



# The Deep Idol Of Comfort

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**A**s we continue our series on the Deep Idols, please refer to the [November 2023 Toolkit](#) that explains what a deep idol is in the context of our unique approach to counseling, Gospel-centered Integrative Framework for Therapy (GIFT), as well as the System of Self Redemption.

The four deep idols are power, control, comfort, and approval. This toolkit focuses on the deep idol of comfort.

## How to Recognize a Comfort Idol

The comfort idol is defined as an over-desire for freedom from pain, stress, and unpleasantness of any kind. The primary characteristic of the comfort idol is the need for immediate gratification or pain relief through impulsive behaviors. Examples of such behaviors include drinking, getting high, oversleeping, gambling, pornography, and escapism of any kind. Comfort becomes someone's deep idol when the avoidance of stress or the desire and pursuit of instant gratification dominate their life.

The comfort idol has a self-focused pattern paired with an avoidance pattern, which seeks to suppress the person's sense of worthlessness.

	MASTERY PATTERNS	AVOIDANCE PATTERNS
OTHERS-FOCUSED PATTERNS	POWER	APPROVAL
SELF-FOCUSED PATTERNS	CONTROL	<b>COMFORT</b>

In discerning the comfort idol, look for other patterns of zoning out or escaping into things such as Netflix, video games, social media, fantasy, shopping, or food. While everyone rightly desires comfort, the deep idol can be recognized by a consistent drive toward compulsive or impulsive self-soothing behavior and an inability to tolerate distress. Watch out for disconnection, especially from their emotions. One of the clearer examples of the comfort idol is when a person exhibits substance abuse or addiction. D. Sumrok, MD, defines addiction as "compulsive, ritualized comfort-seeking," where the person is attempting to experience pleasure and disconnect from pain.

### Case Study for the Comfort Idol

To explore comfort as a deep idol, we will consider the other side of Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. Last month, we looked at how the older brother exhibits a deep idol of control. Now, let us look at the younger brother—the prodigal son—and his deep idol of comfort. The

younger son demanded his inheritance from his dad, left home for a distant country, and “wasted his possessions with prodigal living.” (Luke 15:11-13)

Jesus told this story to illustrate a point about God’s love for His wayward children despite the judgment of the self-righteous. In the first century, the Pharisees and teachers of the Scripture had imposed so many rules on the Israelites that they felt burdened. We will use what we know of their culture to help organize the younger brother's story.

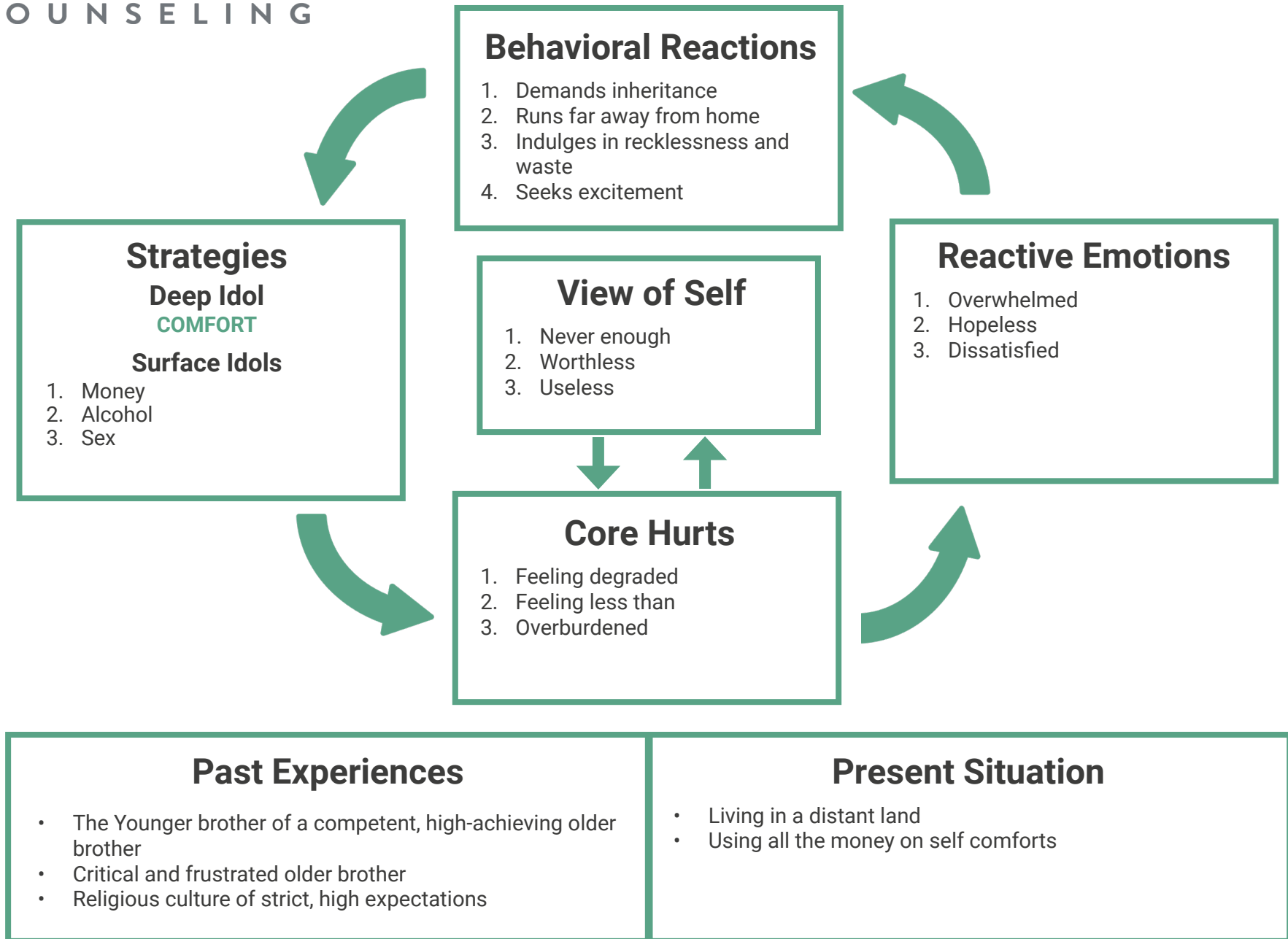
As we discern a System of Self Redemption for the younger brother, we need to ask, why did he leave? What was he trying to escape and seek comfort for? Jesus does not share his past experiences, however, we can imagine what it was like for him. We can imagine that it was hard to be the younger brother to his competent, high-achieving older brother, feeling less than and degraded. We can imagine that the older brother was frustrated and critical of the younger who could not measure up to his standards. For the younger, the experiences with his brother likely reinforced the message that he was never enough and, therefore, worthless. The younger brother also likely felt the pressures of living in a culture of strict and unachievable expectations. Feeling restricted and hopeless that he would ever be enough, he longed for freedom from all his responsibilities and distress. We see in the story that he did not just take the inheritance to spend it there, but he left for a distant country, getting as far away as possible.

