



The Deep Idol Of Control

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This Toolkit on the control idol is part of a series on deep idols. Redeemer Counseling's [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 Control Idol

The Deep Idol of control is defined as an over-desire for mastery of self through factors like hard work, productivity, performance, and perfectionism. People who struggle with the control idol strive for perfection and self-sufficiency. They long to secure a sense of certainty, primarily by burdening themselves with more and more responsibilities and ensuring that everything in their environment is in order. When the desire for control evolves into a demand or compulsion—a ruling desire—it becomes someone’s deep idol. This deep idol affects their behaviors and emotions.

Someone who struggles with a control idol has patterns that seek mastery over themselves, as the diagram shows.¹ In other words, the control idol is not primarily about trying to control others, though they may do so incidentally as they strive for perfection.

1. For further explanation of these patterns, see the “[Deep Idol of Power](#),” January 2024 Toolkit

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

People with a control idol look to their performance and productivity to assert their competence and to prove that they are good and worthy. They are anxious because they see themselves as inadequate. Their emotional reactions and behaviors often stem from a core hurt of being perceived as falling short. In response to this pain, they are driven to perfectionism and continue to push themselves out of an incessant and unshakable insecurity that their performance is lacking. They are motivated by tangible markers of progress and want to achieve goals quickly to ease their anxiety. They come for help when they are burned out, overworked, and too stressed or when they have crises related to work failures. They may be more isolated and have few friends because relationships take time away from productivity and performance. Though they may perceive themselves as lazy, they are often high achievers who have difficulty enjoying their success because they cannot relax. They often struggle with an internal critic who judges their own performance harshly.

We may have trouble connecting with someone who has a deep idol of control as it can feel like they are evaluating our performance. They may convey that they are not satisfied with the direction or the speed of change in counseling, ask questions about where the work is going, or appear to doubt the competence of the caregiver. Remember that what you experience as a lack of faith in you is a symptom of their perfectionism driven by anxiety, which pushes them to fix what is not perfect and thus judge everything, especially themselves. This will help you remain compassionate.

Case Study for the Control Idol

The elder son in the Luke 15 Prodigal Son parable is our case study. The younger brother is often highlighted, but we are looking at the older brother to explore the control idol. From what we can see, the older brother was dutiful. He worked hard, kept up the cultural expectation of the obedient, oldest son, and likely sacrificed his desires for the family's welfare. With the inheritance, he may have felt entitled and proud because of his obedience. He likely felt betrayed when his father gave his irresponsible younger brother a large part of the inheritance while he was still alive, especially since that was uncustomary for the time. Despite this, the older brother continued to work hard to increase his property and inheritance. Sometime later, when his younger brother returned after squandering all the money, their father did not chide him. Instead, he welcomed the younger son with a warm, spontaneous celebration, spending more resources that would have otherwise been part of the older's inheritance.

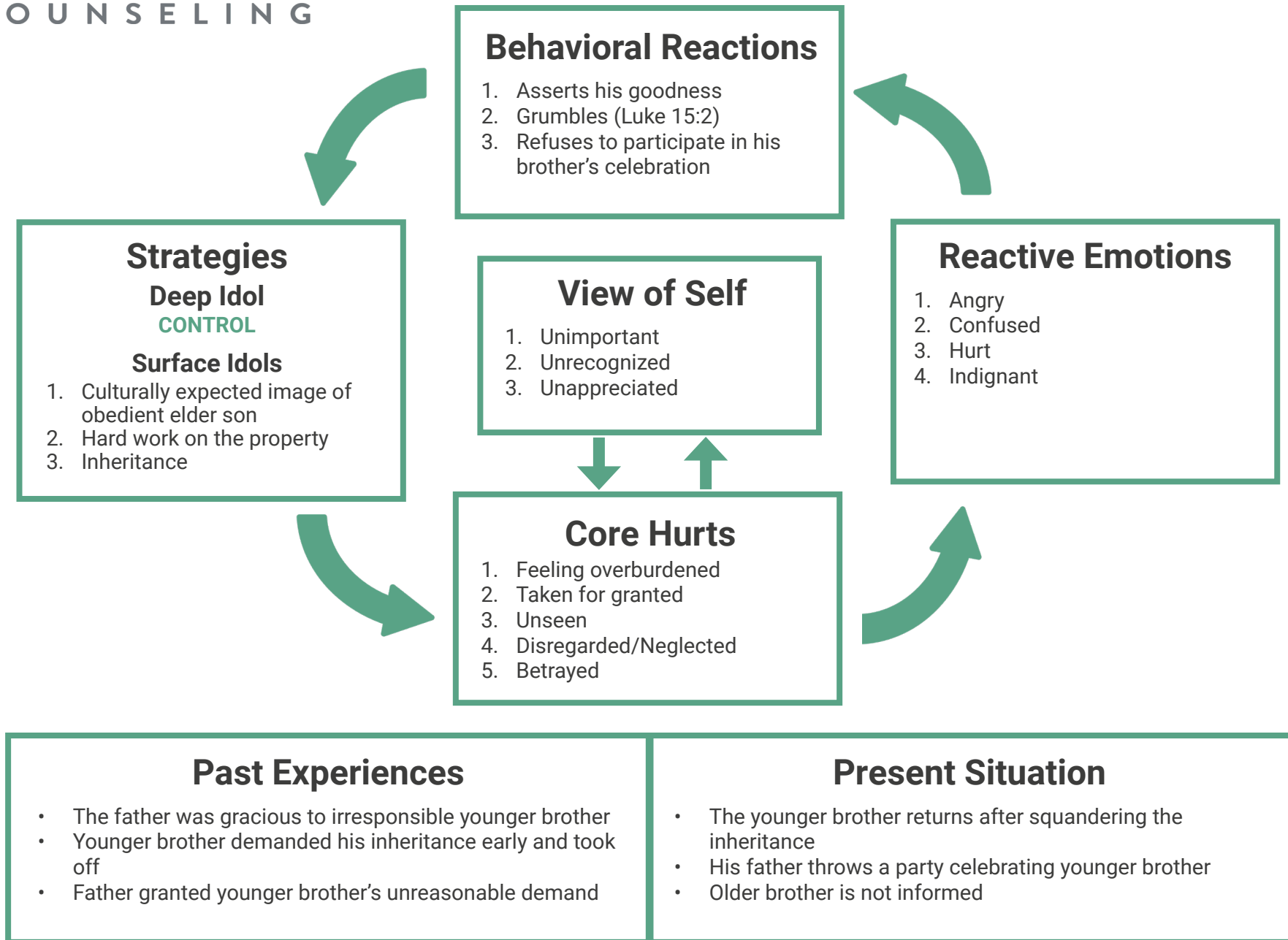
The older brother felt indignant and saw himself as better than his brother for doing what he was supposed to. He also felt unrecognized and unappreciated for all his hard work. In fact, he was coming in from the field when he heard the sounds of the party. No one had looked for him to tell him his brother was back and his father was already pulling out all the stops to celebrate.

