Insufficient Self-control.

My Schema of Insufficient Self-control has a prevalence score of ___/8.

On the next page, take the time to explore your experience of the Schema of Insufficient Self-control. 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 Insufficient Self-control 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?
