

Stepping Out of Social Anxiety

Module 8

Challenging Core Beliefs

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Introduction

By now, you are probably becoming familiar with the process of challenging your thinking in a range of social situations. You know how to identify the thoughts that are causing you distress, and how to challenge them or test them out through behavioural experiments to develop more balanced thinking. However, you might have noticed that there are times when it is harder to believe the new balanced thoughts, because the old unhelpful thoughts seem to be very powerful.

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:

Andrew is generally able to challenge his unhelpful thinking about social situations. However he has noticed that he has a great deal of trouble challenging his thinking when it comes to situations where he is the centre of attention and is forced to speak, such as when talking with a group of people. Even after working through his thought diary, he has a tendency to believe the negative statements such as “I don’t have anything interesting to say”, and continue to feel bad. In these situations, he has recognised that he has extremely high standards for his social performance. In fact, when he really looks hard at his thinking, he can see that often the underlying self-statement is, “I’m boring and incompetent”.

This self-statement that Andrew identified is an example of a core belief, and core beliefs guide how we think and how we behave in our day-to-day lives. In this module, we will discuss ways to identify and modify some of these core beliefs, so that we can reduce the negative impact that these beliefs can have on our approach to social situations and to life in general.

What are Core Beliefs?

Core beliefs are beliefs that we hold about ourselves, other people, and about the world we live in. These beliefs often sit at the ‘core’ of the thoughts and mental images that we experience in the ‘here-and-now’. We may or may not be consciously aware of these beliefs at work – some of our beliefs may remain reasonably unconscious and require a bit of work to uncover, while other beliefs may be quite noticeable and easily retrieved in our minds.

Here are other common features of core beliefs:

- They are not necessarily conscious thoughts or images, but are more like ‘unwritten’ laws or ‘absolute’ statements through which people interpret what is happening around them.
- They can act like ‘filters’ that guide our perceptions and expectations in the here-and-now.
- They are usually fairly powerful (linked to intense emotions), pervasive (present in many areas of life), and often long-standing.



Core beliefs develop over time, usually from childhood and through the experience of significant life events or particular life circumstances. Some of the core beliefs that we have developed can be helpful (e.g., “It’s important to be kind and respectful to others”); however, we may also hold beliefs that are more unhelpful or rigid. These unhelpful core beliefs might have formed to protect us in some ways (e.g., “The world is dangerous”) or to help us to strive at some point in our lives (e.g., “I must never make a mistake”). When we apply these core beliefs too rigidly, and to most or all areas of our lives, they are likely to have a negative impact on how we feel about ourselves, and how we relate to people around us.

Core Beliefs in Social Anxiety

Many people with social anxiety can recall early life events (from childhood, adolescence, or early adulthood) that were associated with significant social anxiety. There may be one or two situations, or many early experiences, that you identify as contributing to your social anxiety. For example, if I was bullied I may have formed beliefs such as “I am unlikeable” or “I am inferior”. I might also have come to believe that “others are hostile or critical”. As a consequence, when I think about entering a social situation now, I view my ‘inferiority’ as being obvious to others and I expect to be criticised by others.



Examples of some common beliefs for people who experience social anxiety include:

- “If I am not liked by everybody, I am worthless.”
- “I’m unlovable.”
- “I’m inadequate.”
- “People will reject/hurt me.”

However, it might be helpful to note that even people without social anxiety can also hold some or all of these beliefs.

Holding such core beliefs can maintain and even exacerbate social anxiety by biasing our interpretation of events (through our thoughts and expectations) and influencing our focus of attention (we selectively look for evidence that supports our beliefs, and tend to ignore evidence that contradicts it). To continue with the example of Andrew from the previous page, Andrew focuses on any feedback from other people or from the situation that isn’t positive, and then uses this to confirm yet again that he is boring and incompetent. Even neutral statements from other people can often be interpreted as negative. Over the years, this narrow focus gives strength to the belief that “I’m boring and incompetent”, and Andrew 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.

By being able to identify our core beliefs, we can challenge them directly, just like the thoughts and expectations that spring from them. Understanding our core beliefs can also provide a useful ‘shortcut’ for challenging our thoughts and expectations, as often the same one or two beliefs will underlie most situations in which you feel socially anxious.

