

Everyone has a basic need for things like safety, acceptance, freedom, and reasonable limits. If these core needs aren't met during childhood, people develop schemas. Schemas are negative themes or patterns that define your life, shaping how you see and respond to experiences in unhelpful ways.

People with a mistrust/abuse schema expect that other people will hurt, manipulate, cheat, or take advantage of them. As a result, they tend to be guarded and suspicious. People with this schema have often been hurt in the past, which makes them mistrustful of others.



Mistrust/abuse is associated with a variety of difficulties:

- Anger
- Bipolar disorder
- Body image problems
- Depression
- Eating disorders
- Health anxiety
- Insomnia
- Pain
- Personality disorders
- Relationship problems
- Self-harm
- Social anxiety
- Trauma



Recognizing your mistrust/abuse schema

Schemas have different components, and can be active or inactive. Triggers for mistrust/abuse include connecting with people or sharing things about yourself. Signs this schema is active include:

Thinking:

- “I don't trust them – I need to protect myself.”
- “I should hurt them before they hurt me.”
- “I need to test how trustworthy they are.”



Feeling:

- Suspicious of other people's motives.
- Anxious about getting hurt or being betrayed.
- Lonely and isolated.



Focusing on:

- Indications you are being lied to or manipulated.
- What other people might want to take from you.
- Signs you are being cheated or exploited.



Remembering:

- Being abused, exploited, or bullied as a child.
- Witnessing abuse or cruelty toward others.
- Grownups telling you not to trust anyone.



Coping with your mistrust/abuse schema

Schemas can be painful. People learn to cope with mistrust/abuse in different ways: by accepting it ('surrender'), avoiding it ('escape'), or acting like the opposite is true ('counter-attacking'). However, these coping styles tend to strengthen schemas over time.

You might surrender to this schema by:

- Having untrustworthy people in your life.
- Being wary and mistrustful of others.
- Tolerating abuse or mistreatment.



You might escape this schema by:

- Keeping people at a distance.
- Not sharing much about yourself.
- Avoiding intimacy or being vulnerable.



You might counter-attack this schema by:

- Mistreating other people.
- Fantasizing about hurting others.
- Trusting people too much or too quickly.



You might cope in other ways, such as:

- Pretending you are sick or fragile so other people don't hurt you.
- Using humor to prevent harm from coming to you.



Healing your mistrust/abuse schema

Growing up in an abusive environment often leads to a mistrust/abuse schema. For example, you might have been mistreated, manipulated, betrayed, bullied, humiliated, or discriminated against as a child. Witnessing abuse or exploitation, or being told not to trust others, can also contribute to this schema.

Developing trust in yourself and other people will help heal this schema. This might involve finding trustworthy people to connect with, knowing when to take risks and give others the benefit of the doubt, and learning how to stand up for yourself when you need to. Revisiting your past experiences can also help you move on from traumatic events and learn that they weren't your fault.