

# **An SMBT Guide to Breaking Stuckness in Therapy A Practical Framework for Identifying and Shifting Looping Patterns**

## **The Core SMBT Assumption**

In Self-Meaning-Based Therapy® (SMBT), stuckness is rarely about resistance, lack of insight, or poor motivation.

Stuckness usually means therapy has reached a meaning ceiling.

A Core Negative Self-Meaning—formed early, implicitly, and emotionally—continues to organize the client’s inner world and relationships. Until that meaning is accessed and transformed at the level where it actually lives, therapy tends to loop.

Loops can look productive.

They can feel therapeutic.

But they do not reliably produce lasting change in the sense of who a person is.

## **Part I: How Stuckness Shows Up (Meaning-Level Loops)**

From an SMBT perspective, looping reflects the nervous system preserving an old self-meaning, not resisting therapy.

Common loops include:

- Insight → clarity → no shift in how I know myself  
The client understands their history and patterns clearly, yet their lived sense of who they are remains unchanged.
- Regulation → stability → the same underlying sense of who I am  
The client learns to calm, ground, or manage distress, but their core self-experience remains intact beneath the regulation.
- Trauma processing → symptom reduction → same relational patterns  
Symptoms improve, but the client continues to enact familiar relational dynamics.
- Narrative coherence → understanding → unchanged internal “truth”  
The story makes sense, but the meaning it carries about the self remains intact.

Key SMBT marker:

“We keep working around the meaning, but not through it.”

## **Part II: Identifying the Core Loop (What to Listen For)**

You are likely at a meaning-level loop when you hear:

- “I know it wasn’t my fault... but it still feels like it was.”
- “I understand myself better, but nothing really changes.”
- “I’m calmer now, but I still feel the same about myself.”
- “I’ve done so much work, yet this part hasn’t moved.”

SMBT clinical question:

“What does this client still know about themselves at a gut level that therapy hasn’t reached?”

### **Part III: The First Pivot (From Content to Self-Meaning)**

Before SMBT moves into transformation, it clarifies the client’s self-meaning consciously.

SMBT shifts the work from:

- Story → felt conclusion
- Memory → identity-organizing meaning
- Symptoms → sense of who I am

Plain SMBT prompts:

- “In that moment, what did you come to know about yourself?”
- “If that experience said something about you, what was it?”
- “Does that feel like it’s been true for a long time?”

You are listening for a meaning that feels inevitable, not intellectual:

- “I am too much.”
- “I don’t matter.”
- “Something is wrong with me.”
- “I am unsafe.”

At this stage, the meaning is named consciously, but it is not yet transformed.

### **Part IV: The Limits of Insight and Cognitive Restructuring**

#### **Why Insight Alone Can’t Fully Transform Core Self-Meaning**

Although the client’s made meaning about the self can be identified and understood consciously, insight operates primarily at the level of reflection and explanation.

At this level:

- The client can understand why a meaning formed
- They can recognize that it was unfair, inaccurate, or developmentally shaped
- They can feel compassion for their younger self

Yet the felt sense of “this is who I am” often remains unchanged.

This is because insight works around the meaning—by naming and contextualizing it—rather than within the system where the meaning is encoded.

This is why clients often say:

“I understand it now... but it still feels true.”

Insight brings clarity.

It does not reliably reorganize implicit self-knowing.

## **Why Cognitive Strategies Can't Fully Transform Core Self-Meaning**

Cognitive strategies engage conscious, verbal, reflective processes—the part of the mind that evaluates, challenges, and replaces thoughts.

Core Negative Self-Meaning, however, does not reside at that level.

From an SMBT perspective, Core Negative Self-Meaning lives in primary-process consciousness—the level where early emotional learning, attachment meaning, and bodily knowing are encoded. This level cannot be reliably accessed through reasoning, disputation, or cognitive restructuring.

As a result:

- Cognitive strategies can help clients think differently
- They can reduce symptoms and increase perspective
- They can offer relief and functional improvement

But they cannot consistently access the Core Negative Self-Meaning where it actually lives, and therefore cannot reliably transform it.

Clients often report:

“I can tell myself something different...”

“I know that's not true logically...”

“I've reframed it a hundred times...”

“...but it still feels true inside.”

In these moments, the issue is not resistance or lack of skill.

It is a mismatch of levels.

Cognitive work can support healing.

It cannot, on its own, reach and transform the implicit self-meaning that organizes the client's inner world.

## **Part V: Using Bilateral Stimulation (BLS) to Transform Core Negative Self-Meaning**

In SMBT, bilateral stimulation (BLS) is used directly on the felt, embodied Core Negative Self-Meaning, not on narrative memory, cognition, or reappraisal.

The target is not:

- The event

- The story
- The thought

The focus is:

The lived experience of “This is who I am.”

SMBT process:

1. The therapist and client work together to identify and articulate the client’s Core Negative Self-Meaning, to the extent the client is able, emotionally, viscerally, symbolically, and/or imaginally—so that the meaning is experienced as a lived sense of self rather than an idea.
2. With therapist support, the client remains consciously in contact with the felt, embodied experience of that self-meaning, with sufficient safety, grounding, and relational containment.
3. Once this lived self-meaning is clearly accessed, bilateral stimulation (BLS) is used in the therapy room to process and transform the client’s Core Negative Self-Meaning, while the client maintains contact with the embodied experience of that meaning.
4. Through BLS, the client’s brain and nervous system begin to reorganize, integrate, and transform the Core Negative Self-Meaning implicitly, allowing it to shift and lose its felt power and truth—without effort, analysis, or reframing.

Clients may say:

- “I don’t experience it the same way.”
- “Something just changed.”
- “That feeling about myself feels less true.”
- “I feel different about myself.”

These shifts reflect primary-process transformation, not cognitive change.

## **Part VI: The Therapist’s Role (SMBT Stance)**

Your role is not to:

- Challenge the meaning
- Replace it
- Reframe it
- Convince the client otherwise

Your role is to:

- Help the client stay with the meaning safely
- Provide relational containment and presence
- Trust the brain and nervous system’s capacities to reorganize

You are supporting the system to learn:  
“This core self-meaning can change.”

### **Part VII: How You Know the Loop Has Broken**

When the Core Negative Self-Meaning shifts, you will notice:

- Symptom change and a different sense of who the client is
- Less effort, less management
- New relational responses without strategy
- A felt internal coherence
- Renewed movement in the work

Often, therapy suddenly feels lighter—for both of you.

### **A Final Note for Therapists**

If you feel stuck with a client, SMBT does not ask you to work harder or blame yourself.

It invites a different question:

“What Core Negative Self-Meaning has not yet been accessed and transformed at the level where it lives?”

When therapy reaches that level, loops dissolve—and movement returns.