

Limiting Beliefs

What are limiting beliefs?

Limiting beliefs are those which constrain us in some way. Just by believing them, we do not think, do or say the things that they inhibit. And in doing so we impoverish our lives.

We may have beliefs about rights, duties, abilities, permissions and so on. Limiting beliefs are often about ourselves and our self-identity. The beliefs may also be about other people and the world in general.

Limit Beliefs can stop us from attaining our goals in life.

I do/don't

We may define ourselves by what we do or do not do. I may say 'I am an accountant', which means I am hopeless at marketing and should not even think about it, and consequently fail to sell my services well.

Another common limiting belief is around how we judge ourselves. We think 'I don't deserve...' and so do not expect or seek things.

I can't

We often have limited self-images of what we can and cannot do. If I think 'I cannot sing' then I will never try or not go to singing lessons to improve my ability. This is the crux of many '**I can't statements**': we believe our abilities are fixed and that we cannot learn.

I must/mustn't

We are bound by values, norms, laws and other rules that constrain what we must and must not do. However, not all of these are mandatory and some are distinctly limiting. If I think 'I must clean the house every day' then this robs me of time that may be spent in something more productive.

I am/am not

The verb 'to be' is quite a malicious little thing and as we think 'I am' we also think 'I am not' or 'I cannot'. For example, we may think 'I am an artist' and so conclude that we can never be any good at mathematics, or must not soil our hands with manual work.

'I am' thinking assumes we cannot change. Whether I think 'I am intelligent' or 'I am not intelligent', either belief may stop me from seeking to learn. 'I am' also leads to generalisation, for example where 'I am stupid' means 'all of me is all of stupid and all of stupid is all of me'. A better framing is to connect the verb to the individual act, such as 'That was a stupid thing to do'.

When coupled with values we get beliefs about whether a person is right or wrong, good or bad.

Others are/will

Just as we have limiting beliefs about ourselves, we also have beliefs about other people, which can limit us in many ways. If we think others are more capable and superior, then we will not challenge them. If we see them as selfish, we may not ask them to help us.

We often guess what others are thinking based on our 'theory of mind' and beliefs about them. These guesses are often wrong. Hence, we may believe they do not like us when they actually have no particular opinion or even think we are rather nice. From our guesses at their thoughts we then deduce their likely actions, which can of course be completely wrong. Faced with this evidence, it is surprising how many will still hold to the original beliefs.

How the world works

Beyond the limiting beliefs above there can be all kinds of belief about 'how the world works', from laws of nature to the property of materials. This can lead to anything from the beliefs that all dogs will bite to the idea that aeroplane travel is dangerous.

Why do we limit our beliefs?

Experience

A key way by which we form our beliefs is through our direct experiences. We act, something happens and we draw conclusions. Often such beliefs are helpful, but they can also be very limiting.

Particularly when we are young and have few experiences we may form false and limiting conclusions. Nature builds us this way to keep us out of harm's way. We learn and build beliefs faster from harmful experiences. Sticking my finger on a hot stove hurts a lot so we believe all stoves are dangerous and never touch a stove again. If punching another child results in a sound beating, we may henceforth believe ourselves weak.

Education

When forming our perceptions of the world, we cannot depend on experiences for everything. We hence read and listen to parents and teacher about how the world works and how to behave in it.

But our teachers are not always correct or well informed on every topic. We also learn from what peers tell us and are often 'infected' by their faulty beliefs, which may be very limiting.

Education is a double-edged sword as it tells you what is right and wrong, good and bad. It helps you survive and grow, but just because you were told something, you may never try things and so miss many useful experiences and knowledge.

Faulty logic

In decisions, we make 'return on investment' estimations and easily conclude that the investment of time, effort and money is insufficient, and that there is a low chance of success and high chance of failure. The return may even be negative as we are harmed in some way.

People make many decision errors, for example based on poor estimation of probabilities. We take a little data and generalise it to everything. We go on hunches that are based more on subconscious hopes and fears than on reality.

The word 'because' can be surprisingly hazardous. When we use it, it seems like we are using good reason, but this may not be so. We like to understand cause-and-effect and often do not challenge reasoning that uses the mechanisms of rational argument.

Excuse

One reason we use faulty logic and form limiting beliefs is to excuse ourselves from what we perceive to be our failures.

