

Improving Self-Esteem

Module 8

Developing Balanced Core Beliefs

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Introduction

We have now come to the final step in tackling low self-esteem – changing the negative core beliefs you have about yourself. In earlier modules, you learned how to tackle the negative unhelpful thoughts you might have in day-to-day situations, which sprout from your negative core beliefs. In Module 7, you learned how to change the unhelpful rules and assumptions that have kept your negative core beliefs intact. All of these previous modules have put you in a strong position to now directly tackle the negative core beliefs that are at the root of your low self-esteem. All the hard work you have done so far has been undermining your negative core beliefs, shaking the ground beneath them, and sowing the seed of doubt as to how accurate they are. So let's finish the job, and focus on adjusting those negative core beliefs – from negative and biased, to balanced and realistic.

Identifying Your Negative Core Belief

Remember, your negative core beliefs reflect the negative, broad, and generalised judgements you have made about yourself, based on some negative experiences you might have had during your earlier years. Based on the work you have done in the earlier modules, you may already know what those beliefs are and you may have begun to question them. However, let's really focus on this now.

If you are not clear as to what your negative core beliefs are as yet, you need to first pin them down and identify them, before you can start changing them. Reflecting on the work you have already done will provide information and clues as to what your negative core beliefs are. To uncover those negative core beliefs, you will need to think about the implications of the specific clues and information you already have, that is, think about what they say about the overall view you have of yourself. Important questions to ask yourself throughout this 'identification' process are: *What does this information mean about me as a person? What does this clue say about who I am?* Asking yourself these questions will help you uncover your negative core beliefs from specific thoughts and experiences you have already identified.



Below are the various clues and information you can use to identify your negative core beliefs. Go through each of them, and see if you can discover the specific negative core beliefs that ring true for you.

Negative Life Experiences

The negative life experiences that you identified in Module 2 as contributing to the development of your low self-esteem could provide clues as to what your negative core beliefs are. Reflect on these experiences and ask yourself the following questions. Jot down any ideas about the negative core beliefs that come to mind.

- *Did these experiences lead me to think there was something wrong with me in some way? If so, what was wrong?*
- *Do I remember specific situations that accompany the negative thoughts or feelings I have about myself? What do my memories of these situations say about me as a person?*
- *Can I link a specific person I know to the way I feel about myself? Has that person used certain words to describe me? What does their treatment of me say about me as a person?*

Biased Expectations

The biased expectations that you identified in Module 4 could provide some ideas as to what your negative core beliefs are. Reflect on the key concerns you identified in your Thought Diaries for biased expectations, and ask yourself the following questions. Jot down any ideas about the negative core beliefs that come to mind.

- *If my biased expectations were to come true, what would that mean about me as a person?*
- *If I didn't avoid or escape or use my safety behaviours, what would I be worried about revealing to other people about who I am?*

Negative Self-Evaluations

The negative self-evaluations you uncovered in Module 5 will also provide clues regarding your negative core beliefs. Think about the sorts of criticisms you made of yourself in your Thought Diaries for negative self-evaluations, and ask yourself the following questions. Jot down any ideas about the negative core beliefs that come to mind.

- *What do my negative self-evaluations say about me as a person?*
- *What are the common themes, labels, words, or names I use to describe myself? What do they mean about me?*
- *Do my negative self-evaluations remind me of criticisms I have received from others when I was young? What do those criticisms tell me about myself?*
- *What things make me critical of myself? What do these things say about who I am?*

Difficulties Promoting Balanced Self-Evaluations

The difficulties you may have had in Module 6 with focusing on the positive you (by writing down your positive qualities) and acting like the positive you (by doing pleasant activities that are just for yourself) may give you some ideas regarding your negative core beliefs. Reflect on any troubles you had with thinking about yourself kindly and treating yourself kindly, and ask yourself the following questions. Jot down any ideas about the negative core beliefs that come to mind.

