

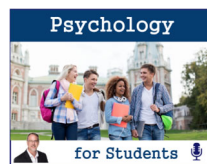
The ROOT Framework

Resolving Origins of Ongoing Triggers



Psychology for Students

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Introduction

Why This Tool Was Created

Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development are among the most important concepts in the field of psychology. They provide a framework for understanding how identity, relationships, and emotional well-being are shaped across the lifespan. Most students encounter this theory in their introductory psychology courses, often memorizing the eight stages and their associated conflicts for exams. Yet for many, the material stops there - stored as abstract knowledge rather than lived wisdom.

As a professor, I have seen students struggle with recurring patterns of anxiety, procrastination, self-doubt, lack of confidence or motivation without realizing where these struggles come from. Erikson's model shows us that these patterns are not random: they can often be traced back to unmet needs or unresolved conflicts at earlier stages of development. Unfortunately, while Erikson's work is widely taught, there has been no practical tool for applying these insights to one's own life.

That is why I created the **ROOT Framework (Resolving Origins of Ongoing Triggers)** - a structured process for connecting current emotional struggles to their developmental origins. This tool is designed to connect Erikson's theory to real life struggles, helping students not only understand the theory but also apply it to foster growth, resilience, and healing in daily life.

The Root Framework

The ROOT Framework is a guided, reflective tool to support you in identifying and working through recurring emotional and behavioral challenges. It is grounded in Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, a foundational model in the study of human growth, identity, and emotional resilience (Erikson, 1963).

The primary purpose of ROOT is to help you link your current struggles – often experienced as anxiety, shame, guilt, low self-worth, sadness, and even depression - to the developmental stages in which unmet emotional needs, inconsistent caregiving, or environmental disruption may have occurred. According to Erikson's model, unresolved conflicts from earlier stages can resurface later in life, shaping how individuals perceive themselves, relate to others, and respond to stress (Knight, 2017; Sokol, 2009).

By identifying these origins, students can begin the process of:

- Re-evaluating their self-perceptions
- Reframing harmful or outdated beliefs
- Understanding their emotional responses more compassionately
- Building psychological insight and personal growth

My intent in developing the ROOT Framework is to provide a developmentally informed approach to emotional understanding and self-reflection, making it a valuable educational resource for psychology students and others seeking deeper personal insight²

Disclaimer

This tool is an educational and reflective resource created by Professor Jeffrey Hastings as part of the Psychology for Students initiative. The ROOT Framework is intended to promote self-awareness and personal development through the exploration of psychological concepts. It is not a diagnostic tool and does not substitute for professional therapy or clinical care. Individuals experiencing significant psychological distress or trauma are encouraged to consult a licensed mental health provider.

Theoretical Background – Erikson's Eight Developmental Stages



Erik Homburger Erikson (1902–1994) developed an eight-stage theory of psychosocial development that frames core conflicts across the lifespan (Erikson, 1963) [2]

Despite lacking a university degree, Erikson served as a professor at prominent institutions, including Harvard, University of California, Berkeley, and Yale [2]. A *Review of General Psychology* survey, published in 2002, ranked Erikson as the 12th most eminent psychologist of the 20th century [2]

Erikson's psychosocial theory proposes that human development occurs across **eight distinct stages**, each characterized by a specific **psychosocial conflict** that must be resolved for healthy psychological growth to occur (Erikson, 1963) [2]. These conflicts are shaped by both internal needs and external social experiences [2]. When a stage is navigated successfully, the individual develops strengths such as autonomy, purpose, or identity [2]. When not resolved, the individual may carry unresolved emotional patterns or cognitive distortions into future stages [2]

These unresolved conflicts often surface as chronic emotional symptoms - anxiety, avoidance, perfectionism, fear of rejection - that persist until they are addressed (McLeod, 2018; Van der Kolk, 2014) [2]. The ROOT Framework provides a structured method for recognizing and responding to these underlying issues [2]



Credit: Verywell / Joshua Seong



The 5-Step ROOT Framework

The **ROOT Framework** is a structured tool for guided self-reflection that helps individuals uncover how current emotional and behavioral patterns - such as anxiety, procrastination, perfectionism, or low self-worth - may be rooted in unresolved psychological conflicts from earlier stages of development. Drawing on **Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory of human development**, ROOT invites users to explore how unmet emotional needs or negative internalized messages from key life stages continue to influence their thoughts, feelings, and relationships today. By identifying these developmental origins, individuals can begin the process of understanding, reframing, and ultimately healing long-standing emotional patterns.

