

## Improving Self-Esteem

### Module 3

# How Low Self-Esteem Is Maintained

Introduction	2
How Negative Core Beliefs are Maintained from Day to Day	2
Information Processing	2
Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions Generate Unhelpful Behaviours	3
At-Risk Situations	3
Model of Low Self-Esteem: How Low Self-Esteem is Maintained	4
Model of Low Self-Esteem: The Full Model	6
The Good News	7
Module Summary	8
About This Module	9

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## Introduction

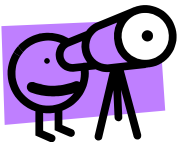
In Module 2, we talked about how negative beliefs about ourselves can develop from past experiences. It is important to understand how and why we come to think about ourselves the way they do. To begin to tackle the problem of low self-esteem, it is also important to understand how negative beliefs about ourselves are maintained, that is, why these beliefs persist, long after the experiences that allowed them to develop have passed. In this module, we will explore how negative beliefs about the self are maintained in the long-term.

### How Negative Core Beliefs are Maintained from Day to Day

As you have seen, the negative beliefs we have about ourselves often have their roots in our early life experiences. Through various things that have happened to us and the way we interpret these events as a child or adolescent, we come to the conclusion that we are “stupid,” “incompetent,” “unlovable,” “ugly,” or some other negative judgement. That was then. However, now as adults, there are things we do on a day-to-day basis that keep the negative beliefs we developed about ourselves in our early life, very much alive and well today. The way we make sense of information from the world around us, the things we do to live up to our unhelpful rules and assumptions, and particularly, our responses to certain day-to-day situations, all serve to keep our negative core beliefs going.

### Information Processing

The way we make sense of the things that happen around us (we call this “information processing”), plays a very big part in maintaining low self-esteem. There is so much happening in our environment at any one time – so much information – that to deal with or make sense of all of it is an impossible task. For this reason, our brain tends to choose what we pay attention to and how we think about and make sense of things. Often, what determines what we pay attention to and how we think about these things, are the beliefs we hold. We tend to pay **attention** to things we expect and **interpret** things in a way that is consistent with our expectations. As a result, we tend to remember only things that happen in our lives that are consistent with what we believe to be true. This process of attending to and interpreting things in a manner that is consistent (rather than inconsistent) with our beliefs, is something all human beings do and not just those with problems with low self-esteem.



Let's look at this further using an example not related to self-esteem. For example, you may have the belief, “My neighbours are noisy.” Now, this belief may be based on your experience of the first night they moved into the house next door and had a loud party that kept you awake all hours of the night and early morning. However, your belief about your neighbours, which started from an initial experience, might still remain a few years later because:

- you only pay **attention** to your neighbours at times when they are noisy, not at times when they are quiet
- you **interpret** any noise you hear as coming from those particular neighbours, often without checking if this is the case.

Therefore, whenever the topic of your neighbours comes to mind, you only remember the occasions that they have been noisy. Therefore, your original belief, “My neighbours are noisy” holds strong.

Let's try another example, but this time related to low self-esteem. Let's say that your negative core belief is “I'm a failure.” This is a conclusion you arrive at following certain experiences you had when you were younger, but how does this affect your information processing now? Holding the belief, “I'm a failure,” means that you probably only focus on the times you make mistakes or don't do something well. You

probably ignore any successes, or play them down (eg., “That was a fluke”). Also, it is unlikely that you acknowledge the times when you had done an acceptable job – those times are never given a second thought because to you they are “No big deal.” Therefore, you only pay **attention** to negative incidents that confirm your belief that you are a “failure.” You probably also have quite an extreme view of what success and failure is, with no middle ground. As such, words like “I did okay,” rarely enter your vocabulary. You might easily jump to the extreme conclusion that you have failed at something, when realistically you might not have done too badly at all (“I didn’t get an A on the assignment – I’m a complete failure!”). Therefore, you also tend to **interpret** the things that happen in your life as confirming your belief that you’re a “failure” when there are likely to be other less harsh interpretations you could make.

The problem is that you seem to be always gathering evidence that supports your negative core belief, because you only ever pay attention to things and interpret things in a manner that confirms how you see yourself. In this way, your negative core beliefs are ‘self-fulfilling.’ Once they are in place, you will keep gathering information to keep them strong, and rarely gather information to challenge and expose them as biased and inaccurate opinions of yourself.

