

The Simple Theory: A Framework for Understanding Human Thought, Safety, and Healing

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Abstract

The Simple Theory is a conceptual framework that seeks to unify multiple psychological models by simplifying how individuals experience, interpret, and respond to life. Drawing inspiration from established theories such as CBT, DBT, REBT, ACT, and Narrative Therapy, The Simple Theory provides a language and structure to explore the complex relationship between experiences, cognition, emotional safety, and behavioral responses. It proposes that healing and growth begin when individuals learn to trust themselves and activate their internal "researcher," thereby disrupting trauma-driven cycles and reinforcing empowerment through curiosity, reflection, and intentional action.

Introduction: Why the Simple Theory?

Many psychological models offer insight into specific behaviors, emotions, or mental health disorders. However, few provide a comprehensive yet accessible explanation for how all humans interpret their lived experiences. As a Licensed Professional Counselor, my goal in developing The Simple Theory is to bridge this gap by creating a neutral, adaptable theory that simplifies psychological processes and helps people understand themselves—whether they're in therapy, learning about behavior, or simply trying to make sense of life. The Simple Theory doesn't aim to replace existing models. Instead, it acts as a ramp—an entry point into psychological insight, offering people a shared language and foundational understanding of their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Particularly useful for neurodivergent individuals, it demystifies internal experiences and provides tools for self-reflection, healing, and decision-making.

Theoretical Foundations

The Simple Theory draws upon the foundations of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Narrative Therapy, and theories of generational trauma and intersectionality. These influences contribute to a holistic understanding of the human psyche by emphasizing thought patterns, emotional regulation, belief systems, contextual narratives, and the broader impact of cultural and historical experiences.

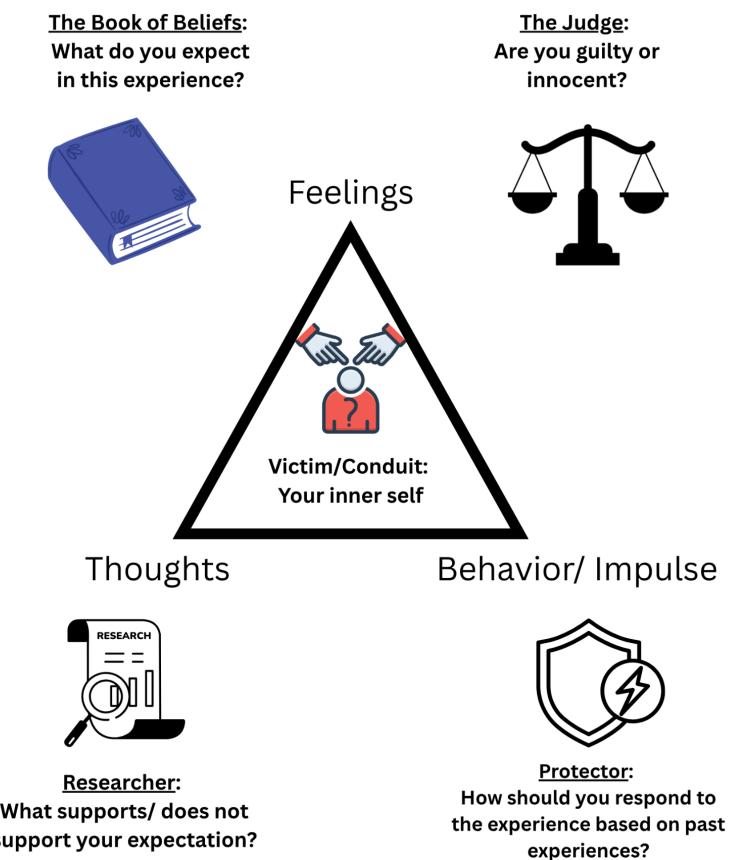
Key Components and Terminology

The theory operates through five interconnected components that together process human experiences. First is the Book of Beliefs, a dynamic internal record composed of conclusions drawn from sensory input, social learning, cultural context, and memory. This internal book does not contain objective facts but rather subjective perceptions, which guide our interpretations of the world. Next is the Judge, the part of the mind that references the Book of Beliefs to assess the safety and empowerment of an experience. The Inner Self, sometimes experienced as the victim, conduit, or inner critic, acts on the Judge's interpretation and carries out the chosen response. The Researcher represents the curiosity-driven, analytical part of the mind called the prefrontal cortex. When active, it questions the accuracy of beliefs and updates the Book of Beliefs.