- *What made it difficult to think about myself kindly or treat myself kindly?*
- *What was I telling myself when I tried to do these things?*
- *What do my reactions to thinking/treating myself well tell me about how I see myself?*

Perceived Outcomes Of Not Fulfilling The Rules

In Module 7, you clearly identified your unhelpful rules and assumptions. You can also use these to uncover your negative core beliefs. Think about what you fear will happen if your rules are broken. Sometimes your rule will incorporate the negative core belief (eg., “If I don’t do things perfectly, *I am incompetent*,” “If people see the real me, then they will know *I am inferior*,” “If I disappoint someone, then *I am a bad person*.”). Ask yourself the following question and jot down any ideas about the negative core beliefs that come to mind.

- *If my rule was broken, then what would that mean about me?*

Using all of the above clues and asking yourself what these things tell you about how you see yourself will help you to uncover your negative core beliefs. Once you think you have a clear idea as to what they are, write them down in the space below.

Adjusting Your Negative Core Beliefs

1. Choose One Negative Core Belief

If you have identified a number of negative core beliefs, choose only ONE to begin working on. You could choose the one that is of greatest concern to work on now or one that is related to any biased expectations, negative self-evaluations, or unhelpful rules and assumptions that you have previously worked on. Write that negative core belief in the top box of the ‘Adjusting Core Beliefs Worksheet’ on page 10. Also note how much you believe the negative core belief at now, when it’s most convincing, and when it’s least convincing. Note how the negative core belief makes you feel. Throughout this module, you will need to keep referring to this worksheet and completing the relevant sections as we go. This will ensure that as you work through your negative core belief and tackle it, you have a clear record of this process to refer to at anytime in the future. There’s an example of how to complete the worksheet on page 9.

Once you have worked through the process of adjusting this first negative core belief, you will then be able to apply it to other negative core beliefs you might want to change.

2. Develop a Balanced Core Belief

Now it’s time to develop an alternative core belief to replace your old negative one. When developing a new core belief, you want to aim for something that is more positive, balanced, and realistic. Think of something that is a more accurate reflection of yourself. It is important that the work you do on your negative core beliefs is not just about squashing the belief that you have been carrying around, but also

about promoting a new balanced view of yourself. So it is not so much about saying what you are not (eg., “I am not stupid”), but more about saying what you are (eg., “I am capable in many ways”).

From the work you have done in previous modules, you may already have some idea of what a more balanced core belief might be. It might be the opposite to your old belief (eg., “I am incompetent” ↔ “I am competent”), a more moderate view of yourself (eg., “I am a failure” ↔ “I am great at many things, average at other things, and weaker in some areas like anyone else”), or something else (eg., “I am no good” ↔ “I am a worthwhile person”). The important thing is that the new belief is more balanced, weighing up all the information (not just the negative) available, and including both your strengths and weaknesses. When developing a new core belief, ensure that your worth as a person is not being determined by only your faults or weaknesses. Also make sure that you are not painting an overly positive view of yourself (eg., “I am perfect in everyway”), as this will be unrealistic, and it is unlikely that you will believe it. Remember not to discount any new alternative core beliefs on the basis that you don’t fulfil these 100% (eg., “I can’t put down that *I am competent* because sometimes I get things wrong”). No one is capable of such feats of perfection, so instead, accept that you are your new view of yourself – not perfect, but “good enough.”

Now that you have an idea of your new balanced core belief, write it in the ‘Adjusting Negative Core Beliefs’ worksheet’ on page 10. Also note how much you believe this new core belief at various times (now, when it is most convincing, and when it is least convincing) and how it makes you feel when you reflect on it. In these early stages, you might not believe it a whole lot. That is to be expected, given that you have carried the other negative view of yourself around with you for some time. To help you be more open to the new balanced view of yourself, let’s work through the process further.

