



Challenging Your Negative Core Beliefs

Theory

The concept of *core beliefs* is central to the CBT framework. Core beliefs are fundamental self-statements and interpretations about ourselves, others, and the world that underlie how we interpret events in our lives. For example, those with low self-esteem often hold on to a core belief that they are unlovable, unlikable, pathetic, damaged, or inferior. Those core beliefs in turn cultivate negative interpretations of everyday events, leading to fear of speaking up, fear of rejection, and self-consciousness in social situations. These anxiety-provoking situations further lead to a never-ending cycle of negative, self-sabotaging thoughts and behaviors.

All too often, people get stuck in focusing on how they learned these self-sabotaging messages in the first place: critical parents and caregivers, bullies in school, being teased by siblings, having been socially and romantically rejected, and so on. Sure, there are some fundamental reasons for how we learned to not trust ourselves and our worth, and how we got the idea that we were not likable or good enough, but making those connections does not change those erroneous core beliefs altogether. Hurts from the past are to be learned from, not to be relived again and again.

That is the beauty of CBT. CBT honors trauma and the hurt we feel from learning harmful core beliefs, but it focuses on giving us the tools to change our core beliefs now.

Implementing Skills

Think of an onion that has many layers to peel to get to the inner core. Our core beliefs are like the core of the onion, and our negative thoughts are the layers.

This analogy shows how one negative core belief will taint your reactions to multiple situations in everyday life. It also shows the power of how challenging and replacing that negative core belief will help you love and accept yourself and your place in the world. If you get distracted by anxiety about everyday life issues, such as worrying about what you say, how you say it, and how people react to you, you won't get to the root of those anxious thoughts—an overall underlying sense that you are flawed and not good enough. By digging deep into your underlying self-talk, you can tackle the symptoms of low self-esteem and manage your reactions in a healthier way.

The good news is that core beliefs are learned—so they can be unlearned.

The Low Self-Esteem Cycle

Triggering Situation	Core Belief	Resulting Negative Beliefs	Emotions	Behaviors
Going to a party where I will not know many people	I'm unlikable	I'm not one of the "beautiful people" here	Anxious	Do not make eye contact
	I'm inferior	No one is attracted to me	Depressed	Sit in a corner isolated
	I'm not an interesting person	It's too painful to be rejected; people are probably pitying me	Dejected	Leave abruptly; binge drink/eat when I get home

Here are some examples of how we can tackle those core beliefs with more rational self-talk, leading to the positive self-esteem cycle shown in the next table.

Challenging Self-Talk

- "Some people like me—there are always people that will and will not like me. That does not define my worth as a person."
- "I need to work on liking myself and the rest will fall into place."
- "What others think of me is much less important than how I view myself, and I will work to chip away at my irrational thoughts. I have control over this."
- "I know I have some issues to work on, but I am a good person with good values."
- "I tend to get anxious when I go to parties alone. It makes me feel more isolated and exaggerates by low self-worth."
- "I am just as worthy as anyone else, even if I am less confident. I am not inferior to anyone."
- "I have identified my low self-confidence issues and will make small attempts to overcome my limitations."
- "I will learn from this situation and get the social support I am seeking."

The Positive Self-Esteem Cycle

Triggering Situation	Core Belief	Resulting Positive Beliefs	Emotions	Behaviors
Going to a party where I will not know many people	I'm likable	I will make an effort to meet others	Confident	Make eye contact
		I will initiate conversation with others to meet new people	Excited	Initiate conversation; talk and laugh with others
		I will work to improve my social skills	Hopeful	Try new skills to "break the ice"
	I'm valuable	I have a lot to offer others	Motivated	Smile at people
		I am just as good as others	Confident	Go up to new people and initiate conversation; ask for someone's number to make social plans

Processing the Activity

You can see that a negative core belief underlies a multitude of negative thoughts, negative feelings, and maladaptive behaviors. This can result in a never-ending cycle unless the core beliefs are examined and challenged. Core beliefs need to be unlearned, challenged, and defeated. As a result, the behaviors also change for the better.

Our perceptions shape our sense of reality and our view of ourselves. In the CBT model, if you accept your unhealthy core beliefs without question, your perceptions will be muddy and unclear. You will continue to see yourself and the world through figuratively smudgy glasses.

In many cases, the greatest change you can make in your life is changing your mind. Challenging your negative core beliefs will stop hundreds of offshoot negative interpretations of everyday life. In TIP #16, we will go further into how to uncover and get to the bottom of your core negative beliefs using the "downward arrow" technique.



"I will work to identify the negative core beliefs that I have learned which are faulty. I deserve better."