



The Deep Idol Of Power

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This Toolkit on the power idol is part of a series on deep idols. Our [November 2023 Toolkit](#) explains what a deep idol is in the context of our unique approach to counseling, the Gospel-Centered Integrative Framework for Therapy (GIFT). That Toolkit also helps you understand the System of Self Redemption.

How to Recognize a Power Idol

The power idol is defined as an over-desire for significance through success, winning, and influence. Defining characteristics of it are the need to be right, the best, outstanding and the winner. When the desire for power becomes a ruling desire or it evolves into a demand, it becomes someone's deep idol.

To recognize a person's dominant deep idol, there are patterns we want to look out for that serve as clues. First, we want to discern whether the person exhibits **mastery patterns** or **avoidance patterns**. Mastery patterns are where people try to assert that they are worthy, valued, and good. Avoidance patterns are where they tend to hide, cover, up, and suppress their sense of unworthiness or badness. Second, we want to explore whether their **patterns are focused on others or on themselves**.

Someone who struggles with a power idol has patterns that seek mastery over others. This is in contrast to people who try to assert mastery over themselves, which would be the control idol, as you can see in the diagram.

	MASTERY PATTERNS	AVOIDANCE PATTERNS
OTHERS-FOCUSED PATTERNS	POWER	APPROVAL
SELF-FOCUSED PATTERNS	CONTROL	COMFORT

People with a power idol are not afraid to compare themselves to others because they perceive themselves as better. They are often in situations in which they are "winning." They are chasing success with the goal of winning or at least trying to be recognized as the best. If they experience failure, then they are more likely to blame others for it or fake success. They are driven by things like status and how they are perceived by others. They may seek out people in their life who adore and affirm their significance. Anyone can have a power idol, but especially those in positions of power, such as business moguls, politicians, and pastors can become more susceptible to the deep idol of power.

Another indicator of the power idol is that we may experience a battle for power when we interact with them. They can easily trigger our feelings of intimidation or incompetence, like we need to defend ourselves or show them we are worth their time. In general, people in their lives may feel used by them, that they are disposable.

Case Study for a Power Idol

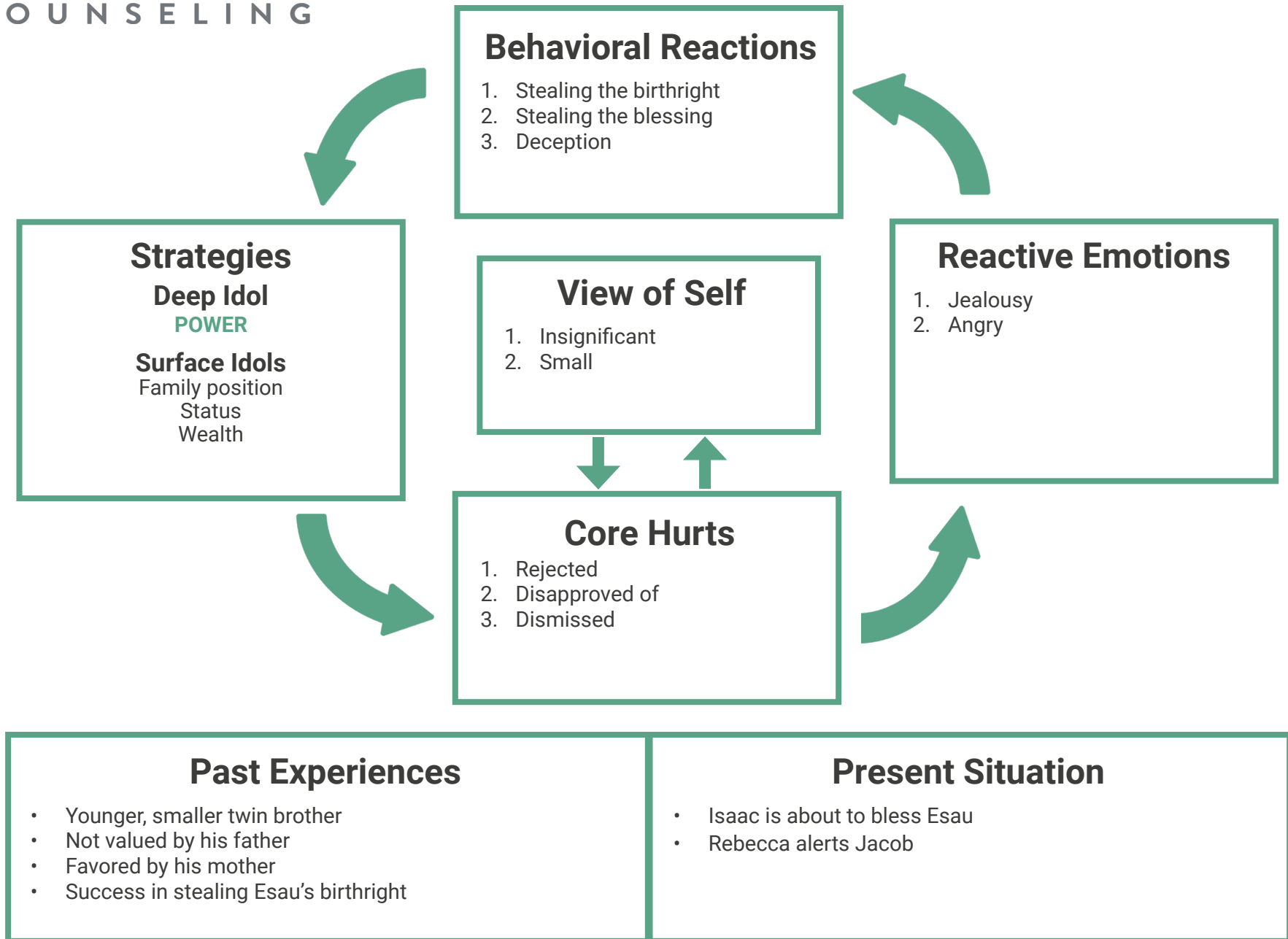
For our case study of the power idol, let us look at a familiar character in the Bible, Jacob. We are focusing on his story from Genesis 25 - 33. Jacob grew up the younger twin by mere minutes as he was born grasping Esau's heel. Esau not only had the birthright but was also their father's favorite. While we can only make an educated guess on how this affected Jacob, it seems plausible that he felt dismissed by his father and saw himself as less significant. Although Rebecca, his mother, had likely told Jacob what God said to her before their birth, that the older would serve the younger (Genesis 25:23), both Rebecca and Jacob took matters into their own hands instead of trusting in God. They relied on their strategy to steal Esau's birthright and receive the blessing from Isaac.