The 5-Step Process includes:

- ✓ **Step 1: Recognize Symptom.** Begin by naming a recurring emotional or behavioral pattern that interferes with your daily functioning or well-being. Examples include but are not limited to anxiety, avoidance, fear of failure, or perfectionism.
- ✓ **Step 2: Observe and Document Triggers.** Track specific situations that activate this symptom. Record emotional reactions, thoughts, physical sensations, and any memories that arise. This builds awareness of patterns over time.
- ✓ **Step 3: Connect to Erikson's Developmental Stages.** Reflect on which of Erikson's eight psychosocial stages may relate to your current challenges. Consider whether key emotional needs were unmet during that time, and how those early experiences may influence your present responses.
- ✓ **Step 4: Reflect and Reframe.** Use targeted prompts to explore how your self-beliefs were shaped by past experiences. Begin to challenge outdated or limiting narratives and explore healthier interpretations of those early events.
- ✓ **Step 5: Rebuild the Narrative.** Re-author your internal story with compassion. Affirm your past self, recognize your current strengths, and identify actions you can take to meet emotional needs in the present. This fosters resilience, emotional regulation, and personal growth.

This framework is intended to support deep self-awareness and emotional insight. While not a replacement for therapy, it is a powerful psychoeducational tool for understanding how the past continues to shape the present - and how we can change it.

Step 1: Recognize the Symptom

The first step is to clearly identify an emotional or behavioral issue that repeatedly interferes with your well-being, decision-making, motivation, or relationships. While many of these patterns may appear to be personality traits or isolated habits, they often reflect **internalized beliefs or emotional coping strategies** formed during earlier developmental periods (Beck, 2011).

Common Presenting Symptoms:

- ☐ Chronic anxiety or panic
- ☐ Procrastination or indecision
- ☐ Perfectionism
- ☐ Fear of failure
- ☐ Social withdrawal or isolation
- ☐ Trust issues or fear of betrayal
- ☐ Impostor syndrome
- ☐ Low self-esteem or self-criticism
- ☐ Avoidance of intimacy
- ☐ Emotional numbness
- ☐ Overdependence on validation
- ☐ Anger or irritability
- ☐ Lack of motivation or meaning
- ☐ Difficulty setting boundaries

Other: _____

These symptoms may serve as defensive mechanisms developed in response to unmet psychological needs (Young et al., 2003).

Step 2: Observe and Document Triggers

After naming the symptom, the next step is to observe and record the specific **triggers** that provoke the emotional response (see Journal, page 18). According to cognitive-behavioral theory, emotional responses are shaped by learned schemas and are often activated by environmental cues (Beck, 2011). Journaling your experiences provides a structured method for identifying patterns over time.

In your journal, record:

- The situation or event that triggered the emotion
- Who was involved
- What you were thinking and feeling
- Any physiological reactions (e.g., heart racing, tension)
- Any specific memories or associations that surfaced

Example Entry:

Trigger: Professor calls on me during class.

Emotion: Anxiety, fear.

Thought: “I’m probably not smart enough for this class.”

Physical Reaction: Racing heart, tight stomach.

Memory: Middle school - I wasn’t paying attention and was called out for a wrong answer and students laughed; also, father disappointed in my grades in elementary school.

This level of detail supports more accurate reflection in later steps.

Step 3: Connect to Erikson's Stages of Development

Once you have documented several instances of emotional triggers and the reactions they produce, the next step is to **reflect** on which of Erikson's psychosocial stages may underlie the pattern you are noticing. Erikson's model highlights that when core needs are left unmet - or when **trauma** disrupts development - these unresolved conflicts do not simply fade with time. Instead, they may be carried forward, subtly shaping the way we view ourselves, interpret others' actions, and navigate relationships across the lifespan (Sokol, 2009).

