

Understanding the Schema of Punitiveness

The schema of Punitiveness is one of the many Early Maladaptive Schemas that's identified in Schema Therapy. It's a rigid, critical, and moralistic belief system that insists things like flaws, character defects, and mistakes, whether our own or others', deserve to be punished. People with this schema often think things like:

- "You made a mistake—you deserve to suffer"
- "People need to learn the hard way."
- Or "Being soft means you're being weak."

When we're trapped in this world, compassion is a way of being that feels unsafe. Forgiveness feels wrong. And emotional vulnerability? That feels like a threat that carries a level of danger that flips us instantly into a state of emotional distress. This schema drives people to be harsh on themselves and unforgiving toward others, and it makes close, emotionally safe relationships incredibly difficult to maintain. As with all of our maladaptive and ineffective stories, the schema of punitiveness is usually rooted in our childhood. When we grow up in environments where caregivers are critical, demanding, or emotionally cold we are notably more vulnerable to its development in our system.

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~Steven Morris RP

When it comes to my own personal experience with the schema of punitiveness, it's one that, to be perfectly honest with you, I wouldn't say is a part of my prominent internal storylines. At the same time, it is definitely one of the cascading schema's that regularly follows on from the activation of fear within my system. Particularly when this fear is connected to the possibility of the toxic guilt and shame that's associated with my primary schema of defectiveness.

When it's in full flow, my schema of punitiveness shows up with a rigid set of beliefs regarding the need to follow rules, to obey the law, and to never deviate from the required social norms connected to my current situation. My internal punitive, and demanding critics are going through the process of pointing out their own unique, and wildly tainted perspective, inside of my personality system. When this narrative is aimed at the external world, it leaves me filled with frustration, resentment, anger, and sometimes rage directed solely at the people around me.

It's not acceptable, they need to be punished, and they shouldn't be allowed to get away with what it is that they're currently doing! I'm trapped in the ruminating thoughts connected to my desire to control. Thoughts that, if I'm not careful, debilitate my system to the point of not being able to function in an effective, or adaptive way at all. When the narrative is directed internally, it usually leaves me with that sense of toxic guilt and shame I mentioned before. Generally regarding my own capacity to live up to the expectations I have rigidly set for myself and the rules I'm supposed to follow. These stories can show up in so many different ways. But more often than not, it's in what you might call more mundane, day to day, social situations.

Things like visiting the grocery store, waiting in line to purchase an item, or simply driving from one destination to another. And, when I'm not aware, the impact of this need to punish myself, or the people around me, for not following the rules that I perceive to be in place, is one that usually stops me from being who I want to be, in the area of life I'm in at that particular point in time.

“Without a parental figure that is able to be compassionate, empathetic, and accepting, we don't internalize a nurturing voice, instead we develop an extremely harsh Internal Critic.”

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The following are some examples of a few common childhood experiences that we recognize can be major contributors to the creation of this schema:

- **Harsh discipline or criticism:**
 - As children, if we're often shamed or scolded for what are small or actually extremely minor mistakes, we quickly learn that imperfection equals punishment.
- **Emotional invalidation**
 - If we hear things being pushed on us like, “Stop crying or I'll give you something to cry about,” “Grow up and get over it” or the classic “Suck it up buttercup,” often enough, we start judging ourselves for having any kind of feelings.
- **Rigid morality:**
 - If our caregivers view the world in very black and white terms, holding everything as absolute with little to no flexibility, even small errors can begin to feel like huge moral failures.

- **Lack of warmth and forgiveness:**

- Without a parental figure that is able to be compassionate, empathetic, and accepting, we don't internalize a nurturing voice, instead we develop an extremely harsh Internal Critic.

- **Unmet Needs:**

- So, at the root of this particular schema are two unmet emotional needs: unconditional love and emotional validation.

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
When either myself or others make mistakes, I often feel that punishment or harsh consequences are necessary to make things right.				
I often find that I struggle to forgive myself, or other people, even for small errors or things that cause unintentional harm.				

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 Punitiveness 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 Punitiveness.

My Schema of Punitiveness has a prevalence score of ___/8.

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