## **Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions Generate Unhelpful Behaviours**

While the unhelpful rules and assumptions you were introduced to in Module 2 are designed to protect you from the truth of your negative core belief, these also play a part in keeping the core belief alive. Unhelpful rules and assumptions like, “I must do everything 100% perfectly, otherwise I will fail,” or “If I get too close to other people, they will reject me” or “People won’t like me if I express my true feelings and opinions,” will tend to affect how you behave. You will run yourself ragged trying to do everything perfectly, or stay at a comfortable distance from others to avoid rejection, or not show anyone the true you in the hope that you will be liked. As long as you do these things, you will probably feel okay about yourself.

The problem is that these rules restrict your behaviour in such a way that you don’t get an opportunity to put your negative core beliefs to the test and see if they are true. You never intentionally do a mediocre job and see if dire consequences follow. You never get close to others to see if you really would be rejected. You never express your opinion and see if people still accept you. These rules make us behave in ways that are unhelpful to us. Essentially they stop us from putting ourselves ‘out there’ to see if the things we believe about ourselves are true or to see if the consequences we fear are true. In this way, the rules and assumptions we have limit our opportunities to have experiences that are inconsistent with our negative core beliefs. They restrict us from behaving in ways that allow us to have experiences that would challenge our beliefs and change them. Hence, the unhelpful behaviour that is aimed at meeting our rules and avoiding our assumptions, also keep our negative beliefs about ourselves alive and well. In the previous module, we mentioned that as long as we are able to live up to our rules and assumptions, we might not feel bad about ourselves, but the low self-esteem lies dormant.

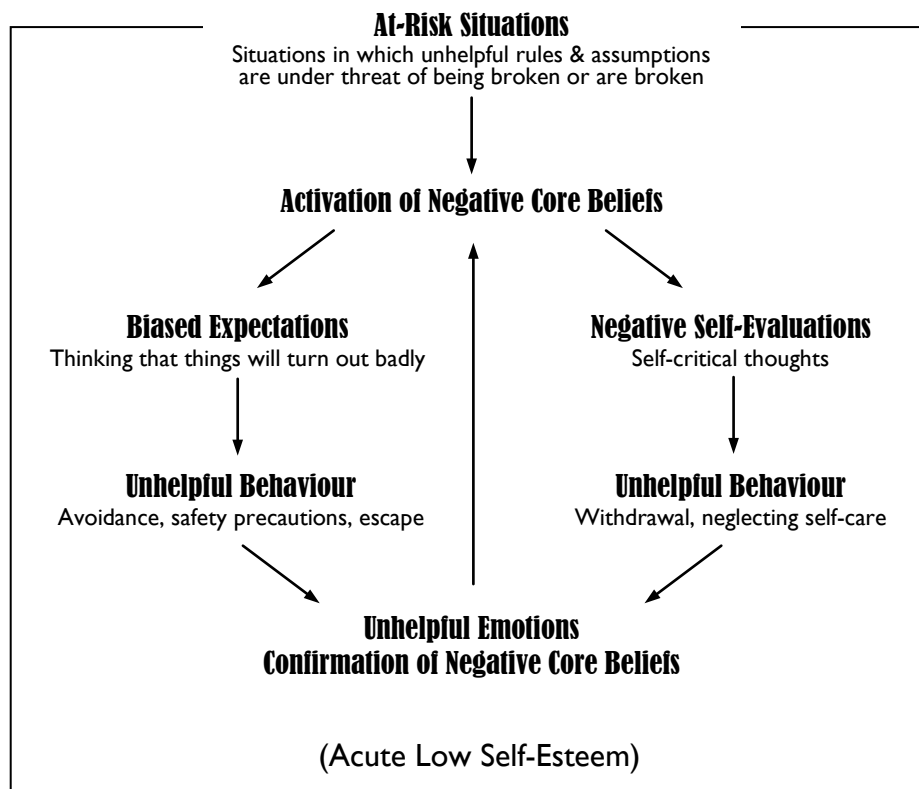
## **At-Risk Situations**

Life is full of all sorts of challenges everyday. When these challenges relate to your negative core beliefs and unhelpful rules and assumptions, they become what we would call “At-Risk Situations” for low self-esteem. These are situations where your rules and assumptions are at risk of being broken or are broken outright (ie., you can’t or will have great difficulty living up to your rules or avoiding your assumptions). Such *at-risk situations* are always going to arise because our rules and assumptions are unrealistic, extreme, and inflexible, and so because of the high and often impossible standards that have been set, these rules will always be susceptible to being broken.

