Life Traps

Understanding your own blueprint, and how to outgrow it.

Austan Sloan • Recover-You

A note before you begin. This guide asks you to look at beliefs formed in childhood, and the eleven descriptions in it tend to land harder than people expect. That's normal, and it's also a reason to go slowly. Nothing here is a diagnostic tool or a score. If a description resonates, treat it as a starting point for exploration, ideally with a schema-informed therapist, rather than a conclusion about who you are.

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Unearthing Your Blueprint

During my most recent stay in treatment, my caseworker handed me a questionnaire and asked if I wanted to try it. I flipped through it, and the second I saw questions about childhood, I could feel my heartbeat in my jaw. I handed it back and said, "No. I'm not ready."

It wasn't the questionnaire I was avoiding. It was the border crossing it represented: from spending my entire adult life insisting my childhood didn't leave a mark, to sitting down and actually checking. That wasn't a small step. It felt like opening a door I'd kept barricaded for thirty years.

If this feels heavy, that's the right response. Schema work isn't a gentle journaling prompt. Sometimes beginning is the whole act of courage. The questionnaire can wait. The decision to look can't.

For years I felt like I was living on autopilot. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't override it. I was constantly reacting, never choosing. In addiction that meant cycling through the same outcomes on a loop: mornings loaded with regret, days in damage control, evenings convincing myself it would be different next time. I genuinely believed these reactions were just who I was. It never seriously occurred to me that these were patterns I had learned. And anything learned can be unlearned.

This is where life traps, also called schemas, come in. They aren't passing thoughts or bad habits. They're deep, enduring beliefs about yourself, others, and the world, formed when core emotional needs went unmet in childhood: safety, affection, validation, guidance, the simple freedom to exist without having to earn it. Those early gaps became the blueprint for how I interpreted everything as an adult. And until I understood them, I kept playing out the same script without realizing I was following one.

Schema work belongs to everyone, incidentally. These patterns show up in families, workplaces, friendships, relationships, and leadership, not only in trauma or addiction. We all build blueprints early in life. Schema work gives you the tools to examine yours and decide which parts still deserve to be there.

What Are Schemas?

A schema isn't a thought you can catch and correct. It's deeper than that. A lens installed in childhood that filters everything you perceive afterward. Schemas form from trauma, neglect, overcontrol, emotional inconsistency, or the quieter kinds of invalidation that erode a child's sense of safety and identity without ever leaving a visible mark.

> *Think of them as the blueprint beneath the house. You can renovate rooms, repaint walls, replace the furniture. But until the blueprint changes, the house keeps getting rebuilt the same way.*

Different relationships. Different jobs. Different substances. Same blueprint underneath.

Different sources categorize schemas a little differently. Dr. Jeffrey Young's clinical framework identifies eighteen maladaptive schemas. In Reinventing Your Life, Young and Klosko group them into eleven life traps for everyday use. The number differs. The meaning doesn't.

When core needs go unmet early enough, we adapt in the only ways available to us at the time. Those adaptations calcify. They stop feeling like responses to circumstance and start feeling like the truth about who you are. Less like survival strategies. More like personality. Less like trauma responses. More like "this is just how I am." Schema work is the process of learning to tell the difference.

The Eleven Life Traps

How to read this list. These descriptions are drawn from Young and Klosko's Reinventing Your Life and are offered for self-reflection only, not as a diagnostic tool. If something resonates, that's a starting point for personal exploration, not a clinical conclusion. Some will hit immediately. Others won't land until later, or until something else shifts first. The point isn't to collect them all. It's to notice which ones have the strongest pull right now.

1 — Abandonment

Fear that people you depend on will leave. In addiction, that can mean clinging to unhealthy partners, or sabotaging closeness before they can hurt you.

— Panic or anger when someone pulls away, cancels, or goes quiet.
— Reading abandonment into small things: a short reply, a shift in tone.
— Clinging tightly, or leaving first so you can't be left.
— Finding it hard to be alone without sensing something is wrong.

2 — Mistrust and Abuse

Belief that others will lie, betray, or exploit you. In addiction, that can mean keeping your guard up, isolating, or gravitating toward people who reinforce the mistrust.

— Waiting for the catch, sure that kindness has a hidden cost.
— Keeping your guard up even with people you want to trust.
— Testing people, or bracing to be used, lied to, or betrayed.
— Feeling safest when no one gets too close.

3 — Emotional Deprivation

Belief that your need for love, care, and attunement will never really be met. In addiction, you may look stable on the outside while running on empty inside, reaching for substances or chaos because nothing has ever felt like enough.

— A quiet sense that no one really understands you.
— Rarely asking for comfort, sure it won't come anyway.
— Feeling unseen or empty even inside relationships.
— Drawn to people who can't fully show up for you.

