

Session 11: core beliefs and self-prejudice

Each of us has particular areas of vulnerability as a result of our personal history. One way of looking at vulnerability is to see it as a result of the inability of our social and family environment to meet our needs as children for basic safety, reliable loving care and adequate nurturance.

This is not meant to be an exercise in blame but about seeing what the long-lasting impact of our upbringing has been. The past lives on in us as a result of how it changes the way we see ourselves, the world and in how we've learned to respond to people and events.

Core beliefs are central to our sense of self – they are unconditional views we hold about ourselves, the world and the future. They are the buttons within us waiting to be pushed. Although they are not always active, stressful circumstances make us more likely to accept them as true.

Try completing these sentences with the first words that come to mind:

I am _____

People are _____

The world is _____

The future is _____

What themes do you notice?

Caroline, who often felt very anxious, answered like this:

I am *weak and vulnerable*

People are *cruel and uncaring*

The world is *frightening and dangerous*

The future is *unpredictable and overwhelming*

Adam, who had been depressed for as long as he could remember, answered like this:

I am *a failure*

People are *selfish and judgmental*

The world is *impossibly hard*

The future is *dreadful - just more of the same*

Although their answers had a different theme they have at least one thing in common: their lives are dominated by feelings of helplessness and hopelessness; they feel trapped and defeated.

This week we are going to look at those core beliefs in more detail. First of all take a look at those sentences you just completed and how stark they are and how little room for manoeuvre they give you. Try answering these questions:

At what times do these thoughts seem most believable to me?

At what times do these thoughts seem least believable to me?

You may notice that these thoughts come and go, or are stronger in relation to some kinds of events – this is because they are like a mental shortcut. They developed in response to difficult circumstances and get triggered by occasions that in some way resemble the events that shaped them. Core beliefs are the way the past lives on in the present, causing us pain in the ‘here and now’ even though the events that caused them are long gone.

We would like you to try an exercise to spot how these thoughts work in practice so that we can introduce some ways to tackle them.

1) Think of someone in your life who has a particular prejudice against some sort of person where you can see that their prejudice is wrong. Write down the person’s name and their prejudice.

Caroline wrote: *Tony, my father-in-law thinks that people who are depressed are ‘swinging the lead’ and should ‘pull themselves together’.*

2) You can see that the prejudice is wrong. Write down some examples of what makes you sure that the prejudiced person is mistaken.

Caroline wrote: *I’m not lazy - I’d love to be able to go back to work, I hate feeling like this; I’ve met other depressed people*

who feel the same; you can't just make sweeping generalisations when you've never had the experience yourself

3) What are some of the ways that the prejudiced person you've thought of might deal with information that doesn't fit what their prejudice tells them?

How might they *distort* the information?

Caroline wrote: Tony asked me in a patronising voice if I was still going to my Overcoming Depression group, when I said I'd met some really nice people in the group and that we are all supporting each other he said it was just as he expected, put a load of depressed people in a room together and they'll just make each other miserable

How might they *discount* the information?

Caroline wrote: whenever I see Tony he asks if I've been looking for work, when I told him that I was going to volunteer two days a week at a local charity to get back into the habit of

working and meet people he said that it 'wasn't real work and I should start applying for a proper job'

How might they claim that the information is just an *exception to the rule*?

Caroline wrote: when I told Tony that two of the people on the course had gone back to work he said that they can't have been really depressed and it proves what he was saying all along

How might they make sure they *don't notice* the information?

Caroline wrote: Tony always turns off the TV or radio if a programme comes on that talks about depression and anxiety - it's like he just doesn't want to hear it

4) If it were important to the prejudiced person to change their mind, what would they need to do?

Caroline wrote: *Tony would really need to want to change - he would have to stop imposing his own preconceptions on what I say and really listen to me - most importantly he'd have to go out and meet people who don't agree with him and be prepared to try something new.*

5) Now let's revisit those sentences you wrote at the beginning of this exercise about yourself, others, the world and the future. Do you notice anything about how your core beliefs act like a prejudice too? What information that might contradict your negative opinions do you distort, discount, claim is an exception to the rule or not notice?

Answer the following questions where you fill in the first blank in each sentence with the belief you wrote in the sentence completion exercise earlier:

Because I believe I am _____ I rarely _____

Because I believe I am _____ I often _____

Because I believe people are _____ I rarely _____

Because I believe I people are _____ I often _____

Because I believe I the world is _____ I rarely _____

Because I believe I the world is _____ I often _____

Because I believe I the future is _____ I rarely _____

Because I believe I the future is _____ I often _____

Caroline wrote

Because I believe I am *weak* I rarely *notice when I do something well*

Because I believe I am *weak* I often *put myself down*

Because I believe people are *cruel and uncaring* I rarely *let myself see when people are kind*

Because I believe people are *cruel and uncaring* I often *tell myself it doesn't count - they're only doing it for themselves really*

Because I believe the world is *frightening and dangerous* I rarely *notice when people cope well with problems*

Because I believe the world is *frightening and dangerous* I often *try to think of everything that could go wrong so I'm prepared for the worst*

Because I believe the future is *unpredictable and overwhelming* I rarely *let myself feel hope - it'll just end in disappointment*

Because I believe the future is *unpredictable and overwhelming* I often *focus on the worst that could happen*

You can probably see now that your core beliefs act like a form of prejudice against yourself. Just like any other prejudiced person we all ignore, distort or discount information that doesn't fit our expectations – this psychological process is universal; it applies to us all and is called *confirmatory bias* by

psychologists. In depression it tends to be even stronger because it is also dependent on mood. The worse we feel the more closed we are to new information; the better we feel the less defensive we are and open to new experiences.

The trick now is to keep a record of information that doesn't fit with our prejudice against ourselves. First you need to ask yourself what would be reasonable alternatives to your core beliefs. Again, try to think of what you would say to someone you care about if they told you they had such negative beliefs.

Instead of telling myself I am _____ it would be more reasonable to think that I am _____

Instead of telling myself people are _____ it would be more reasonable to think that they are _____

Instead of telling myself the world is _____ it would be more reasonable to think that the world is _____

Instead of telling myself the future is _____ it would be more reasonable to think that the future is _____

Adam wrote

Instead of telling myself I am *a failure* it would be more reasonable to think that I am *someone who has failed in some of the things I have tried and succeeded in others*

Instead of telling myself people are *selfish and judgmental* it would be more reasonable to think that people are *a mixture of good and not so good*

Instead of telling myself the world is *impossibly hard* it would be more reasonable to think that the world is *a struggle sometimes*

Instead of telling myself the future is *dreadful - just more of the same* it would be more reasonable to think that the future is *not yet known and to some degree still up to me*

You can start to change some of these core beliefs by using a Positive Events Log. Each day write down at least three things that went well or something you are grateful to have in your life – these don't have to be major achievements, anything that went well can act as a source of information that corrects the tendency to overlook information that doesn't fit with our core beliefs. At the end of the week look back and ask yourself whether the information fits your new outlook better than your old core belief.

Tess kept a Positive Event Log and on the first day wrote:

Tuesday

My boss told me she was really impressed with my work today - I had been really concentrating

I am really grateful to have my friend Helen who shared her lunch with me when I forgot to bring something with me

I was really pleased to go along to a new Spanish evening class - this happened because I took the time to find a class and was determined enough to go along on my own even though I was nervous.

Come and tell us how you got on. Until we meet next week Good Luck

Positive Events Log

	Day:						
Thing that went well							
Thing that went well							
Thing that went well							