What happens when we are faced with an at-risk situation? This is when the dormant low self-esteem becomes active. When you encounter an at-risk situation, your negative core belief about yourself is activated (i.e., it ‘goes off’ like an alarm, ‘lights up’ like a light bulb, is ‘rekindled’ like a burning flame) and influences how you think, behave, and feel in the situation. When a negative core belief is activated in an at-risk situation, you are likely to think that things will turn out badly or you become extremely critical of yourself. We call these two types of thoughts *Biased Expectations* and *Negative Self-Evaluations*, respectively. These types of thoughts will then influence how you behave. You might avoid doing certain things, try things out but quit when things get too difficult, take precautions to prevent a negative outcome, or withdraw from situations. These behaviours are unhelpful because they do not address the main issue or solve the problem. Instead, they lead to negative unhelpful feelings (such as anxiety, frustration, depression, or shame) and confirm the negative core belief. This also causes the negative core belief to remain activated and this time, the low self-esteem is no longer dormant – it is now acute low self-esteem.

## Model of Low Self-Esteem: How Low Self-Esteem Is Maintained

Let’s look at how these concepts fit together in our model and then we will further illustrate this with examples. In the previous module, we presented the first part of the model. Here’s the second part.



Here’s an example. Let’s say that your negative core belief is, “I am incompetent,” and your unhelpful rule is, “I must do everything 100% perfectly, without mistakes, and without the help of others.” As long as you follow your rule, you might feel okay about yourself, because your incompetence is quashed or hidden for the time being. However, let’s say you encounter a new and challenging experience – you are starting a new and difficult course of study. You are now in a situation where you are probably unable to do things 100% perfectly, without mistakes or without the help of others, because the situation you are in is new and challenging, and you lack experience in this area. You are now in an at-risk situation for low self-esteem, because your rule is either broken or looks likely to be broken. When this happens, your belief, “I am incompetent,” is activated, and this belief is brought to the forefront of your mind and now affects how you respond in the situation.

## *Biased Expectations*

If your rule is only threatened (ie., it hasn't been broken yet, but looks likely to be broken at some point), your response might be to expect that things will turn out badly. We call this having *biased expectations*. This means that the way you **think** is consumed by predicting the worst and jumping to negative conclusions about how the situation will pan out, saying things such as, "I'm not going to be able to do this," "I will fail," "Others will criticise me," "I won't do a good job."

As a result of having these biased expectations, you might **behave** in certain ways. You might begin to avoid attending lectures or put assignments off until the last minute. You might become extremely cautious and over-prepared, such as staying up all hours of the night working on an assignment.

Alternatively, you might give the course a try but withdraw when an assignment seems too difficult. We call these three types of behaviours *avoidance*, taking *safety precautions*, and *escaping*. These thoughts and behaviours contribute to you **feeling** anxious, nervous, tense, afraid, uncertain, and doubtful. Your biased expectations, unhelpful behaviours, and anxiety may impair your performance, and confirm to yourself that you were right – "I am incompetent." Your negative core beliefs therefore remain unchanged and continue to be activated. By avoiding things or escaping from difficult situations, you never test out your biased expectations to see if they are accurate. Even if your biased expectations do not come true and things go well, by taking safety precautions, you might believe that everything is a "close call" this time, and that you might not be so lucky next time. Again, your negative core belief is not changed. So you can see that the way you think and behave in at-risk situations leads to unhelpful emotions and maintains your negative beliefs about yourself.



## *Negative Self-Evaluations*

If your rule is actually broken, your response might be to engage in *negative self-evaluations*. This means that the way you **think** is consumed by self-blame and self-criticism. You become very harsh on yourself, beating yourself up about perceived mistakes or inadequacies saying things such as, "I should have done better," "If I can't even do this, I must be really dumb," "I knew I didn't have it in me," "It just shows that I'm really lousy."