4 — Social Exclusion

Feeling fundamentally different, or like you don't quite belong anywhere. In addiction, even recovery spaces don't fix it. You can be in a room full of people who've been through the same things and still feel like you're watching from behind glass.

— Feeling like an outsider even among people who care.
— Watching from behind glass in groups and rooms.
— Sensing you're fundamentally different or don't belong.
— Holding back from belonging before you can be rejected.

5 — Dependence

Belief that you cannot handle life without constant help or direction. In addiction, that can mean handing your power to others and then resenting them for it, or rebelling, falling apart, and confirming what you already believed.

— Second-guessing ordinary decisions and seeking reassurance.
— Feeling overwhelmed by responsibilities others seem to manage.
— Handing decisions to other people, then resenting the outcome.
— A background belief that you couldn't cope on your own.

6 — Vulnerability

Conviction that something bad is always about to happen. Not a passing worry. A baseline. The threat doesn't have to be real to feel imminent. In addiction, substances become the only thing that reliably turns the alarm down.

— A constant low hum of "something bad is about to happen."
— Catastrophizing health, money, or safety.
— Needing control to feel okay, and rattled when you lose it.
— Calm only when the alarm is artificially turned down.

7 — Defectiveness

Core shame that you are broken, unlovable, or fundamentally flawed. In addiction, that can mean wearing masks, hiding, or sabotaging success because deep down you don't believe you deserve it.

— A core sense of being broken, flawed, or unlovable.
— Hiding the real you, certain you'd be rejected if seen.
— Deflecting praise; sabotaging good things when they arrive.
— A harsh, relentless inner critic.

8 — Failure

Belief that you will never measure up or succeed. In addiction, that can mean giving up before trying, convinced you'll blow it anyway. The schema doesn't need to be right. It just needs to go unchallenged long enough to act like it is.

— Assuming you'll fall short before you even begin.
— Measuring yourself against others and coming up short.
— Giving up early, or not trying, to avoid proving it true.
— Feeling like a fraud on the occasions you do succeed.

9 — Subjugation

Belief that you must suppress your needs or face rejection or punishment. In addiction, that can mean saying yes when you mean no, letting resentment build, then escaping through substances.

— Saying yes when you mean no.
— Going quiet to keep the peace.
— Resentment that builds silently, then leaks out sideways.
— A sense that your needs don't matter or aren't safe to voice.

10 — Unrelenting Standards

The belief that nothing you do is ever quite enough. In addiction, that can mean overworking, pushing through, performing competence you don't feel, then using substances to survive the gap between who you're pretending to be and how you actually feel.

— Nothing you do ever feels like quite enough.
— Driven by "should"; rarely satisfied by "done."
— Overworking, and struggling to rest without guilt.
— Tying your worth to output and performance.

11 — Entitlement

Belief that rules don't apply to you, paired with a genuine difficulty respecting limits. In addiction, that can mean pushing boundaries, rationalizing destructive choices, and feeling strangely exempt from consequences. Right up until you're not.

— Chafing at rules, limits, or being told no.
— Trouble with patience, boundaries, or delayed gratification.
— Feeling exempt from consequences that apply to everyone else.
— Pushing past limits, then rationalizing it afterward.

What I Found Beneath the Labels

I did eventually go back to the questionnaire. Once I knew I would be tackling my trauma with trauma-specific therapy, my thinking was simple: if I was going in, I had to go all the way.

Abandonment was the loudest result, followed by mistrust and abuse. The questionnaire also suggested that unrelenting standards played a major role, and at first I believed it. It fit what I could see on the surface: the pressure, the performance, and the inability to ever feel like I had done enough. Only after some serious emotional excavation did I realize that defectiveness was closer to the root. The standards were not the wound itself. They were part of how I tried to outrun it.

That changed what schema work meant for me. This was less about finding one hidden cause for everything and more about tracing the origins of shame. Shame had always felt like evidence about who I was. Schema work helped me see that it had been embodied through a harmful environment. It was something I had learned to carry, not proof of what I was.

The recognition was painful first and liberating second. I could finally trace behaviours that had followed me for as long as I could remember, including lying, stealing, and manipulation. I had assumed addiction created them. Instead, I found earlier and more basic roots in survival. Those behaviours came easily to me because, at one time, they had been necessary. That did not excuse the terrible things I did or remove my responsibility for them. It made the truth easier to face without treating every failure as proof of moral corruption.

The list can initially feel like an inventory of poisons coursing through you. But it offers the antidotes at the same time. I had no hope of changing a psychological pattern I could not correctly identify. Recognition did not mean I was more damaged than I realized. It meant I finally had an accurate map of what needed care.

