

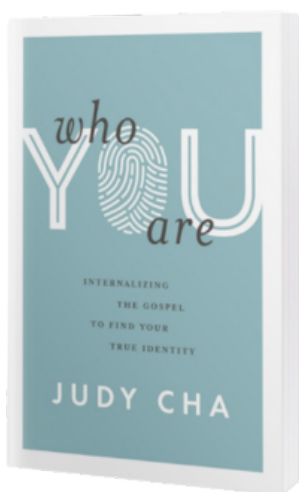


Making Sense of Someone's Story

How the System of Self Redemption Can Help
You Better Care for Others

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Redeemer Counseling values the insights offered about people in both theology and psychology. In our unique approach to counseling, the GIFT, the “**System of Self-Redemption**” is a conceptual lens that helps us deeply understand people’s stories and current struggles in the context of their life history. It not only helps us understand and organize the information better but also gives us direction as we consider goals for healing and growth. For a more in-depth look, please refer to my new book, *Who You Are: Internalizing the Gospel to Find Your True Identity*. Chapters 1 - 4 are especially helpful for understanding the System of Self Redemption.



In *Who You Are*, I explain that at the core of the System of Self Redemption is, “an innate shame that is internalized in all of us as the result of being born sinners” (p 9).

This shame-based identity gets shaped and personalized into a particular view of self as each person experiences unique core hurts living in a fallen world with pain, sin and suffering.

In order to survive the pain, we develop strategies, but these strategies become idolatrous – self-reliant ways to suppress our pain and counter our shame.

We recognize that these strategies may have helped the person we are caring for at times, but they also likely have failed to accomplish the self redemption that the person was unconsciously trying to achieve. “So, when we face situations in which our strategies fail, we experience painful **reactive emotions**, which lead us to act immediately with **behavioral reactions** to numb, distract and alleviate the pain.” (p 9) Our strategies will inevitably fail us. Only God’s grace can heal us and set us free from the vicious cycle of self-redemption to remove our shame.

Let us look at the System of Self Redemption in the context of a fictional case study.

Lily is relatively new to your small group. After finishing college and trying unsuccessfully to find work near home, she recently moved to the city for a job. She has struggled to make friends within or out of the group. You reach out to her and, though reluctant at first, over time, she opens up. She tells you that she is bored and lonely, that she just ends up watching a lot of Netflix, reading fantasy novels, and ordering comfort food online a few times a week. She says she feels awkward around other group members, since they seem to be more settled and connected while she feels so alone and unwanted. She is socially anxious at church, at her job, and in the group.

Lily has also told you a bit about her childhood. Growing up, she lived with her single mom and younger brother in a subsidized housing unit. They had to move there when she was seven, after her dad passed away while her mom was pregnant with her brother. Her mom worked full time. Her grandmother helped by watching her baby brother but she spent a lot of time watching TV, playing video games alone, and sleeping a lot. Lily struggled socially and academically.

The System of Self Redemption is a way you, as the small group leader, can organize Lily's story. It can help you make better sense of her struggles so that you can better contextualize the care to relieve her distress and deepen her healing and growth. In the diagram on the following page, you can follow along as we discuss Lily's personalized System of Self Redemption.

Lily's current struggles that you witness developed in the context of her history. You are likely to first hear or observe Lily's **behavioral reactions** of isolating, binge watching Netflix, and fantasizing. As you get to know her, she tells you that she is feeling sad, overwhelmed, and afraid of people's judgment. These are her **reactive emotions**, stemming from her **core hurts**—the repeated **past experiences** of feeling unwanted, neglected and alone—which are triggered by her **present situation** of being unable to feel comfortable with people in her new social environments. As you track with her story, she will eventually be able to recognize and express to you that her core hurts reinforced the internalized **view of herself** as worthless, unimportant, and unlovable. As a child, she developed strategies to cope with her pain. What might seem like a natural coping mechanism for her evolved into an ingrained self-reliant strategy that she unconsciously depends on to suppress the pain of her core hurts and avoid the shame that repeatedly says she is worthless, unimportant and unlovable. Because her self-reliant strategies look to something other than God to save her, they are **idolatrous strategies**.

Lily's idolatrous strategies involve two parts: **deep idols** and **surface idols**.

DEEP IDOLS

are the underlying desires that become overdesires that fuel our pursuit of good things, evolving them into ultimate things. Although we are all motivated by the desire for power, control, approval, and comfort, we develop a preference for one that evolves more consistently and endures throughout our lifetime.