accordingly. However, the Researcher requires a sense of safety and trust to function. Finally, the Protector serves as the instinctual safety mechanism, activating fight, flight, freeze, or fawn responses when threat is perceived. The protector is synonymous to the stress response due to its impulsive responsiveness that becomes fixed with trauma and insecure attachments in relationships.

The Simple Approach

Understanding How Humans Respond



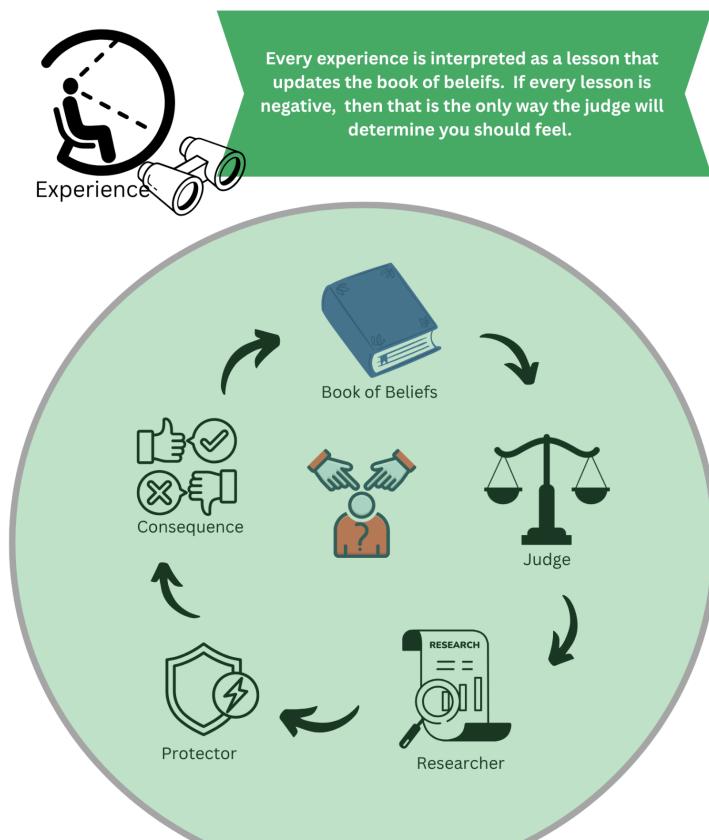
Core Theory Flow: The Ideal vs. The Actual

In an ideal state, a person encounters an experience through the five senses. The Book of Beliefs interprets this experience, and the Judge determines whether it is safe and the person feels empowered. If the person feels safe enough to assess the situation due to trust in themselves or the environment, the Researcher becomes engaged and may reevaluate and update the beliefs informing the judgment. The Inner Self then enacts a decision, and the resulting consequences lead to a refinement of beliefs, reinforcing a cycle of learning and growth.

However, when trauma or distress is present, the process often shifts. The Book of Beliefs may contain rigid or distorted beliefs shaped by painful experiences. When new input is filtered through this lens, the Judge perceives threat more readily and calls upon the Protector to intervene. In this stressed state, the Researcher is suppressed, as the system prioritizes survival over analysis. Responses become reactive or avoidant, and consequences may reinforce the original harmful beliefs, thereby solidifying maladaptive cycles.

The Process of an Experience

Why we Must be Self Aware, and not Take Things Personally.



The Role of Safety, Trust, and Emotion

Emotions act as indicators of safety or threat. Persistent negative emotions such as fear, shame, or anxiety often signal that the Protector is overactive and the Researcher is underutilized. In this state, individuals are trapped in defensive patterns that inhibit growth. The Researcher only becomes active when a person feels sufficiently safe and is able to trust either themselves, another person, or a broader structure such as faith or community. This trust creates the psychological space necessary for reflection, curiosity, and belief revision. Similar to the internal cycle, the individual can then create an environment devoid of safety for others, even their children. This is a result of their impulsive response to anything that may counter the beliefs that reinforce their feelings of empowerment. Not out of love for those close to them, but out of fear

that the safety found within their belief system may be countered and the persistent protector response that prevents effective communication with those around them.