Jacob, feeling dismissed and insignificant, first used manipulation to claim power over Esau. Then, he employed trickery on his father, Isaac, to steal the full covenant blessing.

If we were hearing Jacob's story and filling out his personal System of Self Redemption, it would be the statement below and the diagram on the following page.

In the cycle, we know that Jacob has internalized a **view of self** that he is small and insignificant, having experienced feeling rejected, disapproved of, and dismissed in his relationship with his father. To redeem this, he developed a **strategy** of power, seeking for significance through family position, status, and wealth. When his father would not acknowledge him and continued to devalue and dismiss him, Jacob's **core hurts** of being disapproved of and dismissed were triggered. Jacob felt jealous and angry at Esau and Isaac, and manipulated and deceived his brother and father.

Jacob's System of Self Redemption



Unfortunately, receiving the covenant blessing did not deliver what Jacob expected. He had to flee his home and lost contact with his family for years. Decades later, Jacob was afraid and distressed the night before he was about to face Esau and his army. His old strategies now felt useless and he knew he was powerless against Esau. (Genesis 32:7,8)

God's power was needed to transform Jacob's deep idol of power. Jacob turned away from his strategy and cried out to the Lord in his fear. As God himself wrestled with Jacob, the experience humbled Jacob and God gave him a limp for the rest of his life as a reminder of this transformative moment. Then, God gave him a new identity from "the heel" (Jacob) to "he wrestles with God" (Israel). This encounter not only revealed who God is, it also showed Jacob who he truly is, which allowed him to trust God to reconcile with Esau. As the years of his life went by, Jacob became less self-reliant and walked in greater freedom and blessing with God Almighty.

Transformation of the Power Idol and Goals in Counseling

For a person who struggles with power, it can take a long time for them to see limitations to their strategy. They struggle with admitting weakness and are often winners. But, as we maintain curiosity of their story, stay confident, and continue to build trust, we will inevitably hear a story of weakness—a "chink in the armor." This is our opportunity to note this failed power strategy and offer to sit with them in it.

Within the GIFT counseling framework, the solution to our System of Self Redemption is to help people internalize the Gospel more deeply. When we are counseling a person with a power idol/strategy, we know that there are "good" reasons that led them to hang onto this strategy ever so tightly. So, we want to take them through an experience of encountering God that will heal their core hurts, while challenging their mastery and other-oriented strategy. We can have goals that counter the power idol in three different categories: goals for their relationship with God, goals for themselves, and goals for their interactions with others.

- 1. Relationship with God Goal Examples:** 1) Submit to and accept God's sovereignty over life's circumstances. 2) Over time, recognize all they have was given by God, not because of their own goodness, as well as progressively internalize the experience of God's mercy, empathy, and favor toward them.
- 2. Personal Goal Examples:** 1) Spend time journaling to increase self-reflection and recognize one's tendency toward self-promotion. 2) Identify unresolved hurts that trigger their fear of humiliation and grieve these hurts.
- 3. Relational Goal Examples:** 1) Be willing to allow others to lead or receive praise instead of seeking it themselves. 2) Serve or give from their resources to benefit others without the need for accolades.

A challenge of working with this particular idol is treading a fine line between showing empathy and challenging their assumptions at the right moments. It can be a slow process. As you maintain curiosity about what they share over time, they can make discoveries about themselves and their situations that they did not see before. Through the help of the Holy Spirit, we have the opportunity to lead those we work with to incredible transformation. Be encouraged that, as with Jacob, God's power plays a major role in their journey and you can trust him to help you.