Witnessing his father's response to his brother's return, "[the older brother] was angry and refused to go in...He answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!'" (Luke 15:28-30 ESV)

We can organize the older brother's story and understand his System of Self-Redemption through the statement below and the diagram on the following page.

The older brother internalized a **view of self** that he is unimportant and unappreciated, having experienced feeling overburdened by his responsibilities as the firstborn, disregarded despite his hard work, and feeling taken for granted as he grew up with a father who was gracious to his irresponsible younger brother. To redeem this, the older brother developed a **strategy of control**, working hard to fulfill the culturally expected image of the obedient elder son and laboring to secure his inheritance and property. However, when his brother comes home after squandering the inheritance and his father throws a party to celebrate his return, his **core hurts** of feeling unseen and disregarded are triggered, reinforcing the message that "I am unimportant and unappreciated." He reacted in indignance and refused to join the celebration.

Older Brother's System of Self-Redemption



Transformation of the Control Idol and Goals in Counseling

Jesus told this parable to rebuke the Pharisees who sought righteousness through obedience to the law, an example of the deep idol of control. They were unable to show mercy to others or recognize their need for the Messiah who was right in front of them! In fairness, it is easy for all of us to drift toward a control idol or righteousness through works because so much of life reinforces it. School, work, and friendships all feel good when we are doing better. However, similar to the Pharisees and the older brother, those with stronger control tendencies may face challenges connecting with God, as well as receiving or giving grace because they tend to use performance and achievement to earn their righteousness. Below are examples of goals to help people who struggle primarily with control.

- 1. Relationship with God Goal Examples:** 1) Write a prayer to God describing their control tendencies and how it has affected their relationship with God. Imagine Jesus' face as they express this prayer to him. 2) Take time to meditate before bed that God's grace is over the past day and over tomorrow. Take note of how it feels in their body as they receive God's grace and acceptance. 3) Remember that God is in control. Make a regular practice of praying for and surrendering areas of life that are out of their control to Him.
- 2. Personal Goal Examples:** 1) Grieve and receive comfort over the circumstances in which they developed their dependence on control, noting times when they were made to feel like they fell short or had to earn acceptance. 2) Identify 3 ways that they can seek rest and commit to rest, e.g., be more intentional about Sabbath rest every week; create firmer boundaries about work during the weekend; commit to a certain amount of sleep per night, etc.
- 3. Relational Goal Examples:** 1) Ask for others' help as soon as they start to feel anxious or overwhelmed. 2) Seek and cultivate relationships where they can be vulnerable to both confess and give grace. Aim to have at least 2-3 relationships that are close enough to depend upon and share deeply. 3) When colleagues or family members struggle with meeting their responsibilities, do not over-function for them and give them the gift of learning through failure.

As caregivers, be aware that counseling can also be a setting for people who struggle with control to work hard and perform, which can make it easy for us to subtly reinforce their deep idol. They will do the homework, master the tools, and come on time. They will learn what types of behaviors elicit the most positive response from us and avoid the hard, internal work of growing in vulnerability. We want them to experience being deeply seen and cared for, rather than getting a gold star for performance in counseling. Of course, God sees through their performance, but we also need to be particularly vigilant for this type of dynamic.

In the parable, the father reassures his older son, "Son, you are always with me," (Luke 15: 31 ESV). We want clients to know that God is always with them, regardless of their performance. In fact, Psalm 46:1 shows that, in our struggles, He is more present and near. He wants us to lean upon him and take up his promise of grace.