3. Examining the Evidence for Old Beliefs

To start to chip away at your old negative core belief, we first need to examine the evidence you base this belief on. What evidence do you have for this negative view of yourself? What experiences do you use to justify this negative core belief? To try to uncover what you base your belief on, ask yourself the following questions:

- Are there current problems I am having that I base this belief on? (eg., problems with depression or anxiety, relationship problems, etc)
- Am I condemning myself because I need help and can’t manage alone? (eg., turning to friends, family or mental health professionals for assistance)
- Am I condemning myself based on past mistakes I have made? (eg., failing school, trouble with the law, infidelity in past relationships, etc)
- Am I condemning myself based on specific weaknesses of mine? (eg., not being academically minded, not being good at sport, etc)
- Am I condemning myself based on my physical characteristics or my personality attributes? (eg., my body size, my attractiveness or my shyness, my untidiness)
- Do I base my view of myself on how I compare to other people? (eg., whether I am better than them in certain tasks, achievements, appearance, etc)
- Do I use how other people treat or have treated me as a basis for how I view myself? (eg., abuse, neglect, mistreatment)
- Do I use the behaviour of other people as a basis for how I view myself? (eg., my child’s poor behaviour)
- Have I lost something that is important to my self worth? (eg., job loss, relationship break-up)

Once you have a clear idea of some of the evidence you use to justify the negative view you have of yourself, write the evidence down in the column marked “Evidence For” your Old Negative Core Belief, on the worksheet on page 10.

When you have identified the evidence for your negative core belief, it is time to assess how credible and accurate the evidence is. This is like being a lawyer who questions how good or trustworthy the evidence is, whether or not it stands up under scrutiny. This is where you also ask yourself: *Are there alternative ways of understanding this evidence? Are there other explanations you have not considered? Are there other ways of interpreting or making sense of the evidence, other than condemning who you are as a person?* Try to uncover other ways of understanding the evidence by asking yourself the following questions:

- Are there other explanations for the current problems I am having, other than personal shortcomings? (eg., “I have not been meeting my commitments – not because I am lazy – but because procrastination and neglect are symptoms of depression”)
- Are there benefits in getting help from other people? How do I view people that ask me for help? (eg., “I guess two heads are better than one, and I don’t think badly of people who ask me for help, sometimes it takes a stronger person to admit they need help”)
- Is it reasonable to base my self-esteem on my past mistakes? (eg., “Everyone makes mistakes. It is unfair to beat myself up over things I can’t change”)
- Is it reasonable to base my self-esteem on my specific weaknesses? (eg., “Just because I am not good at something, does not make me useless as a whole person. Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses”)
- Is it reasonable to base my self-esteem on my appearance or on certain personality attributes I have? (eg., “I don’t judge others by how they look, so why do it to myself”; “Just because I am shy, doesn’t mean I am a freak, it is just who I am, everyone is different in that way”)
- Is it fair to compare myself to others, and base my self-esteem on whether I am better than they are? (eg., “Just because someone is better than me at this doesn’t make them a better person. There will always be people I am better than at certain things and others who are better than me at certain things”)
- What are other reasons for the way people treat or have treated me, other than personal shortcomings? (eg., “The way they treated me was probably due to the type of person they are and problems they have, rather than who I am”)
- Can I be 100% responsible for other people’s behaviour? (eg., “As much as I try to do my best, I don’t have absolute control over my child’s behaviour. There are other factors involved, it is not all my fault”)

Once you have identified some other ways of understanding the evidence for your old negative core belief, list these new perspectives in the column marked “Alternatives Ways of Looking at the Evidence” on the worksheet. Now that you have completed this section of the worksheet, what did you make of what you had written? Hopefully this exercise will show you that the evidence you base the old negative view of yourself on is not totally accurate and probably unfair in many ways. Did you find this difficult to do? It can be in the beginning, because you have always accepted your negative core beliefs and the evidence for them. However, with practice, and putting on a different perspective (like putting on a different pair of spectacles), you’ll soon find that you can do this exercise with ease.

4. Supporting New Beliefs

You have spent time gaining a new perspective on the evidence you have used in the past to support your old negative view of yourself. Now let’s turn to supporting the new balanced view of yourself that you have developed. To support your new core beliefs, to take them on board, let them sink in, and make them believable, you need to do two things. Firstly, you need to gather evidence that is consistent with this new view of yourself, paying attention to evidence from the past/present and looking out for appropriate evidence in the future. Secondly, you need to act on, and experiment with, this new view of yourself. This means that you need to test it out, try it on for size, and act in ways that are consistent with the new you.



