

## **Schema Focused Therapy**

Matilde Salazar

Alliance Graduate School of Counseling, Alliance University

GNC731: NOS Cognitive Behavioral Therapy-CBT

Dr. Elaine Eng

November 15, 2022

## Schema Focused Therapy

According to Leahy (2017), personal schemas are patterns of how we process information in a biased way that guides our attention, memory, values, and perspective of the world, ourselves, and other people, especially in relationship interactions (Leahy, 2017). These consistent ways of thinking are learned and formed over time, usually to cope with life and different environments. Therefore, these beliefs become automatic, unconscious, prone to confirmation bias as well as self-sustaining and for this reason can be a challenge to change (Leahy, 2017). Since, schemas are adaptive, a person may possess overdeveloped schemas that produce compensatory behaviors or underdeveloped schemas that avoid situations in different areas of life (Leahy, 2017). However, these adaptive responses become maladaptive when they become prominent or excessive, especially for those vulnerable to depression, anxiety, or anger issues (Leahy, 2017). Leahy (2017) provides approaches in schema therapy that counselors may use to assist clients in drawing out and identifying schemas, investigating foundational events, as well as picking up on patterns of schema avoidance, compensation, and self-preservation. The end goal according to Leahy (2017) is to reverse “the rigidity and pervasiveness of these schemas using a wide range of techniques” (p. 9).

In the book, *“Hold on, but don't hold still: Hope and humor from my seriously flawed life”*, author Kristina Kuzmic, shares lessons and memoirs of her life as a mother (Kuzmic, 2020). Throughout her recollections, Kristina reveals several negative personal schemas. One of these was that of being a failure and with no purpose in life, usually triggered when she faced severe disappointments or challenges. Some of the thoughts associated with this schema are, “it's definitely not changing the world... I'm definitely still a total worthless loser” and some repetitive thoughts that came to her were, “I am a complete failure. Every idea and thought I

have is useless. I am useless. I have nothing to offer. I don't know how to do anything" (Kuzmic, 2020, p. 48). This schema appears to be associated with Kristina's perspective regarding her level of competence. Her vocabulary indicates an all-or-nothing extreme train of thought; often using words like, complete, nothing, definitely, total, anything and forever or always in her phrases (Leahy, 2017).

A useful technique to assist Kristina with challenging this schema would be the "Defining the Terms" (Leahy, 2017, p.51), because it is important for her to first become aware of what the terms such as loser, failure, and useless mean to her. This will allow her to examine the validity of the words she is using to label herself and see how she may be overgeneralizing the term when it comes to applying it to herself. It would also be beneficial to use the "Creating False Dichotomies" technique to show Kristina how to search for various alternatives to situations to correct logical errors (Leahy, 2017, p. 160). By using words such as sometimes, often, or occasionally, the client can more accurately quantify and evaluate the situation or themselves more objectively. As a result, her thinking can become less biased, more flexible, and reduce her anxiety. To apply this to an event and see how she can change her perspective it would be effective to use the "Pie Chart" technique (Leahy, 2017, p. 321). In this manner she can move away from personalizing her disappointments or setbacks and consider that other things contribute to the outcome of a negative event, not just her. This technique is a good way to normalize situations without invalidating the clients' emotions, because they are still part of the equation. Finally, using the "Explaining Schematic Processing" technique it would be beneficial to help Kristina understand how she developed this schema about feeling like a failure but also serve to prepare Kristina for the next schema that is developmentally focused (Leahy, 2017, p.368).

A second schema Kristina showed was tied to her poor sense of self-esteem, which led to her keeping quiet about bad things that happened to her. This schema manifested itself when the show producers took over and discarded her suggestions. She states that “when you’ve spent most of your life believing your voice doesn’t matter, it’s easy to slide back into that familiar way of thinking about yourself and your place in the world” (Kuzmic, 2020, p. 25). This schema may have been established when she was a child. The reason for this is that when Kristina shared about her childhood trauma of sexually abused, she says, “I never seem to outgrow my inability to fight back or even speak up” (Kuzmic, 2020, p.64). This schema resurfaced when the talent manager sexually assaulted her as well, she says “He acted as if he owned me, like I was just a body with no voice, no say, no feelings” (Kuzmic, 2020, p. 65). This negative self-schema may have been reinforced during her teenage years when she was made fun of in school. She states that “I was certain I was always going to be someone others looked down on, someone people pitied” (Kuzmic, 2020, p.17), and when reminiscing with her friend Jonathan about what he remembered the most about her during her divorce, she says “I expected him to tell me how pathetic my life was, how he pitied me” but instead he replied, “The thing I remember the most, Kristina, is how much you hated yourself” (Kuzmic, 2020, p.43).