Scenarios to Demonstrate Utility of the Theory

Scenario 1: A cat runs from a dog due to a belief that dogs are dangerous. Over time, if the cat experiences friendly dogs, the Researcher begins to update the belief. Eventually, the cat may stop fleeing altogether. This scenario illustrates how exposure to safe, new experiences can gradually transform internal beliefs and responses. However, if the cat continued to encounter dangerous dogs, the cat's initial belief would be reinforced and the trust required to challenge that belief becomes almost impossible. A human's capacity for critical thought makes challenging that belief, and the ability to recondition behavioral responses makes it possible.

Scenario 2: A child fails a test, and has the belief that smart people pass tests. The Judge interprets this experience through the Book of Beliefs and concludes, "I'm dumb." The Protector responds with feelings of shame and a desire to avoid future tests. If a supportive adult provides reassurance and prompts reflection, the Researcher may activate: "Maybe I didn't study enough." The belief shifts from a fixed negative self-concept to a more accurate and empowering one, such as "I can do better with support."

Scenario 3: From an early age, Jordan experienced inconsistent caregiving from his mother. At times, she was attentive and nurturing, but at other times she was emotionally unavailable, overwhelmed by her own stress. As a result, Jordan developed an anxious-avoidant attachment style. He learned not to rely on his mother for emotional regulation or guidance, which over time eroded his trust in her ability to support or teach him.

By the time Jordan reached elementary school, he often rejected help or direction from his mother, showing defiance during routines like homework or chores. He frequently questioned her rules, became oppositional, and had frequent meltdowns when corrected. Teachers reported that he struggled with authority and had difficulty following through on instructions. Beneath the surface, Jordan's behavior was driven by a core belief that adults—especially caregivers—could not be depended on, and that he needed to control situations to protect himself emotionally.

Scenario 4: Amaya grew up in a home marked by emotional neglect and verbal criticism. Her caregivers rarely offered praise or reassurance and were quick to point out her mistakes. Over time, Amaya internalized a core belief that she was not good enough—that something was inherently wrong with her. These early experiences were traumatic, not because of a single dramatic event, but due to chronic invalidation.

Responding on Purpose

Steps to Intentional Living

Identifying Limiting Beliefs: Become aware of the beliefs that are relevant to this experience. Pay attention to your inner critic (the Judge) and identify the underlying assumptions it's making.



Challenging Beliefs: Question the validity of your beliefs. Are they based on fact or interpretation? Are they serving you, or hindering you? The Researcher can find conflicting evidence.



Updating Beliefs: Replace negative beliefs with more positive and empowering ones. For example, replace 'I am not good enough' with 'I am good enough for myself, as long as I'm trying.'



Building Self-Trust: Engage in actions that align with your updated beliefs. As you experience success and overcome challenges, your self-trust will grow.



Befriending the Judge: Instead of fighting the judge, try to understand it. It is responding to something. Validate its concern and then gently redirect it.

As a teenager, Amaya began second-guessing herself in nearly all areas: school, friendships, and decisions about her future. Even when she received positive feedback, she dismissed it, believing she had "just gotten lucky" or that others were being kind out of pity. She avoided trying new things or taking risks, fearing inevitable failure. This deep-seated mistrust of herself—rooted in developmental trauma—led to anxiety, self-sabotage, and a diminished sense of identity.

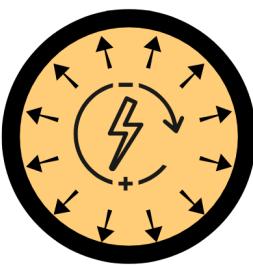
There are many more examples like this where, just a little bit of trust in anything that would allow you to challenge those beliefs could start to update many limiting and maladaptive beliefs, i.e. thought traps. A person can gradually work towards building trust within themselves by using the instructional flow to the left.