When we do something and it does not work, we often explain away our failure by forming and using beliefs which justify our actions and leave us blameless. But in doing so, we do not learn and may increasingly paint ourselves into a corner, limiting what we will think and do in the future.

Fear

Limiting beliefs are often fear-driven. Locking the belief in place is the fear that, if we go against the beliefs, deep needs will be harmed.

There is often a strong social component to our decisions and the thought of criticism, ridicule or rejection by others is enough to powerfully inhibit us. We also fear that we may be harmed in some way by others, and so avoid them or seek to appease them.

So what?

There is also the question of whether limiting beliefs are actually good for us and whether they keep us from harm. In practice some beliefs which limit us are actually valid beliefs which are worth keeping. The problem is telling the difference. The reality is that many of us err on the side of perceived (and not necessarily real) safety. Limiting beliefs are flawed, being based on wrong '**facts**' and so prompt us to treat things with undue caution.

Overcoming Limiting Beliefs

Most of us have beliefs which limit us in some ways, depriving our lives and preventing us from achieving our true potential. Here's how to overcome these and so enable and empower your life and those of others.

Isolate the belief

First consider what the belief is that is limiting you. Many of us make limiting choices without realising that they are based on flawed, limiting beliefs.

Find times where you have done something (or not done something) that seemed to limit you in some way. Then ask 'What beliefs led to this choice?'. Keep digging, asking 'What belief underlies that belief?' until you come to the limiting belief or beliefs.

Also consider what concerns or frightens you and so limits you. What do you fear? Why? What beliefs lead you to such fears?

Seek the source

Think back to when you first had the belief. When did you first believe this? What happened for you to believe it?

Were you told to believe it by someone? Was it a parent, teacher, or maybe someone who was not thinking kindly about you.

Was it based on an experience? Did you try something once, failed and then formed the belief that you were incapable? Or that 'other people' think in certain ways?

Recognise the falsehood

In doing the above steps, you may already realise that the limiting belief is just that: a belief which is both limited and limiting. You are holding it because you were told to or because it helped you once.

Take time to reflect on this and Recognise the full extent of the belief, how false it really is and especially how it has limited you in the past. Feel free to get angry about this.

In doing this, you may need to accept that you are not perfect, which can be disconcerting (beware of limiting beliefs here also). You must be open to learning and ready to change.

Form empowering beliefs

When you want to change a belief, you may well need an enabling belief which will replace the old one.

Be careful with these, making them realistic and not setting yourself up for failure. It can be more effective, for example, to believe that you can do public speaking than to immediately believe you are world-class at it. If you lack a skill that needs to be learned, believing you now have it is likely to lead to problems. It is better to believe you are able to learn (which is one of the most empowering beliefs you can have). Believing 'I can' can be more powerful than thinking 'I am'.

In a similar vein, if you thought yourself stupid, notice the different between thinking you are not stupid as opposed to being intelligent. There is a difference between 'Not A' and 'B', both of which may initially seem to be the opposite of 'A'.

The trick is to consider where the belief will take you, what will it let you think and do, and what evidence will it create, as in the next step.

Start 'as if'

A good start point for many beliefs is to act as if the belief were true. Just pretend you are an actor and are going through the motions.

Your mind is not great at knowing when you are acting or not, with the result that what you do will steadily become what you believe. One reason for this is way the consistency principle works. This is a classic way that brainwashing works. All you are doing, is brainwashing yourself into the beliefs that will serve you best.

Create evidence of success

The most powerful and unshakeable beliefs are those that are based on lots of evidence. So now you have to recognised and challenged your limiting beliefs and found empowering beliefs, then you need to start creating evidence.

Depending on what it is, you may be more sensible to start small. If you believed that you could not talk with strangers, try starting with simple politeness, saying 'thank you' and 'after you', which immediately show that actually you can talk to strangers. Then build up with brief small-talk, such as about the weather or sports.

When you see a success, no matter how small, use this an affirmation. Tell yourself 'I did it!' and reflect on how you are now a changed person, with no way back. When you have done something new, it cannot be undone.

Keep building evidence until the limiting belief seems silly and you are now comfortable in your new belief.

Determination and persistence are critical in this. Also watch for other limiting beliefs which get in the way (change these too if you need