

what are core beliefs?



By now you are probably becoming used to the process of challenging your thinking in a range of situations. You know how to identify the thoughts that are causing you distress and how to challenge them and replace them with more balanced thoughts. However, you might notice that there are times when it is harder to believe the new balanced thought and the old unhelpful thoughts seem to be very powerful. You might notice that this happens in certain kinds of situations.

A possible explanation for this 'difficulty in letting go' of an unhelpful thought is that there may be a strong core belief at the root of that unhelpful thought. **Core beliefs** are the very essence of how we see ourselves, other people, the world, and the future. Sometimes, these core beliefs become 'activated' in certain situations. Here's an example:

Erica is able to challenge her thinking in most situations. However, she has noticed that she has trouble challenging her thinking in situations involving her flatmates and friends. In these situations, she has recognised that her thinking is often about being unlikeable. In fact, when she really looks hard at her thinking, she can see that often the underlying self-statement is, "I'm unlovable."

Core beliefs, such as the one from the above example, develop over time, usually from childhood and through the experience of significant life events or particular life circumstances. Core beliefs are strongly-held, rigid, and inflexible beliefs that are maintained by the tendency to focus on information that supports the belief and ignoring evidence that contradicts it. For example, Erica focuses on any feedback from her flatmates that isn't positive and then uses this to confirm that yet again she is unlikeable. Even neutral statements from her flatmates and friends are often interpreted as negative. Over the years, this narrow focus gives strength to the belief and Erica no longer thinks to question it. It is just totally and absolutely accepted. It is not surprising, then, that these types of beliefs are the hardest to shake.

Identifying Themes from Thought Diaries

So, how can you start identifying your core beliefs? The first step is to look over your Thought Diaries to see if your 'hot' thoughts have any common themes. You might notice that there are certain patterns to your thoughts – similar themes that occur in the B columns. Look closely at these to identify the patterns. You may become aware of one or two common themes found in the things you say about yourself, others, and the world.

Identifying A Core Belief

The process of identifying a core belief is not a great deal different from what you have already been doing in your thought diaries. Essentially, the idea is to extend the hot thought further to reveal the bottom line or root of what you might be thinking. Use questions such as: "If that's true, what does that mean?" "What's bad about that?" "What does that say about me?"

This process is like sifting through the layers of self-talk to get at what is at the bottom layer. Now, you are ready to challenge your core beliefs. Even though these beliefs are strongly held, it is important that they are challenged, just like any unhelpful thoughts. Once you have fully identified what you are telling yourself, you can begin to see if your core beliefs hold up against all that you have experienced. This process of challenging your core beliefs may not be an easy one. If you find the process too difficult or distressing, do consider seeing a mental health professional and discussing this with them.

Challenging Your Core Beliefs

To evaluate and challenge your core beliefs, ask yourself "What experiences do I have that show that this belief is not completely true all the time?" List as many experiences, and be as specific, as possible. Remember to write down everything even when you're not sure if they are relevant. When you have considered all the experiences you have written down, develop an alternative, balanced core belief. Remember that these experiences show that your unhelpful core belief is not completely true all the time. What would be an appropriate balanced and helpful core belief? Write this down.

Behavioural Experiments

You could also try doing a behavioural experiment to challenge those hard-to-budge unhelpful core beliefs. The purpose of doing an experiment is to find out how true your core beliefs are. Here's how you could conduct an experiment.

1. Write down the core belief you want to test
2. Think of a few tasks you could do to test your core belief
3. Write down what you would expect would happen if your core belief were true
4. Carry out the tasks
5. Record what actually happened when you carried out the tasks
6. Compare the actual results with your prediction and write down what you might have learned from the experiment. Then, write down a new balanced belief that fits with your conclusion.

Following Through

You might find it useful to write your balanced core beliefs onto cards that you can carry around with you as a reminder when this type of thinking is triggered. Once you've developed balanced core beliefs, follow through on them. Balanced core beliefs require careful nurturing and 'tender loving care.' Affirm yourself by using positive self-statements, remind yourself of all the evidence against the unhelpful core belief. Also, **act against** your unhelpful core belief. Ask yourself, "If I really believed my balanced belief, what are the things I would do?" Then, go out and do them. The more you do these things, the more you will come to believe your balanced beliefs. Over time, these new core beliefs will be integrated into your belief system.