

Understanding the Schema of Subjugation

In the philosophy of The Liberation Place, we see our schemas not as diagnoses or labels, but as stories that we carry in our system. Stories that are formed through our early unmet needs, shaped by the environments we were raised in, and then repeated through the behaviors we adopt to survive. One of the most painful and limiting of these personal stories is the Schema of Subjugation. It tells us that our needs, our feelings, our preferences, and our beliefs are dangerous to express, and that the safest thing to do is to keep silent, to comply with what others want, and hide our sense of Self. This is not about kindness or humility, it's about fear. Even though at times subjugation might look like selflessness on the outside, its roots are much deeper and darker. To free ourselves from its grip, we must understand where it comes from, how it impacts our lives, and how we can use the skills of DBT and the guiding light of values and beliefs to respond differently.

“The Schema of Subjugation plays out in subtle but usually destructive ways. We often gravitate towards relationships where our needs are consistently unmet due to a comfortable feeling of familiarity.”

~Steven Morris RP

The origins of this schema are almost always relational. Many of us grew up in households or around important people, where love was believed to be conditional. Maybe we had primary caregivers who were controlling, unpredictable, narcissistic, or emotionally immature. These were adults who may have responded to our needs with anger, guilt-tripping, or manipulation. Some of us were praised only when we were “good,” quiet, or helpful. Others were punished for emotional expression or told that we were selfish for wanting autonomy. In environments like this, we learned to adapt. We learned to read the room, to stay small, and to avoid triggering other people. Over time, our story of subjugation becomes part of our personality map. We forget that we once had a voice, and we actually begin to believe that we never deserved one in the first place.

For me personally, the schema of subjugation was never the dominant force that was shaping my behaviour. At the same time, that doesn't mean it Didn't leave a mark. I learned very early on in life to silence certain needs, and definitely certain opinions. This wasn't because I believed I didn't matter, but often because it just felt easier to avoid any type of conflict, or particularly, any type of disapproval. Overtime, these quiet compromises turned into quiet stories. Things like, “don't rock the boat,” “it's not worth the fight,” and “just shut up and keep the peace” became regular internal experiences.

And while these weren't loud life defining stories, they lingered in the background, adding to the way I showed up in relationships, and defining how much of my Self I felt it was ok for me to express. When combined with the more dominant stories connected to my Schemas of Defectiveness, Failure, Social Isolation, and Abandonment, this would send my internal world into a state of chaos that felt like a kind of pressure cooker. Emotions and feelings that were simmering at a low boiling point underneath the surface, waiting to explode at any moment, and usually playing out in the activation of my Angry Child. That part of my personality that would protect me from vulnerability by screaming for attention in a desperate attempt to be heard and understood.

“This wasn't because I believed that I didn't matter, or I wasn't important in any way. It was often because it just felt easier to avoid any type of conflict, or particularly, any type of personal disapproval.”

~Steven Morris RP.

Healing from this schema begins with building awareness. Through the skill of mindfulness, we can start to notice the moments when our voice disappears, when we feel the pressure to agree, when our body tenses as someone else speaks, or when we catch ourselves suppressing truth in the name of peace. These moments are not failures; they are invitations. We learn to check in with our internal baseline throughout the day, as we do in our STOP practice, to notice when our system is shifting into distress. If we find ourselves falling into submission, we pause, acknowledge the emotional and physical signals, and ask: “Whose voice am I silencing right now? What am I afraid will happen if I speak?”

The distress of this schema can be intense, especially when it's tied to longstanding patterns of emotional invalidation or trauma. This is where our Distress Tolerance skills become essential. We are not always ready to speak up immediately, to advocate for our needs, but we can learn to stay with the emotional discomfort long enough to understand it.

The use of our grounding skills like the 5-Senses technique, or the practice of self-validation exercises like the RAAVEN, can help us hold space within our personality system to regulate our emotions during moments of fear. We remind our system that the emotion is valid, that the fear is old and not tied to current events, and that we now have the capability to respond in different ways. Building this capacity for emotional endurance allows us to sit in the gap between our fear and our reaction. Observing the situation, both internally and externally, long enough for us to make a more effective personal choice.

To shift from reactive to responsive behavior, we also need to remain with our window of emotional regulation. Often, the Schema of Subjugation is accompanied by feelings of shame, sadness, anger, or fear. We can get flooded with emotion when trying to assert our boundaries, to speak up for our values and beliefs. This makes it extremely difficult to speak clearly or act consistently in effective and adaptive ways. Using the skills of DBT, we begin to name our emotional state, to understand it's behavioural purpose, and to track the personal stories we're subconsciously connecting to the current situation.

We can apply skills like Taking an Opposite Action: if the emotion tells us to stay silent, we experiment with speaking up, to practice Self Advocacy. If the stories are telling us to agree, we practice pausing through the use of the STOP Skill, to reflect before we act. Little by little, we teach our system that it is safe to be whole, to own our true core values. That it's ok to have wants and needs, to hold boundaries, and when we express these things, we can still be loved.

“Every time we choose to show up with courage, skill, and self-awareness, we loosen the grip of our old stories and write new chapters for our lives, ones in which we are genuinely and authentically free.”

~Steven Morris RP

Finally, when we use the skills of Interpersonal Effectiveness, it allows us to take these shifts in, what were previously rigid perspectives within our internal personality system and bring them to our important external relationship dynamics. We practice asserting ourselves clearly and respectfully. We learn to ask for what we need without apologizing for our existence, to say no without explanation, and to offer compromise without abandoning our true sense of Self. We stop expecting others to mind-read our silence, resenting them for not knowing what it is we want and need, and we start speaking up, using our voice as a bridge to emotional and personal connection. We choose relationships where our wants and needs are welcomed, where our boundaries are respected, and where we actually feel safe to be seen and be known.

As we do this work, we return again and again to the central principle at The Liberation Place: that we are working to Live the Life We Want to Live, by Being the Person We Want to Be, in the Areas of Life that Matter Most to us, according to our own values system. The Schema Subjugation keeps us trapped in a life that's shaped by fear. But recovery, and I mean it in the truest sense of the word, is the process of coming back into our sense of Self. It's reclaiming our own agency, it's finding our voice, and it's choosing to live in alignment with our values, not just conforming to our fears.

We are not here to serve the comfort of others at the cost of who we want to be. We're here to live a life of integrity, connection, and purpose. And every time we choose to show up with courage, skill, and self-awareness, we loosen the grip of our old stories and write new chapters for our lives, ones in which we are genuinely and authentically free.

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 I feel upset, hurt, or uncomfortable in a relationship, do I tend to stay silent or push my feelings down out of fear of conflict, guilt, or being seen as difficult.				
I often feel invisible, resentful, or emotionally exhausted from constantly meeting other people's needs while feeling like mine don't matter, or that I'm not even sure what my needs are.				

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 Subjugation 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 Subjugation.

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

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