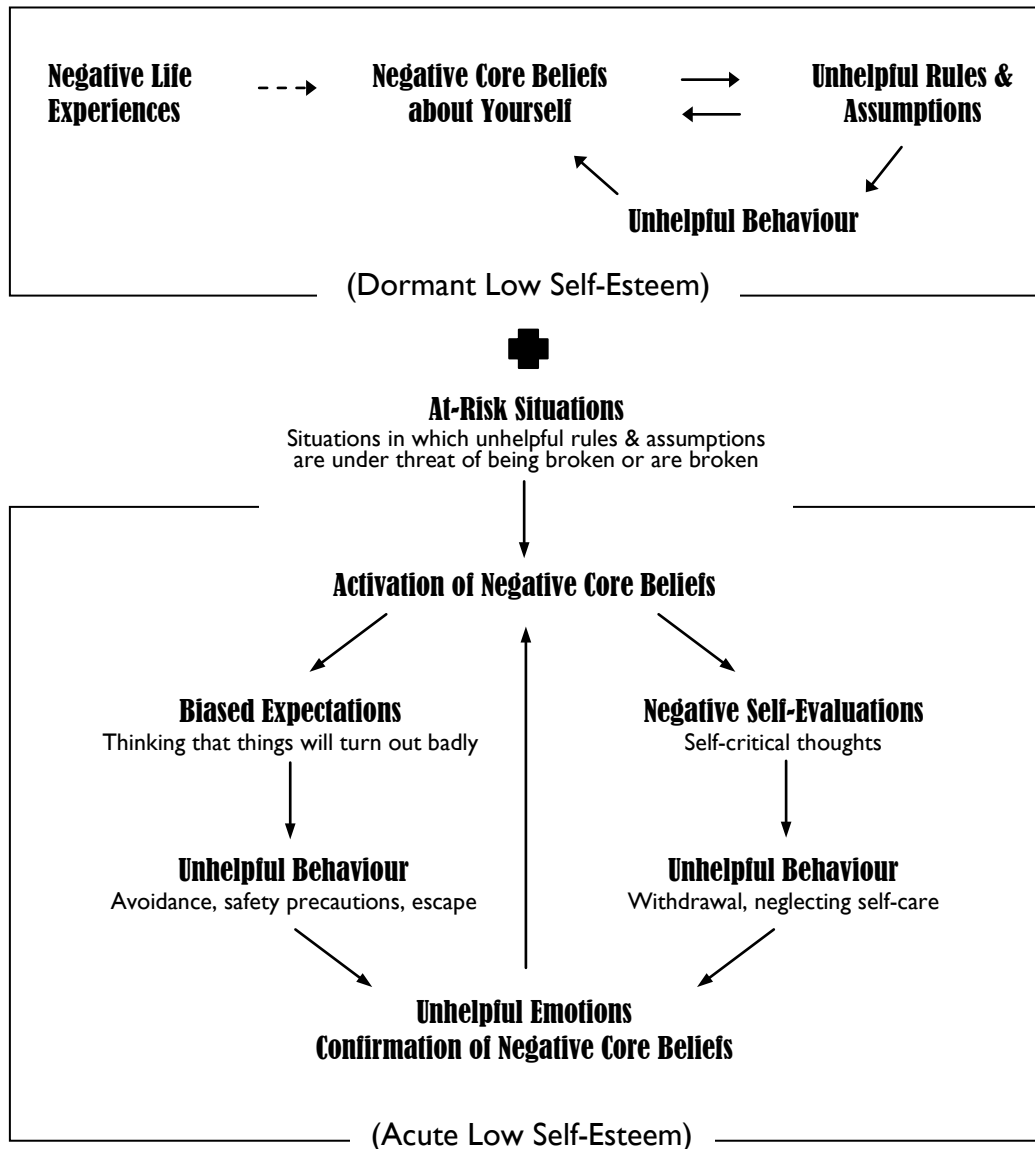
Again, as a result you may **behave** in certain ways, such as isolating yourself, withdrawing, hibernating, not taking care of yourself, not doing much, being passive, not doing enjoyable things – all because you think you don't deserve positive things.

When you think and behave in this way, you will tend to **feel** depressed, sad, low, upset, dejected, and hopeless. Given that a sign of depression is negative self-talk, these feelings will also tend to keep your negative beliefs about yourself activated.

What then happens is that your negative self-evaluations, unhelpful behaviours, and depression all confirm to you that you were right – "I am incompetent," and keep this belief alive, well after the at-risk situation has passed. So again, you can see that the way you think, behave, and feel in at-risk situations, means your negative beliefs gather further support and become even more unwavering.

## Model of Low Self-Esteem: The Full Model

Let's put what we know from Modules 2 and 3 together and get it clear in our minds how low self-esteem develops and is maintained. Here is the full model.



This first part of the model shows that low self-esteem might begin with our having had negative experiences in our lives, which influence how we see and place worth on ourselves or aspects of ourselves. If we see ourselves in a poor light and place low worth on ourselves, it is likely that we have made some negative conclusions about ourselves, which are called negative core beliefs. In order to protect our self-esteem and continue to function from day-to-day, we develop rules and assumptions for living. These rules guide us to behave in ways that, in the end, are unhelpful because they serve to keep our negative core beliefs alive. While we are able to stick to these rules for living, we can feel okay about ourselves, but the low self-esteem remains dormant.