The Bubble Concept: Boundaries and Energy

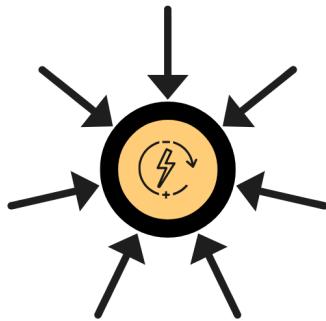
Each individual possesses a metaphorical bubble that represents personal boundaries and internal energy. The state of this bubble—whether strong and positive or weak and fear-based—determines how effectively it protects from external harm and influences internal responses. A strong, vibrant bubble reflects internal trust and emotional resilience. A weak bubble, shaped by chronic fear or unresolved trauma, is porous and reactive. This concept extends to communities: when collective fear dominates, community bubbles become dysfunctional, leading to group-level instability and conflict.

While we can't always control the energy that comes our way, we do have the power to choose how we respond—and what kind of energy we put back into the world around us. No experience is purely positive or negative; each holds a mix of both. The more we focus on the positive, the more of it we're likely to notice. The same is true for the negative—what we choose to focus on tends to grow in our awareness.

Individual Safety in Community



Reinforce or
disempower your wall



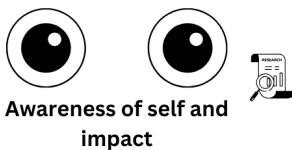
Thickness of Wall-Ability to
protect self from external

Practical Applications: The AAT Method

The AAT Method—Awareness, Acceptance, and Think—is a practical approach to applying The Simple Theory in everyday life. First, Awareness involves cultivating mindfulness of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors and recognizing how one's internal world affects external interactions. Second, acceptance means acknowledging reality without judgment. When individuals resist reality, they become stuck in loops of defensiveness and denial. Acceptance allows for clarity and curiosity. Finally, Think involves planning, perspective-taking, and reframing expectations. This includes evaluating beliefs for accuracy, incorporating alternative perspectives for a holistic perspective of a situation and possible consequences, setting SMART goals, and understanding that setbacks offer information rather than condemnation.

What Can We do to Course Correct?

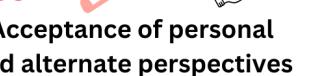
Awareness



Awareness of self and impact



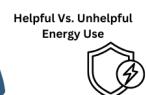
Acceptance



Trust

Acceptance of personal and alternate perspectives

Think



SMART Goal
Step by Step of tasks
Alternative expectations

Clinical Treatment Path

The therapeutic application of The Simple Theory follows a staged process. In the first stage, the goal is to build rapport and teach distress tolerance. Motivational interviewing and consistent validation help clients feel safe and begin exploring their beliefs. The second stage emphasizes empowerment and safety. Normalizing emotional responses and journaling can help clients identify alternative interpretations of their experiences. In the third stage, clients work on developing flexible thinking and goal-oriented behavior through techniques like executive functioning coaching and reality testing. In the fourth stage, clients are guided toward self-love and compassion by reflecting on their growth and strengths. The final stage focuses on social engagement and boundary-setting, encouraging healthy relationships and the establishment of protective but permeable interpersonal boundaries. It is detailed more explicitly below to show the gradual progression of trust in the counseling space, then in oneself, then in their ability to engage in society in healthy ways. Once one belief rooted in trust can be amended, then healthy consistent encouragement opens the door for a full revision of the book of beliefs and a happier life.

Goal 1: Build Rapport, Motivational Interviewing, and Distress Tolerance- focus on skills, goals, and values.