According to research done by Mohammed (2016), if a person has a negative schema, often developed during their childhood, they will have low self-esteem and as a result be more susceptible to anxiety disorders. To help Kristina address her low self-esteem schema it may be effective to deal with how she came up with these maladaptive assumptions or rules about herself. The “Using Case Conceptualization” technique could help her discover how the automatic thoughts she has are related to one another (Leahy, 2017, p. 114). To assist with this task the “Activating Early Memories Related to Schemas” can connect Kristina’s current anxiety

provoking emotions and thoughts to events that could have influenced their formation (Leahy, 2017, p. 375). To encourage Kristina to have a more balanced and positive perspective of herself, using the “Setting a Zero Point for Evaluation” would provide her with an opportunity to see what values and qualities she does have to offer or can honestly appreciate about herself.

Another schema that was prevalent throughout Kristina’s book was that of her being a worrier. Kristina recounts her childhood experiences with her grandmother, Baka, who she considered to be a warrior but also a worrier (Kuzmic, 2020). It appears that from a very young age (for as long as she can remember) Kristina learned from her grandmother that she also was a worrier. She recalls Baka saying to her, “You worry. You worry too much. I’ve spent my entire life worrying. I don’t want the same for you” (Kuzmic, 2020, p. 96). Despite this warning from her grandmother, Kristina says that she worried about things throughout her life up to her early twenties, and even more so when she became a mother. She states that, “I kept worry around, kind of like an old friend you know is destructive but who has been your friend since childhood, so it’s hard to part ways. Because what’s familiar, even if it’s unhealthy, becomes comfortable” (Kuzmic, 2020, p. 98). This describes well what Leahy (2017) says about how pervasive and lifelong schemas can be. Kristina explained that people fool themselves into believing that worrying is protective or preventive to be prepared for the worst-case scenario. Leahy (2017) agrees but adds that another problem for worriers is that they believe “worry will result in negative consequences, such as illness or insanity, and that worrying must be controlled or eliminated” (p. 250). Therefore, worrying becomes the problem.

For Kristina to break free from constant worrying and ruminations she can be guided to use the “Taking Yourself Out of It/Disappear” technique, to remove herself from the center of things and thinking that everything that happens is dependent on her (Leahy, 2017, p.280). To

reduce anxiety associated with worst case scenario outcomes the “Imagining Better Outcomes” can validate Kristina’s worries but consider them more realistically (Leahy, 2017, p. 261”. Kristina says that she chooses to “embrace what is” and just sit with it (Kuzmic, 2020, p. 91), which is an example of Leahy’s (2017) “Acceptance of Thought” technique. Consequently, instead of trying to control what she cannot or prevent things from happening, she uses the “What I Can Still Do” technique to change her perspective, in the case that something should happen (Leahy, 2017, p. 326). Since Kristina may worry about many things it would be pertinent to have her use Leahy’s (2017) “Examining Your Life Using a More Positive Schema” technique (p. 383), can show her how to evaluate and observe various areas of her life that can change for the better if she learns to see things differently, more positively.

Koppel & Berntsen (2013) stated that, “The cultural life script serves as a cognitive schema in how it structures memory and its phenomenological properties” (p.968) and are pertinent when examining cognitive processing in schemas. Kristina’s schemas appear to have been formed at an early age and influenced by several cultural factors, such as her coming from a European Croatian culture, her close relationship to her maternal grandmother, living through a war as a tween, being a teenage immigrant, and having a traumatic sexual experience. As an adult, her divorce, career issues and sexual assault may have served to trigger and reinforce various negative core beliefs about herself and others. Kristina barely talked about her family of origin dynamics (her relationship with her parents and sister) but mentions that she “wasn’t a big reader growing up, much to the dismay of my scholarly parents” (Kuzmic, 2020, p.7). Perhaps feeling she disappointed her parents due to her different personality contributed to the development in her feelings of incompetency or rejection. Kristina also mentioned that her grandmother was a woman of faith but says for herself, “I won’t be able to pray my fears away,

the way my grandmother tried to do" (Kuzmic, 2020, p. 100). It is not clear if Kristina says this in an antagonistic way or just as a matter of fact. These are some areas I would like to explore further with her.

### References

Koppel, J., & Berntsen, D. (2013). The cultural life script as cognitive schema: How the life script shapes memory for fictional life stories. *Memory*, 22(8), 949–971.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09658211.2013.859269>

Kuzmic, K. (2020). *Hold on, but don't hold still: Hope and humor from my seriously flawed life*. Penguin Publishing Group.

Leahy, R. L. (2017). *Cognitive therapy techniques, second edition: A practitioner's guide*. Guilford Publications.

Mohammed, A. (2016). Negative Cognitive Schemata, Low Self-Esteem and Anxiety: A Theoretical View. *Indian Journal Of Health And Wellbeing*, 7(5), 550-552. Retrieved from <https://www.i-scholar.in/index.php/ijhw/article/view/120388>