

Module 8
Core Beliefs

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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 when it comes to situations involving her flatmates and the people she volunteers with at the hospital. She is troubled by feelings of depression and despair, and even after working through her thought diary, she has a tendency to believe the negative statements and continue to feel bad. 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. In the columns below, write down the themes you might have found from your ‘hot’ thoughts.

| I am ... | Others are ... | The world is ... | The future is ... |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Eg: “I am inadequate.” | Eg: “People always reject me.” | Eg: “The world is a dangerous place.” | Eg: “The future is hopeless.” |
| | | | |

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. This is illustrated using the following example:

Thought Diary (example)

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>A Activating Event</p> <p>This may be either: An actual event or situation, a thought, mental picture or recollection.</p> <p><i>My flatmates went to see a movie together but I wasn't invited to go with them</i></p> | <p>B Beliefs</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> List all self-statements that link A to C. Ask yourself: "What was I thinking?" "What was I saying to myself?" "What was going through my head at the time?" Find the most distressing (hot) thought and underline it. Rate how much you believe this thought between 0 to 100. <p><u><i>"My flatmates don't like me."</i></u></p> <p>"What does that mean?"</p> <p><i>There must be something wrong with me</i></p> <p>"What does that mean?"</p> <p><i>I'll never be able to have close friends</i></p> <p>"What does that say about me?"</p> <p><i>I'll never be able to have a relationship</i></p> <p>"What does that mean?"</p> <p><i>"I'M UNLOVABLE" (core belief)</i></p> |
| <p>C Consequences</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Write down words describing how you feel. Rate the intensity of those feelings and underline the one that is most associated with the activating event.) <p><i>Hurt (90)</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Jot down any physical sensations you experienced or actions carried out. | |

As you can see it takes a bit of work to get down to the actual core of what you believe. Use questions similar to the Thought Discovery Questions discussed in Module 4, 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.

⇒ Turn to the next page for a discussion on how to challenge your core beliefs.

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?” Use the space below to 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.

Core belief to be challenged:

Experiences that show that this belief is not COMPLETELY true ALL the time:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

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.

Balanced Core Belief:

In the example of Erica, some of the experiences that go against her core belief (“I am unlovable”) might be:

1. When I was in school, I had 4 really good friends. We hung out together everyday. Unfortunately, we didn’t keep in contact after we left school, but I did have friends who liked me.
2. I had a neighbour who became quite a good friend. She would tell me a lot about herself. She’s married and moved over east now, but we occasionally keep in touch.
3. At the hospital where I volunteer, there’s someone I sometimes have coffee with.

Her balanced core belief might be: “Not everyone will like me all the time, but I am likeable to some people.”

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.

Let's use the example of Erica to illustrate this process for you. Use the blank behavioural experiment record provided below, and a Core Beliefs Worksheet on the next page, to challenge your unhelpful core beliefs.

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| Core belief to be tested: <i>I'm unlovable</i> | | |
| Task/s: <i>Smile and say hello to 5 nurses I don't know</i> | Prediction: <i>They will look away or mumble something and then walk away</i> | What actually happened: <i>1 mumbled something 3 said hello 1 stopped to chat</i> |
| <i>Ask 3 persons I volunteer with to have coffee with me</i> | <i>They will all say no</i> | <i>2 said they were busy, 1 said yes</i> |
| Conclusion: <i>From this experiment, I realise that I am not totally unlovable or unlikeable. I definitely know some people who like me and are friendly with me. Therefore, my core belief is not always true.</i> | | |
| Balanced core belief: <i>Not everyone will like me all the time, but I am likeable to some people.</i> | | |

| | | |
|----------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|
| Core belief to be tested: | | |
| Task/s: | Prediction: | What actually happened: |
| | | |
| Conclusion: | | |
| Balanced core belief: | | |

Core Beliefs Worksheet

Core belief to be challenged:

Experiences that show that this belief is not COMPLETELY true ALL the time:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

Balanced core belief:

Core belief to be tested:

| Task/s: | Prediction: | What actually happened: |
|--|--------------------|--------------------------------|
| | | |

Conclusion:

Balanced core belief:

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. Remember, unhelpful core beliefs are approached just the same as any other type of unhelpful thinking – they just take some extra work on your part. Once you've gathered evidence against your unhelpful core beliefs, conducted a behavioural experiment to test them, and have 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. If you have previously avoided doing certain things because of your unhelpful core belief, now is the time to act against it, and stop avoiding those things. 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.

Note: In your own reading about core beliefs, you might come across the term 'self-schemas.' This term and core beliefs mean the same thing.

Module Summary

- Sometimes, it may be difficult to believe balanced thoughts in certain situations because there may be a strong core belief operating in that particular situation
- Core beliefs are the very essence of how we see ourselves, other people, the world, and the future. They 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. Such beliefs are often unquestioned – they are just totally and absolutely accepted
- Core beliefs can be identified by looking over your thought diaries to see if your ‘hot’ thoughts have any common themes
- You can get to the core of what you believe by asking yourself “What does that mean?” after an unhelpful thought or a ‘hot’ thought
- To evaluate and challenge your unhelpful core beliefs, ask yourself, “What experiences do I have that show that this belief is not completely true all the time?”
- Core beliefs can also be challenged by conducting a behavioural experiment, which aims to find how true your core beliefs really are
- Plan a few tasks to test your belief, write down what you expect will happen, carry out the tasks, record what actually happened and compare this with your prediction
- Develop an alternative, balanced core belief to replace the unhelpful core belief
- Remind yourself of your balanced core belief by writing it on a card and carry it around with you and affirm yourself with positive self-statements
- Follow through on your balanced core belief by putting it into action

Stay Tuned ...

In the next module, we will discuss how you can maintain the gains you have made, stay healthy, and enhance your well-being.