In his **current situation**, the younger brother pursues a life of pleasure, indulging his senses with all that money can buy—sex, alcohol, and food—and numbing his feelings in a desperate effort to suppress his worthlessness and hopelessness.

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

The younger brother internalized a **view of self** that he is never enough, and therefore, worthless, having experienced feeling degraded and less than, growing up with a competent and perfectionistic older brother. Additionally, when he realized the strict religious and cultural norms of the day were putting increasing pressure on him, he was overwhelmed. Feeling hopeless, he seeks freedom from all perceived responsibilities by taking his inheritance and disconnecting from his family. He then fully engages in his **deep idol** of comfort, indulging his senses with **surface idols** of alcohol, food, and sex to numb the pain of his shame. See *System of Self-Redemption diagram*.

When the younger brother burns through all his money, he does not go back home right away. Still trying to make it on his own, he switches to another strategy, tending unclean swine. Yet, this too fails and he is in a real crisis. Hitting bottom, in addiction terms, opens the door for his redemption. He comes to his senses, turns away from his self-reliance, and turns toward home to his father. While the son is still far off, fully expecting to beg to be a slave in his father’s house, the father runs to him and throws him a huge party in a beautiful display of radical love! (Luke 15:14-24)



## Transformation of the Comfort Idol and Goals in Counseling

Our self-reliant strategies to heal our pain and give us an acceptable identity never last. They eventually always fail. The son only took the risk of going home after he saw how much his pursuit of comfort had cost him. He repented. In Hebrew, repent means to turn and go a different direction; in Greek, the meaning is to change one's mindset. A critical task of counseling is to help people change direction to turn toward God as well as change their mindset. With those tasks in mind, here are some goal examples for someone exhibiting a deep idol of comfort.

- 1. Relationship with God Goal Examples:** 1) Identify the shame messages that you carry. 2) Risk having an honest conversation with God about those messages, your pains, and how your comfort-seeking strategies have failed. 3) Seek and receive comfort from God, allowing him to forgive you and transform your shame into acceptance and joy.
- 2. Personal Goal Examples:** 1) Establish guardrails to your choice of escape, e.g., a pornography filter, canceling social media or addicting TV subscriptions. Another guardrail is disconnecting from people you engage in comfort-seeking compulsions with. 2) Make small, practical steps to face and do hard things. For example, when you feel the urge to smoke, drink, or watch Netflix, learn to pause and name what you are feeling and why.
- 3. Relational Goal Examples:** People develop the tendency to seek comfort from things when they have not been able to receive comfort relationally from God and people. Given this and the self-focused nature of the comfort idol, relational goals are crucial. Help them turn from things to people. 1) Join a 12-step program, especially one focused on the Gospel, or a small group where you can feel safe, be authentic, and share the hard stuff. Look for groups where you experience grace, acceptance, and accountability. 2) Commit to small, somewhat uncomfortable ways to serve others, e.g., doing the dishes for a family member each day or visiting the elderly in a nursing home. 3) Practice engaging in difficult conversations and conflict resolution. Share your own and listen to others' difficult emotions without minimizing.

A challenge of working with someone who struggles with a comfort idol is their unconscious tendency to minimize. Because they hide from difficult things, they may minimize what happened to them and their own behaviors. They often only seek help from pastors or counselors when they hit bottom or when they finally face the mounting consequences of their avoidance. They are good at not seeing their bad habits and the harm they cause their loved ones. Moreover, since they tend to avoid conflict, people in their wider circle often find them easy-going and nice, while those closest to them feel increasing loneliness and pain from their neglect. Caregivers need to remember to give them grace and acceptance while not letting them off the hook when they start to make excuses or dismiss their experiences.

Our ultimate goal is to help people encounter God's grace and have a personal, tangible experience of deep comfort as they connect with difficult emotions more honestly. The father in the parable restores the prodigal's identity from ashamed servant to beloved son. With our help, as people experience the mercy and grace of our compassionate and sympathetic Father, they can live out of their true identity, turn away from false sources of comfort, and live as beloved sons and daughters.