Identifying Core Beliefs

Identifying themes from your thought diaries

There are several methods that we can use to uncover core beliefs. One method, which you might have used already, is to look for recurring themes that come up in your thought challenging records. You might notice that there are certain patterns to the images or thoughts, perhaps one or two common themes in the things you say about yourself (“I am...”), other people (“Others are...”), the world (“The world is...”), or the future (“The future is...”). Take some time now to consider some of the themes you may have noticed that you hold, and record them in the space below.

| About myself... | About others... | About the world/future... | Other themes... |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------|
| E.g., “I am a failure”, “I am stupid” | E.g., “People are critical” | E.g., “The future is hopeless” | |
| | | | |

Downward Arrow Technique

Some core beliefs are easily retrieved from our minds, like the themes you may have noticed in the earlier exercise. If you were not able to identify specific themes, or you are still a bit unsure, another useful way of uncovering core beliefs is to use the “Downward Arrow” technique. This technique is not a great deal different from what you have already been doing in your thought challenging records. Essentially you start with a common thought or prediction from your monitoring, and work downwards by asking yourself at each level, “What does this say or mean about me/others/the world?” End this exercise when you arrive at an absolute statement about yourself, others, or the world (core belief). This process is like sifting through the layers of self-talk to get to what is at the bottom layer.



Take a look at the example on the left panel below, and then have a go at using the downward arrow for your own example in the right panel.

| IDENTIFYING CORE BELIEFS: AN EXAMPLE | MY EXAMPLE |
|---|---|
| <p><u>Situation (from your Thought Challenging Record)</u></p> <p><i>Talking to my friend Michelle</i></p> <p>↓</p> <p><u>Initial thoughts/expectations</u></p> <p><i>“I don’t think Michelle likes me”</i></p> <p>↓</p> <p><u>What does this say or mean about me?</u></p> <p><i>“Whenever I get close, people end up disliking me”</i></p> <p>↓</p> <p><u>What does this say or mean about me?</u></p> <p><i>“I’ll never have a close relationship”</i></p> <p>↓</p> <p><u>What does this say or mean about me?</u></p> <p><u>“I’m unlikeable” (Core belief)</u></p> | <p><u>Situation (from your Thought Challenging Record)</u></p> <p>↓</p> <p><u>Initial thoughts/expectations</u></p> <p>↓</p> <p><u>What does this say or mean about me/others/world?*</u></p> <p>↓</p> <p><u>What does this say or mean about me/others/world?*</u></p> <p>↓</p> <p><u>What does this say or mean about me/others/world?*</u></p> |

As you can see, it takes a bit of work to get to the actual core of what you believe. You may not need as many prompts as the example given to arrive at your core belief or you may need to use a few more.

Challenging Core Beliefs

Now that you have identified one or more core beliefs, you are ready to challenge them. Even though these beliefs are strongly held, they can be challenged just like any unhelpful thoughts. Because core beliefs are often long-held and can be emotionally provocative, this process of challenging your core beliefs may not be an easy one. If you find the process too difficult or distressing, consider seeing a mental health professional and discussing this with them.

Evidence-Testing

An important way that we can start to challenge a core belief directly is by paying attention to, and recording, evidence that this belief is not 100% true. This is not as easy as it sounds, as often these beliefs have been there a long time and are hard to shake. A good example of the power of core beliefs is the difficulty many people have with accepting compliments, and the discomfort this creates. This is because this information (the compliment) is often contrary to what people believe about themselves, and therefore people's first reaction is to deny or downplay the information, thereby keeping their core belief intact. To be able to challenge the core belief, it is therefore important to keep track of all the evidence that might disagree with a core belief, even if it seems small or unimportant.

Step 1. Choose a core belief to test

Choose a core belief that you would like to evaluate and rate how strong your belief is before challenging it between 0 (completely untrue) to 10 (completely true).

Core belief to be challenged: *e.g., "I'm unlikeable", "I'm incompetent"*

Strength of belief (0 = completely untrue – 10 = completely true)

Before challenging: ____ **After** challenging (leave this for after Step 3): ____

Step 2. Record evidence that shows this belief is not completely true 100% of the time

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 it is relevant – even very small experiences count. This can include instances from the past, including from when you were a child, all the way to examples from the present day. You might have to look really hard (and to look regularly, over a period of time), because you are probably not used to seeing the good things about this area of your life.