Schemas do not operate in isolation. Working on one often loosens others. Sometimes starting with the one that feels most manageable, or even its ugly cousin when the biggest feels untouchable, is enough to shift the whole structure. You do not have to dismantle everything at once.

How We Respond to Life Traps

Once a life trap is installed, you do not just sit with it. You build an entire operating style around it. Young and Klosko describe three ways people adapt to schemas, coping styles that often mirror the nervous system's trauma responses. None of them resolve the underlying belief. Each makes sense in the short term, and each keeps the life trap in place.

1 — Surrender

Accepting the schema as if it's the truth and organizing your life around it. Someone with an abandonment schema stays in toxic relationships because being left feels more unbearable than the toxicity. In addiction, surrender looks like returning to the same destructive patterns because they're at least predictable. The schema tells you this is just how things go for you, and because you've never seriously challenged that, you keep proving it right.

2 — Escape (Avoidance)

Staying one step ahead of the schema so you never have to face it directly. Substances, busyness, distraction, dissociation: anything that buys enough distance from the feeling that you never have to register what it's actually about. In addiction, escape is the most efficient route available. Fast, reliable, immediately effective. The only problem is that the schema is still there every time the relief wears off, and slightly louder than before.

3 — Counterattack (Overcompensation)

Fighting the schema by performing its opposite with everything you have. Someone with a failure schema overworks compulsively, not because they enjoy it, but because stopping lets the fear catch up. In addiction, this can look like swinging from feeling worthless to performing invincibility: demanding control, chasing status, and insisting nothing is wrong. The performance is exhausting, and the wound underneath never gets touched. When the performance finally cracks, the fall can seem to confirm everything the schema said about you.

The Life Trap Loop: Addiction as the Last Link

For many people, addiction does not start with the substance. The substance is a late link in a longer chain: trigger, schema, coping response, and then the behaviour. Treatment has to stop the dangerous behaviour. Schema work asks what earlier links keep feeding it, because that is where another break in the chain may become possible.

Trigger: a friend doesn't text back.

Schema activated (abandonment): "They're pulling away. I'm going to be left."

Coping style (escape): "I can't hold this feeling. I need to shut it down."

Addictive behaviour: drinking to dull the panic, the loneliness, or the specific terror of being too much for someone to stay.

> *The substance wasn't the problem that started this. It was the solution that showed up at the end of a process that was already well underway.*

Rewiring the Pattern

Schemas formed for a reason, and that reason made sense given what was happening at the time. The work is not to erase them. It is to weaken their grip until they stop running the show automatically. The brain changes through repeated, intentional practice. Not through insight alone. Not through willpower. Through repetition, over time, with enough support.

Recognize: catch the schema as it activates. Name the story, the sensation, the pull toward the old response. You can't interrupt what you haven't noticed.

Challenge: ask whether this is actually happening right now, or whether your past is replaying itself through a present that just looks similar enough to trigger it. This is reality testing in practice.

Replace: choose a response aligned with your values and the person you are building toward, instead of one dictated by what you survived. Do it even when it feels wrong. Especially when it feels wrong.

Repeat that cycle enough times and the schema loses its automatic authority. It doesn't disappear, but it stops being the only voice in the room.

Before You Go

Reading about life traps and recognizing them in your own life are two very different experiences. The first feels intellectual. The second tends to feel like someone turned on a light in a room you've been navigating in the dark for years.

The descriptions here aren't a diagnostic tool. They're a mirror. If something in that list resonated, that's not a label. It's a signal that something worth exploring is closer to the surface than you may have realized.

A simple place to start: go back to the list and pick the one that didn't just make sense. Pick the one that made you slightly uncomfortable to read. Not the most relatable. The one with the faint pull of recognition you almost skipped past. Write it down. Then ask: where do I see this playing out right now, in a relationship, a pattern, a reaction I keep having? That's the thread. You don't need to unravel the whole sweater today.

Where this work actually lives. Reinventing Your Life by Jeffrey Young and Janet Klosko is the book this guide is built on. I was handed it in treatment and kept it: one of maybe three books from that period I still have. It was written for people doing this work in their own lives rather than for clinicians reading about it from a distance. If the descriptions above landed, that book is where the actual work begins. And if the recognition hits hard, a schema-informed therapist can take you places a page never could.

The descriptions here are doorways, not destinations. A page can create recognition. It can't walk you through what recognition opens up.

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Sources & Further Reading

These sources cover the origin of the schema framework, the eleven life traps used here, and the clinical evidence for schema therapy, including its application to substance use.

Young, J. E., & Klosko, J. S. (1993). Reinventing Your Life. Plume. *The self-help text this guide is built on, and the source of the eleven life traps and the three coping styles (surrender, avoidance, overcompensation) described here. Written for people doing this work in their own lives.*

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