- Deep breathing and emotional scale to initiate self-awareness and empowerment in ability to self-regulate.
- Validation and client guided conversation is essential.
- Gain understanding of their interests and thought process when unfiltered. Instead of corrections, ask questions

- Limited disclosure will build trust. You can also provide representation in the media to normalize using favorite shows.
- Key Intervention: Unconditional Positive Regard and Fact Checking

Goal 2: Safety and Empowerment- discuss theoretical foundation, and provide alternative possibilities to pain/numbing

- Education on uniform understanding of their disclosure with empathy.
- Normalize the responses to mistakes.
- Encourage processing & planning, instead of avoiding negative emotions
- Get the client into the habit and comfort of questioning self.
- Key Intervention: Journaling and Behavioral Activation

Goal 3: Goal oriented behavior and flexible thinking- focus on if/then scenarios, decision making, and empathetic understanding of others

- Emphasis on homework and daily effort towards goals.
- Exploration of executive functioning.
- Role playing and questions to understand alternative perspectives.
- Key Intervention: Record Keeping and Reality Testing

Goal 4: Self Love- bully/friend self-talk, acceptance of past with lessons from challenges, engagement in self care activities to increase ability to spend time with self

- Encourage frequent positive self-talk.
- Reflect on lessons from past mistakes leading the client to where they are now.
- Explore activities the client has longed for but never pursued.
- Key Intervention: Highlight Strengths and Progress

Goal 5: Positive Engagement in Society- identify characteristics of a healthy relationship, appropriate boundaries, plan for trigger responses, understand social mores, and assertive communication

- Use healthy relationships, even if only the counselor as an option, to determine foundational relationship needs/wants.
- Emphasize mistakes and successes, and how embarrassment is about perspective.
- Trusted individuals regularly join sessions in order to correct in the moment.
- Utilize a weekly checklist in order to hold clients accountable for social goals.
- Key Intervention: Behavioral Experiments

Mindfulness as a Connector

Mindfulness, or self-awareness, is a critical bridge in The Simple Theory. It connects the body, thoughts, and actions by quieting the Protector and allowing the Researcher to step forward. Mindful practices enhance awareness, provide emotional regulation, and create a pause between stimulus and response, enabling intentional action over impulsivity. Every person can find their own way to be mindful, but mindfulness must include a choice, in addition to a deep breath in through the nose, and a long exhale through the mouth. This allows you to reverse your stress responses, and feel more in control of your body, which naturally builds empowerment.

Interrupting Impulses

Breathe in through the nose

Breathe out through the mouth

exhale should be longer than inhale

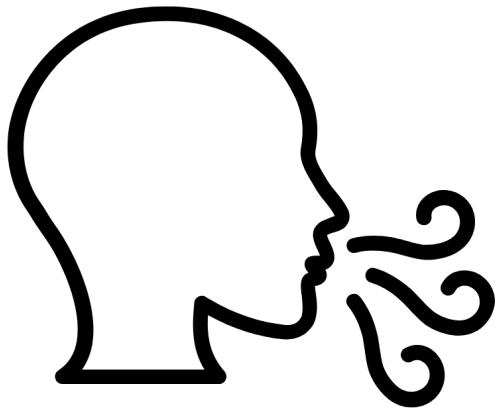
Repeat if you need a break.

Racing Thoughts?

**Grab something to fidget with
and name 10-15 colors.**

Funny made up names count, only if they sound goofy.

Don't forget:
988-Suicide Hotline
911-Emergency



Societal Impact

Widespread adoption of The Simple Theory could offer a shared language for healing across families, communities, and institutions. By reducing confusion, increasing empathy, and reinforcing empowerment, the theory fosters a culture that values understanding over reaction and growth over punishment. The approach is particularly resonant for marginalized or neurodivergent individuals whose experiences are often pathologized or misunderstood. Humans did not evolve by prioritizing emotional intelligence because it is not tangible. However, as we create a better world for the generations to come, it is important to understand how and why we respond, in order to increase the positive energy both in our individual and community bubbles.

Conclusion

Humans are not broken—they are adaptive and responsive. The Simple Theory asserts that when the Researcher is engaged and the Judge is informed by updated beliefs, individuals can respond to life with clarity, purpose, and compassion. Power comes not from control, but from

understanding oneself and making wise, authentic decisions. This theory is not about fixing people—it is about giving them the tools to understand how they work, so they can live with more peace, intention, and love. Power is not in strength, but in self-awareness and empathy. Ignorance will be the death of humanity.

Next Steps

Future developments for The Simple Theory include visual aids, animations, a clinician's guide with interventions, and a client-facing workbook. Additional elaboration on child development, family systems, specific diagnosis, and neurodivergence will also be explored to broaden the theory's accessibility and applicability.

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