Use the table below to guide your reflection:

Stage	Age Range	Core Conflict	Positive Resolution	Signs of Unresolved Conflict
1. Trust vs. Mistrust	0–1 yr	Can I trust others and the world?	Trust, security	Anxiety, fear of abandonment, hypervigilance
2. Autonomy vs. Shame & Doubt	1–3 yrs	Can I act independently?	Confidence, self-control	Procrastination, fear of making mistakes
3. Initiative vs. Guilt	3–6 yrs	Is it okay for me to act?	Initiative, courage	Perfectionism, guilt, inhibition
4. Industry vs. Inferiority	6–12 yrs	Am I capable and competent?	Confidence, mastery	Avoidance of effort, low academic or social confidence
5. Identity vs. Role Confusion	12–18 yrs	Who am I and what do I value?	Stable identity	Confusion, social comparison, impostor syndrome
6. Intimacy vs. Isolation	18–40 yrs	Can I connect deeply with others?	Emotional intimacy	Fear of closeness, emotional avoidance
7. Generativity vs. Stagnation	40–65 yrs	Can I contribute meaningfully?	Purpose, creativity	Apathy, lack of direction or contribution
8. Integrity vs. Despair	65+ yrs	Has my life been meaningful?	Acceptance, wisdom	Regret, despair, withdrawal

Important Note: This chart is a simplified summary of Erikson's eight stages, created to support reflection within the ROOT Framework. While it highlights key conflicts, outcomes, and examples of unresolved issues, it does not capture all of the nuances of Erikson's original theory. Students preparing for class quizzes or exams should review their textbook and course materials for the most accurate and comprehensive descriptions.

Stage-Specific Cues

- **Trust vs. Mistrust (0–1):** Was comfort consistent when I signaled distress? Do I expect others to be basically safe or unpredictable?
- **Autonomy vs. Shame & Doubt (1–3):** Was I allowed to try things myself? How were accidents or messes handled - coaching or shaming?
- **Initiative vs. Guilt (3–6):** Did I get permission to start things, ask questions, and play? Were my impulses met with curiosity or criticism?
- **Industry vs. Inferiority (6–12):** How was effort vs. outcome emphasized? Did I receive useful feedback and support, or labels and comparisons?
- **Identity vs. Role Confusion (12–18):** Did I have space to explore interests, values, culture, and belonging without ridicule or pressure to conform?
- **Intimacy vs. Isolation (18–40):** Could I be known - strengths and flaws - without fear of rejection? How did I learn to set and respect boundaries?
- **Generativity vs. Stagnation (40–65):** Do I see my work/caregiving as meaningful? What beliefs limit contribution or mentorship?
- **Integrity vs. Despair (65+):** Can I hold regret and gratitude together? What story about my life feels coherent and fair?

Step 4: Reflect and Reframe

After identifying the developmental stage most closely associated with your symptom(s), use the prompts below to examine what may have happened during that time and how it shaped your current beliefs and reactions?

A. Context & Relationships

- What messages - spoken or unspoken - did I receive from caregivers, teachers, or peers during this period?
- How did important adults respond to my mistakes, emotions, and efforts?
- Which relationships felt safe, and which felt critical, inconsistent, or absent?

B. Needs & Conditions

- Were core needs (e.g., safety, predictability, encouragement, appropriate limits, belonging) reliably met?
- What was I *praised* for? What was I *punished* or criticized for?
- Did I have chances to try, fail, and try again without shaming?

C. Caregiver/Environment Factors (Non-blaming)

- What stresses, constraints, or beliefs may have shaped how caregivers or teachers responded (e.g., cultural norms, work stress, health, their own schooling experiences)?
- How might those factors explain their behavior *without excusing harm*?

D. Memory & Body

- Which specific moments from that stage still feel emotionally “hot” or vivid?
- When I recall them, what shows up in my body (tightness, heat, numbness, urge to withdraw)?
- Do current triggers produce a *similar* body response?

E. Beliefs & Rules I Learned

- What belief about *me* took root then (e.g., “I’m not safe,” “I must not be wrong,” “I don’t belong,” “I’m not smart enough”)?
- What rule did I adopt to cope (e.g., “Stay small,” “Avoid trying,” “Be perfect,” “Don’t ask for help”)?
- How has that belief or rule protected me? What has it cost me?