Evidence

In previous modules, we have discussed how when you have a core belief about yourself, you will tend to only pay attention to things that confirm your belief. Therefore, to enhance the new balanced view of yourself, you will need to start paying attention to evidence from the past and present that confirms this new view. You also need to be ready to pay attention to evidence that arises in the future that confirms this new view. On the 'Adjusting Negative Core Beliefs' worksheet, fill in past or present examples or experiences you have had that are consistent with your new balanced core belief. When doing this, pay attention to things that have happened that support this kinder view of yourself. Once you have done this, fill in the types of evidence likely to arise in the future, which will confirm your new balanced view. This will act as a reminder of what to be on the look out for, to help you strengthen this kinder view of yourself.

Experiments

The last part of adjusting your negative core beliefs involves behaving as if the new balanced view of yourself is true. At the moment it doesn't sound very good, does it? But of course, it is true! It's just that you might not quite believe it as yet. Do you agree? This is because you have been carrying around the negative core beliefs for a while. However, you are beginning to loosen their hold on you. Let's loosen it further by changing how you behave and live your life! Ask yourself how someone who believed this kinder view of themselves might act or behave from day to day? How you can test out this new perspective you have of yourself? What things could you do to obtain more evidence for your new balanced core belief? What new experiences might further support this new perspective you are developing?

In general, to create new opportunities for more experiences that will support your new core belief will involve:

- Approaching rather than avoiding things
- Sticking with challenges rather than escaping
- Stopping safety behaviours and approaching things without taking precautions
- Treating yourself well
- Doing pleasant things for yourself
- Taking note of achievements and positive qualities
- Being active and engaged in life
- Being assertive

At a more specific level, think about exactly what you could do to 'test-drive' this new view of yourself. Exactly what new behaviours will you need to try out? How will you be behaving differently to before? Once you have some specific ideas about how to experiment with this new core belief, write these down in the "New Behaviour/Experiments" section of the 'Adjusting Negative Core Beliefs' worksheet.

5. Evaluating Your Beliefs

Now that you have been through the step-by-step process for adjusting your negative core beliefs, it is important to reflect on what impact this process has had on you. You can do this by re-rating how much you now believe your old negative core belief and compare it to how much you now believe your new balanced core belief. Complete these ratings at the bottom of the worksheet.

An Ongoing Process

It is important to remember that changing your core belief about yourself is a difficult task that might take some time and practice. It will involve revisiting the steps in this module a number of times, reflecting on what you have written, and perhaps adding more things. It will involve continually re-training your attention in everyday life so that you take note of all the future evidence that will arise to further support your new belief. It will involve behaving differently and using experiments to help accumulate more experiences and evidence for your new belief. It is an ongoing process. Remember, you have carried this old belief around for many years, so it will take some time to adjust it and embrace your new belief. However, you will find that if you continue to apply these strategies over time, your conviction in your old negative core beliefs will decrease and your conviction in your new balanced core beliefs will rise.

Adjusting Negative Core Beliefs

(example)