In the example of Andrew, some of the experiences that go against his core belief that "I'm boring and incompetent" might be:

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

1. *I got promoted to assistant manager at the store I used to work at.*
2. *I meet with my high school friend Joe about once a month for a coffee. He asks me a lot of questions about what I'm doing and how I'm going, and often tells me that he enjoys our catch-ups.*
3. *I am good at chess and often win when I play with my family or online.*
4. *When I was 12, I was invited to present a speech at the graduation assembly.*

Try to be as specific as possible when describing the evidence. For example, instead of "I have some friends who find me interesting", the evidence becomes more powerful and compelling when we can describe specific people, events, and actions (as shown in Andrew's description of his friend Joe in point 2 above).

Stepping Out of Social Anxiety

You might find it difficult to come up with evidence all at once. That's understandable because it takes time to shift core beliefs that have developed over many years. You may choose to do this exercise over the course of a week or two, writing down at least one piece of evidence each day. Once you can find a piece of evidence nearly every day, try looking for two or three bits of evidence every day. Don't worry if the things you write down seem trivial or if you are unsure if they "count". When you have 20 or so items on your list you can look at them all and draw an overall conclusion about whether your original negative core belief accurately describes your whole experience.



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

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____
13. _____
14. _____
15. _____
16. _____
17. _____
18. _____
19. _____
20. _____

Step 3. Develop an alternative, balanced core belief

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.

For Andrew, his new, balanced core belief might be: “Although there are things I don’t know or haven’t done, I do have knowledge and experiences that people find valuable or interesting.”

What would be an appropriate balanced and helpful core belief for your example? Write this down.

Balanced core belief:

Strength of this belief: _____ (0 = completely untrue – 10 = completely true)

It is also helpful to revisit your rating of the strength of your original negative core belief before challenging (i.e., go back to Step 1), and re-rate how much you believe in it after challenging. This allows you to see the contrast between your old and new core beliefs, and the impact from taking on board the different pieces of evidence you have collected.

The following page puts all three steps together into a worksheet that you can use to test other beliefs that you may have.

Recording Evidence that a Core Belief is Not 100% True

Core belief to be challenged:

Strength of belief (0 = completely untrue – 10 = completely true)

Before challenging: ____ After challenging: ____

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:

Strength of this belief: ____ (0 = completely untrue – 10 = completely true)

Remember!

New core beliefs take time to develop and to make them more believable. Even after you have created a more balanced core belief, it is important to continue collecting evidence regularly (from past and present events) to help “feed” and strengthen it. Writing the evidence down in a log book can be useful so that you can refer back to it if you experience a setback and need some reminders about your new core beliefs. You might also find it useful to write your balanced core belief(s), along with a few key pieces of supporting evidence, onto small cards that you can carry around with you as a reminder when your old core beliefs are activated.



In the next module, we will talk about more ways to strengthen our new core beliefs. We will focus on setting goals and taking action in various areas of our daily lives to follow through with these new beliefs.

Module Summary

- Sometimes, it may be difficult to believe balanced thoughts in certain situations because there is 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. Alternatively, 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 (the ‘Downward Arrow’ technique).
- 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?” Record past and present experiences, and try to be as specific as possible.
- Keeping a log book of evidence or writing the new beliefs and their supporting evidence down on small cards are ways to remind yourself of your new core beliefs when the old beliefs are activated.

Coming Up...

In the next module we will discuss how you can strengthen your new and more balanced core beliefs.



About the Modules

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BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in the modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT). Examples of this are reported in:

McEvoy, P. M., Hyett, M. P., Bank, S. R., Erceg-Hurn, D. M., Johnson, A. R., Kyron, M. J., Saulsman, L. M., Moulds, M. L., Grisham, J. R., Holmes, E. A., Moscovitch, D. A., Lipp, O. V. Campbell, B. N. C., & Rapee, R. M. (in press). Imagery-enhanced versus verbally-based group cognitive behavior therapy for social anxiety disorder: a randomized clinical trial. *Psychological Medicine*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0033291720003001>

Rapee, R. M., Gaston, J. E., & Abbott, M. J. (2009). Testing the efficacy of theoretically derived improvements in the treatment of social phobia. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 77, 317–327.

REFERENCES

These are some of the professional references used to create the modules in this information package.

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Hackmann, A., Bennett-Levy, J., & Holmes, E. A. (Eds., 2011). *Oxford Guide to Imagery in Cognitive Therapy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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Saulsman, L. M., Ji, J. L., & McEvoy, P. M. (2019). The essential role of mental imagery in cognitive behaviour therapy: what is old is new again. Invited review for *Australian Psychologist*, 54, 237-244. doi: 10.1111/ap.12406.

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