F. Evidence & Alternatives

- Where does this belief *not* fit the facts of my current life? (List at least three counterexamples?)
- What would a wise, caring adult have said to me at that age?
- What is a more accurate, developmentally fair belief I can hold now?

G. Impact & Direction

- How does this old belief shape my choices today (school, work, friendships, risk-taking)?
- If I keep this belief for the next five years, what is likely to happen? If I update it, what could change?

Example Reframe:

- **Trigger (now):** Being called on unexpectedly in class?
- **Emotion/Body:** Anxiety and shame; racing heart, tight stomach?
- **Thought:** “I’m probably not smart enough for this class?”
- **Linked Memory (then):** Middle school - I wasn’t paying attention and was called out for a wrong answer and students laughed; also, father disappointed in my grades in elementary school?
- **Likely Stage:** Industry vs. Inferiority (6–12)?
- **Old Belief/Rule:** “If I speak up, I’ll be exposed as not smart? Better to stay quiet?”
- **Context Note:** Parents and teachers emphasized the importance of grades and gave little support on effort or helping me understand how I learn?
- **Counterevidence (today):** I do well in classes that I’m interested in, so I do realize that I’m capable of learning and earning good grades?
- **Updated Belief:** “Competence grows with practice and feedback; a wrong answer is part of learning; not proof I don’t belong?”

- **Next Step:** Limit distractions, pay attention, take notes, and ask one clarifying question in the next class and review feedback with the goal of learning, not proving?

Step 5: Rebuild the Narrative

The final step in the ROOT process is to **reframe your internal narrative** using a more compassionate, growth-oriented perspective. This step draws from narrative therapy and schema therapy, which emphasize rewriting negative self-beliefs and reprocessing emotional memories (White & Epston, 1990; Young et al., 2003).

Reframing Prompts:

- What would I say to the younger version of myself from that stage?
- Could there have been trauma or other external circumstances going on with my caregiver, teacher, or peer that made them respond to me in a negative way?
- Could I have misinterpreted the events of my past? For instance, could my parent's anger or undesired response come from a place of love or fear of me being hurt?
- What new belief can I practice that supports my well-being?
- What strengths have I developed as a result of my experience?
- How can I move on and prevent the negative effects from occurring again?

This final phase encourages **self-compassion**, the development of **new habits**, and greater **psychological flexibility** (Siegel, 2012).

Closing Thoughts by Professor Hastings



The **ROOT Framework** is about more than learning psychology - it's about learning *yourself*. By paying attention to your symptoms, tracking your triggers, and connecting them to earlier stages of life, you begin to recognize patterns that may have once felt confusing or overwhelming. Every pattern has a story, and every story can be re-told in a healthier way.

This journal is not meant to replace therapy, but it can serve as a powerful first step toward healing. As Erikson reminded us, the past does not define you - it provides opportunities to grow. When you revisit unresolved experiences with fresh awareness, you open the door to hope, resilience, and meaningful change.

Taking the time now to reflect on and resolve these conflicts is an investment in your future. The struggles you carry today - whether anxiety, procrastination, self-doubt, or fear of failure - can continue to shape your relationships, career, and overall well-being if left unexamined. By addressing them early, you strengthen your confidence, build emotional resilience, and free yourself to pursue opportunities without being held back by outdated beliefs or fears. The work you do with the ROOT Framework today has the power to create a healthier, more fulfilling, and more empowered life for years to come.

My hope is that through this process, you find all of the happiness and success in life that you truly deserve.

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5-Step ROOT Framework Worksheet

Resolving Origins of Ongoing Triggers

Psychology for Students by Professor Jeffrey Hastings

Instructions:

Use this worksheet when you notice a recurring emotional pattern or behavior (e.g., anxiety, procrastination, self-doubt, overreaction, etc.). Reflect honestly and thoughtfully. This process helps connect present struggles to past developmental experiences using Erikson's psychosocial stages.

Step 1: Identify the Presenting Symptom

What emotion, behavior, or pattern is showing up in your life that feels distressing, confusing, or repetitive?