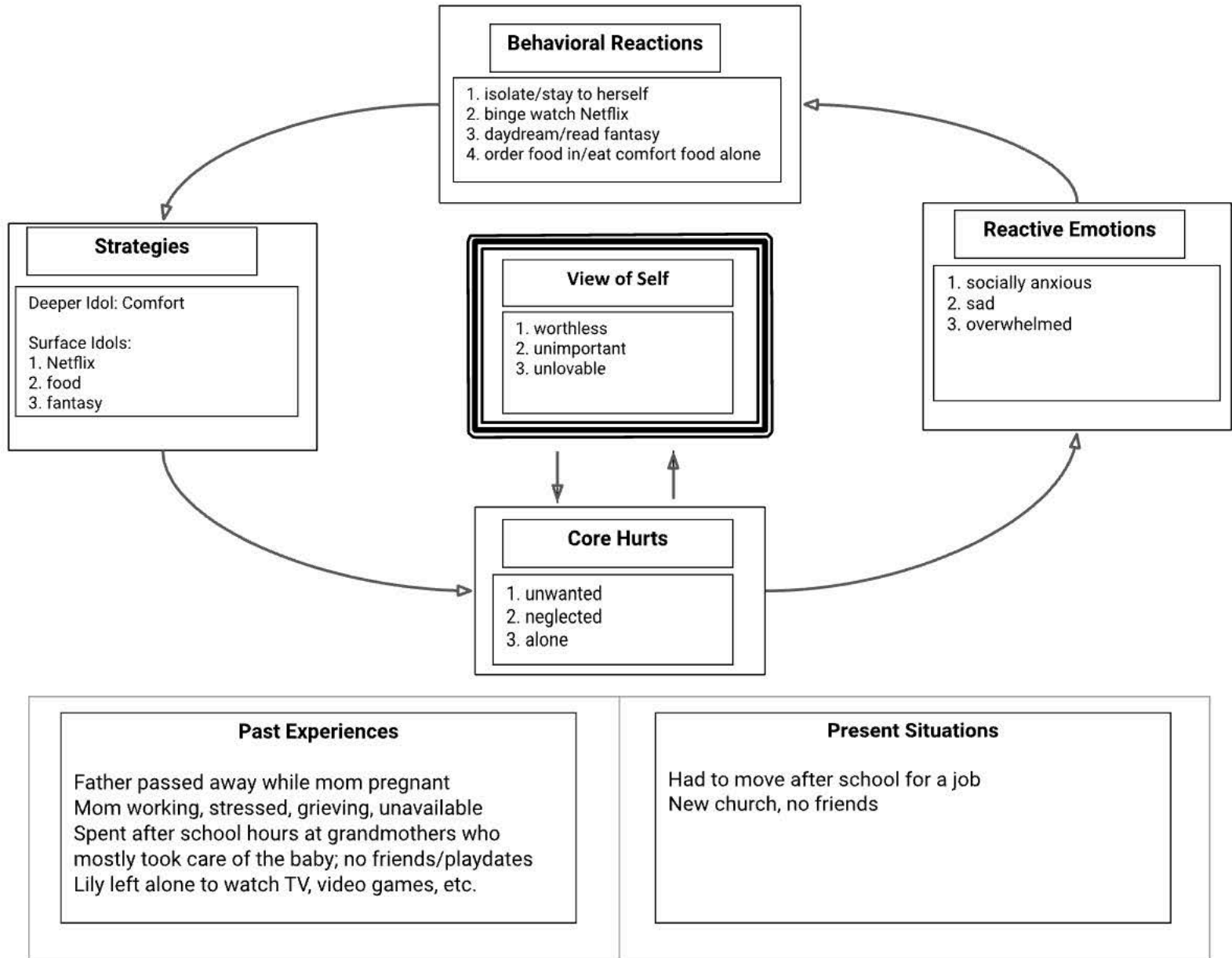
SURFACE IDOLS

are the concrete things, people, and pursuits which may be good things that become ultimate things/god replacements as they are fueled by our deep idols. We can have multiple surface idols and can switch surface idols depending on our circumstances and season of life.

For Lily, the loss of her father was significant and her pain needed attention and comfort from her caregivers, which she often did not get. The deprivation of needed care, as well as her subsequent experience of inattention, led to Lily feeling neglected and alone again and again. To cope with these painful feelings, she overslept or watched TV as a child, then later as an adult, she sought to isolate, fantasize, and binge watch Netflix to escape the reality of her pain. Her over desire for comfort—the enduring deep idol—motivated her toward these surface idols, which shifted from childhood to adulthood. She used these strategies to suppress both the pain of her loss and her repeated experiences of feeling unwanted and alone. They are also her strategy to avoid reinforcing the message that she is worthless and unlovable.

Understanding Lily's deeper idol of comfort can help you learn what she is hoping for by engaging in these behavioral tendencies. It also gives you, as the small group leader, direction for heart transformation that goes deeper than just addressing Lily's surface, more visible tendencies.

System of Self Redemption
(What do I need to do to feel okay about myself?)



As the diagram shows, the different parts of the System of Self redemption build on each other, creating a repetitive cycle. As we explore someone's story, we can identify significant events that personalized and reinforced their shame, as well as recognize strategies they developed to deal with their painful experiences. While certain more visible things, persons, and pursuits may be more apparent to us, we are not always aware of the unmet desires that people seek to satisfy. To help with this challenge, over several toolkits, we will focus on the left side of the diagram: the four deep idols that can become part of our idolatrous strategies.

As caregivers, understanding the deep idols helps us identify significant wounds the people we serve may need to grieve. Each deep idol also presents different challenges for the person providing counseling and care and each is connected with different outcomes and goals for the person receiving counseling. In the toolkit series, we will help you define and recognize the four deep idols and give you some tips on creating goals for a person who struggles with a particular one.

The four deep idols are:

Power

Control

Approval

Comfort

The first strategy we will look at in an upcoming toolkit is the deep idol of power. The goal in identifying a person's deep idol is not to hunt for sin but to recognize patterns that are ultimately more harmful than helpful. We also want to address the wounds that cause them to hang on to their idolatrous strategies ever so tightly. We want to help people get unstuck, be less preoccupied with the self and be able to deepen their connections with others and God. As they receive healing, they will also be able to respond more healthily to their situations and environments. We hope this toolkit series will help you better process the stories you hear and provide the best care possible for the people you serve.

To learn more about the deeper idols and the System of Self Redemption, the following resources are helpful:

- [*Who Your Are: Internalizing the Gospel to Find Your True Identity*](#) by Redeemer Counseling Director Judy Cha, PhD
- [October 2018 Toolkit](#) — "Heart Transformation: Identifying Our Strategies for Self Redemption" by Peter Cha, LMFT
- [*Counterfeit Gods*](#) by Tim Keller