

Module 9

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:

Fred 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 center of attention and is forced to speak, such as at his class presentations. He is troubled by feelings of intense anxiety, and he experiences symptoms of panic just thinking about the situation. Even after working through his thought diary, he has a tendency to believe the negative statements 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 must look smart and funny all the time”, and “Everyone must like me.”

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, Fred focuses on any feedback from his peers that isn’t positive and then uses this to confirm that yet again he is unintelligent and boring. Even neutral statements from his peers are often interpreted as negative. Over the years, this narrow focus gives strength to the belief and Fred 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 and other people. The columns below might help you to find common types of themes.

| About myself... | About others... | About the future... | Other themes.. |
|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------|
| Eg “I am a failure” | Eg “People think I’m stupid” Eg “People are critical” | Eg “This will never get better” | |
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Identifying a Core Belief

The process of identifying a schema is not a great deal different from what you have already been doing. Essentially, the idea is to extend the B column out to reveal the bottom-line of what you might be thinking. This is illustrated using an example from Fred's thought diary below:

Thought Diary (example)

| A Activating Event | B Beliefs |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>This may be either: An actual event or a situation, a thought, a mental picture or recollection.</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. List all 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?" 2. Find the most distressing (hot) thought and underline it 3. Rate how much you believe this thought between 0 to 100. |
| <p><i>While I was talking to the class several of them were yawning</i></p> | <p><i>Whenever I talk to a group of people, they always respond negatively</i></p> |
| C Consequences | <u>"What does that mean?"</u> |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 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>That people don't want to listen to me</i></p> |
| <u>Anxious (70)</u> | <u>"What does that mean?"</u> |
| Irritated | <p><i>That I have nothing important to say</i></p> |
| | <u>"What does that mean?"</u> |
| | <p><i>That they won't like me</i></p> |
| | <u>"What does that say about me?"</u> |
| | <p><i>"I'm stupid and boring" (core belief)</i></p> |

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 Fred, some of the experiences that go against his core belief (“I’m stupid and boring”) might be:

1. While I have been studying, I have been getting high grades in many of my courses.
2. I meet with a few friends about once a month for a coffee and we often talk for hours. They ask me a lot of questions about what I’m doing and how I’m going and tell me each time they’ve enjoyed catching up with me.
3. I’ve had a few people in my classes over the past couple of years email me to ask me questions about some of the topics, like the one I presented on. They’ve even asked to meet up with me to talk more about it.

Fred’s balanced core belief might be: “Although I’m not perfect, I do have knowledge and experiences that people find valuable or interesting.”

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 Fred 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 stupid and boring"</i> | | |
| Task/s: <i>* Phone up 3 of my friends and ask how they're going</i> <i>* Make a comment to one classmate after each class (3) about that day's topic</i> | Prediction: <i>* The conversation will be short or they won't want to know about how I'm going</i> <i>* They will all ignore me or make a quick comment and leave</i> | What actually happened: <i>* Joe said he was busy. Nat asked me 4 questions about my studies. David and I talked about my travel plans.</i> <i>* One nodded then walked off, one asked me a few questions about the course, one said we should start a study group.</i> |
| Conclusion: <i>From this experiment I realised that I am not stupid and boring. When people talk to me they often ask me more questions about what I think about things so my core belief is not always true.</i> | | |
| Balanced core belief: <i>Although I'm not perfect, I do have knowledge and experiences that people find valuable or interesting.</i> | | |

| | | |
|----------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|
| Core belief to be tested: | | |
| Tasks: | 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. _____

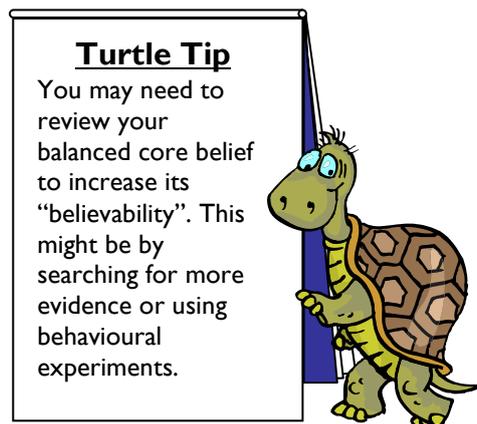
Balanced core belief:

| Core belief to be tested: | | |
|------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------------------|
| Tasks: | 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

In the next module we will look at how to start going into social situations that you been anxious about.

Coming

About The Modules

BACKGROUND

This module was created in 2003 by Patrick Kingsep at the Centre for Clinical Interventions, under the supervision of the Centre's Founding Director, Paula Nathan.

The concepts and strategies in these modules have been developed from evidence-based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (CBT). CBT for social anxiety is based on the approach that anxiety is a result of problematic cognitions (thoughts) and behaviours.

REFERENCES

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

Clark, D. M., & Wells, A. (1995). A cognitive model of social phobia. In R. G. Heimberg, M. R. Liebowitz, D. A. Hope, & F. R. Schneier (Eds.), *Social phobia: Diagnosis, assessment and treatment* (pp. 69–93). New York: Guilford Press.

Heimberg, R. G. & Becker, R. E. (2002). *Cognitive-behavioral group therapy for social phobia*. New York: Guilford Press.

Rapee, R. M., & Heimberg, R. G. (1997). A cognitive-behavioral model of anxiety in social phobia. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 35, 741–756.

“SHY NO LONGER”

This module forms part of:

Kingsep, P., & Nathan, P. (2003). *Shy No Longer*. Perth, Western Australia: Centre for Clinical Interventions.