The second part of this model shows that at some point in our lives, we will encounter at-risk situations because it is extremely difficult to live up to our rules and assumptions, which are unrealistic and rigid. When these rules are at risk of being broken or have been broken, our negative core beliefs become activated and we engage in negative thinking. We expect that things will not work out (biased expectations) or criticise and blame ourselves (negative self-evaluations). We also engage in unhelpful

behaviours and together with the unhelpful thinking, lead to negative unhelpful emotions and our negative core beliefs remaining activated. It is then that low self-esteem becomes acute.

## The Good News

While it can be helpful to understand how the problems we have today might have developed from our past experiences, it might also be discouraging, because unfortunately we cannot change our past. However, what we have seen in this module is that there are things we do on a day-to-day basis in the 'here-and-now' that maintain the negative core beliefs we have about ourselves, keeping them alive and active today.

This is good news, because given that these things happen on a daily basis, you can work on changing them. You can change the negative views you have developed about yourself. This means that things can be different and you can overcome low self-esteem. What is important now is that you commit yourself to making the effort in addressing your unhelpful thinking and unhelpful behaviour from day to day. The rest of the modules in this package will focus on the things that you can start doing to chip away at your low self-esteem. Before long, you will begin to see yourself in a better light and treat yourself more kindly.

The approach taken in this information package of identifying and changing unhelpful thinking and behaviour to overcome low self-esteem comes from a type of treatment known as **cognitive-behavioural therapy**. This type of psychological treatment has been evaluated scientifically and shown to be effective in treating a number of psychological problems. Cognitive-behavioural therapy is aimed at changing your unhelpful thinking patterns and beliefs (the cognitive part), as well as any unhelpful style of behaving (the behavioural part). This will bring about a change in how you see yourself and how you feel.

The modules in the remainder of this information package will focus on how to deal with biased expectations and negative self-evaluations first. The modules will then move to addressing unhelpful rules and assumptions, and finally negative core beliefs. You may ask why we do not start with negative core beliefs first, given that these are what determine how we think, feel, and behave from day to day. The reason we don't start with negative core beliefs is that these are a lot harder to shift than our thinking and behaviour in daily situations. Examining our thinking and behaviour in specific situations tends to be easier to do, so by starting here you can begin to get some immediate benefit for your efforts. Starting here can also have an effect of slowly chipping away at your negative core beliefs, and allows you to practice skills you will be applying to tackling your unhelpful rules and negative core beliefs later. So, we recommend that you work through this package in the order the modules are presented (rather than skipping ahead), as this will bring the most benefit to you.

## Module Summary

- There are things that we do everyday that maintain our negative core beliefs, long after the negative experiences that generated them have passed
- Low self-esteem is maintained by:
  - The way we process information in our environment (eg., our attention and interpretation)
  - The restricting behaviour our unhelpful rules and assumptions generate (eg., no opportunity to put negative core beliefs to the test)
  - Our responses in 'At-Risk Situations' (eg., biased expectations and negative self-evaluations)
- 'At-Risk Situations' are situations where your unhelpful rules and assumptions are at risk of being broken or are broken outright. When this occurs, negative core beliefs and dormant low self-esteem become activated
- When your negative core beliefs are activated, they lead you to either expect that things will not turn out well (eg., biased expectations) or become highly critical of yourself (eg., negative self-evaluations). Both types of thoughts will lead you to engage in unhelpful behaviours and feel unhelpful emotions like anxiety or depression
- The unhelpful thoughts, behaviours, and feelings that are generated from 'At-Risk Situations' confirm your negative view of yourself and keep it alive. Therefore, these responses maintain your negative beliefs about yourself over the long-term
- Overcoming low self-esteem involves addressing the factors in the here-and-now that maintain low self-esteem. The strategies used to address these factors come from a style of therapy known as cognitive-behavioural therapy, which involves changing unhelpful thinking and behaviour patterns to change how you feel.



### Coming up next ...

In the next module, you will learn more about biased expectations and how to challenge them.



## 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.

Clark, D. M. & Wells, A. (1995). A cognitive model of social phobia. In R. Heimberg, M. Liebowitz, D.A. Hope and F.R. Schneier (Eds), *Social Phobia: Diagnosis, Assessment and Treatment*. New York: Guildford.

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

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