Old Negative Core Belief I would like to Adjust	
<i>I am incompetent</i>	
Rate how much I believe it (0-100%):	Emotions
Now: 50% When it is most convincing: 95% When it is least convincing: 80%	<i>Depressed, Sad, Hopeless</i>
New Balanced Core Belief I would like to Adopt	
<i>I have some weaknesses like anyone does but I am good at many things</i>	
Rate how much I believe it (0-100%):	Emotions
Now: 30% When it is most convincing: 60% When it is least convincing: 5%	<i>Ok, Calm, Accepting</i>
Old Negative Core Belief	
Evidence For	Alternative Ways of Looking at the Evidence
<i>I am anxious all the time. There are other people better than me. Everyone knows what they are doing. I have made mistakes and gotten things wrong. Bosses have told me I am no good. I have to ask people for help at times. I find things hard. Things don't come naturally to me.</i>	<i>Feeling unconfident is a symptom of anxiety - it doesn't mean I can't do things well. There will always be some people who are better than me. Lots of those people have more experience than me. It doesn't make me incompetent. I can always improve further. I don't know for sure that everyone knows what they are doing - it just appears that way. They may be feeling the same way I do on the inside. Everyone makes mistakes. It is not fair to use that as a reason to keep beating myself up and telling myself I'm incompetent. The two bosses who criticised me did it to everyone, not just me, so it probably doesn't accurately reflect my level of competence. Finding things a challenge doesn't mean I am incompetent - I just need to work at what I do.</i>
New Balanced Core Belief	
Evidence For New Balanced Core Belief (from the past/present)	Evidence For New Balanced Core Belief (what to look out for in the future)
<i>I complete most of my projects on time. I complete all of the duties expected of me as a worker, parent, partner, daughter, etc. I juggle work and home commitments well. I am able to do things that others can't do. I have had positive feedback about my work. People acknowledge I do a good job.</i>	<i>Meeting deadlines. Completing tasks at work and home. Fulfilling commitments I have made. Handling difficult challenges. Positive feedback from others. Signs others value my work or abilities.</i>
New Behaviour/Experiments (things I can do to support or gain more evidence for my New Balanced Core Belief):	
<i>Less preparation for presentations and meetings. Stop checking work so much (just proof once). Leave small mistakes and note reactions from others. Try not to do everything perfectly at work and home, aim for 80% or "good enough" with some tasks. Approach challenging work opportunities. Ask for help with something at least once a week. Admit to not knowing something regularly. Express my opinion even when I am not 100% sure of the correct answer. Spend time weekly doing pleasant activities just for myself. Treat myself kindly, rather than filling my week with striving to achieve.</i>	
Rate how much I believe the following now (0-100%)	
Old Negative Core Belief: 30%	New Balanced Core Belief: 70%

Adjusting Negative Core Beliefs

Old Negative Core Belief I would like to Adjust	
Rate how much I believe it (0-100%): Now: When it is most convincing: When it is least convincing:	Emotions
New Balanced Core Belief I would like to Adopt	
Rate how much I believe it (0-100%): Now: When it is most convincing: When it is least convincing:	Emotions
Old Negative Core Belief	
<i>Evidence For</i>	<i>Alternative Ways of Looking at the Evidence</i>
New Balanced Core Belief	
<i>Evidence For New Balanced Core Belief (from the past/present)</i>	<i>Evidence For New Balanced Core Belief (what to look out for in the future)</i>
New Behaviour/Experiments (things I can do to support or gain more evidence for my New Balanced Core Belief):	
Rate how much I believe the following now (0-100%)	
Old Negative Core Belief:	New Balanced Core Belief:

Module Summary

- A negative core belief is a broad, negative, and generalised judgement you have made about yourself, based on some previous negative experiences
- Activities you have done in previous modules will give you information and clues for identifying your negative core belief
- You may have more than one negative core belief, but it is best to choose the most problematic belief first, and work on them one at a time
- To identify your negative core belief, reflect on the following and ask yourself what these things mean about you as a person?
 - Negative life experiences you have already identified
 - Biased expectations you have noted
 - Negative self-evaluations you have become aware of
 - Difficulties you had promoting balanced self-evaluations
 - What you fear will be the outcome if you don't fulfil your old rules
- To adjust your negative core belief you need to:
 - Develop a new understanding of the evidence on which you based your old beliefs
 - Develop a new balanced core belief
 - Identify evidence from the past and present that support this new belief
 - Identify what evidence you need to look out for in future to support this new belief
 - Behave and experiment in ways that confirm your new core belief



Coming up next ...

In the next module, you will be able to explore what healthy self-esteem is and put all the concepts in this infopax together.

About This Module

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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). CBT is a type of psychotherapy that is based on the theory that unhelpful negative emotions and behaviours are strongly influenced by problematic cognitions (thoughts). This can be found in the following:

Beck, A.T., Rush, A. J., Shaw, B.F., & Emery, G. (1979). *Cognitive Therapy of Depression*. New York: Guildford.

Clark, D. M. (1986). A cognitive approach to panic. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 24, 461-470.

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

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“IMPROVING SELF-ESTEEM”

This module forms part of:

Lim, L., Saulsman, L., & Nathan, P. (2005). *Improving Self-Esteem*. Perth, Western Australia: Centre for Clinical Interventions.

ISBN: 0-9757995-0-9

Created: July 2005