Write it here:

Optional examples (check if applicable):

- | | | | | |
|------------------------------------|--|--|---|---------------------------------------|
| ☐ Anxiety | ☐ Procrastination | ☐ Perfectionism | ☐ Low motivation | ☐ Self-doubt |
| ☐ Avoidance | ☐ Overthinking | ☐ Fear of failure | ☐ Emotional numbness | ☐ Other: _____ |
-

Step 2: Document a Trigger

Describe a recent situation when this symptom showed up.

What happened?

Who was involved?

What emotions did you feel?

What physical reactions did you notice?

(e.g., heart racing, stomach tightness, tears, numbness)

What thoughts came up in the moment?

✔ Step 3: Link to a Developmental Stage

Review Erikson's 8 stages of development. Choose the stage that might relate to the emotional need behind your current pattern.

Select One	Stage	Core Conflict	Age Range
☐	1 Trust vs Mistrust	"Can I trust others?"	0–1 yr
☐	2 Autonomy vs Shame & Doubt	"Can I act independently?"	1–3 yrs
☐	3 Initiative vs Guilt	"Is it okay to take action?"	3–6 yrs
☐	4 Industry vs Inferiority	"Can I be competent?"	6–12 yrs
☐	5 Identity vs Role Confusion	"Who am I?"	12–18 yrs
☐	6 Intimacy vs Isolation	"Can I form close relationships?"	18–40 yrs
☐	7 Generativity vs Stagnation	"Can I contribute meaningfully?"	40–65 yrs
☐	8 Integrity vs Despair	"Was my life meaningful?"	65+ yrs

Why do you think this stage may be connected to your symptom?

✔ Step 4: Reflect on the Unmet Need or Belief

Think back to your experiences during that life stage. What messages, treatment, or events may have shaped your view of yourself?

Was there a moment or pattern where a core emotional need wasn't met?

What belief might you have internalized from that time?

(e.g., "I'm not good enough," "I'll be abandoned," "I must be perfect")

Is that belief still affecting you today? How?

 Step 5: Reframe and Rebuild

Now, offer compassion to your younger self. Begin replacing outdated beliefs with more truthful, compassionate ones.

What would you say to your younger self in that stage?

What new belief or message can you practice now?

What small action can you take to support yourself today?

 *ROOT is not about blame - it's about insight. Understanding the origin of your patterns helps you respond to yourself with greater care, intention, and clarity.*

How would you rate your overall mood today? Circle one:

    
1 2 3 4 5

Today I felt (check all that apply):

☐ Happy ☐ Calm ☐ Content ☐ Grateful ☐ Hopeful ☐ Excited
☐ Confident ☐ Loved ☐ Proud ☐ Motivated ☐ Inspired ☐ Tired ☐ Bored
☐ Numb ☐ Confused ☐ Curious ☐ Anxious ☐ Sad ☐ Angry ☐ Lonely
☐ Guilty ☐ Ashamed ☐ Frustrated ☐ Overwhelmed ☐ Jealous
☐ Embarrassed ☐ Disappointed ☐ Irritable ☐ Insecure ☐ Hurt ☐ Afraid
☐ Stressed ☐ Resentful ☐ Other: _____

 **2. Sleep Quality** 1 – Very Poor 2 – Poor 3 – Fair 4 – Good 5 – Excellent

Time I went to bed: _____ **Time I woke up:** _____

Total hours slept: _____ hrs

 **3. Social Interaction**

Who did I interact with today? _____ **Did any interaction affect me emotionally?** ☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, briefly explain:

 **4. Food & Water**

What did I eat or drink today? _____ **Water intake (cups):** _____ ☐ Met 8–10 cups

Did anything I consumed affect my mood or energy? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, how? _____

 **5. Emotional Trigger or Symptom**

Did I feel emotionally triggered today? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, describe:

- **What triggered the emotion?** _____
- **What emotion did I feel?** _____
- **Physical response (e.g., tension, heart rate):** _____
- **Thoughts that came up:** _____

 **6. Closing Reflection**

One thing I'm proud of today: _____

One thing I want to work on tomorrow: _____

Use this journal daily to track emotional patterns, improve awareness, and begin recognizing the roots of your reactions over time.

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