Exploring Beliefs

Tracy Henderson
Counseling

Exploring beliefs, especially deeply held or unconscious ones is a powerful process in therapy, coaching, or personal development. It helps people understand how their thoughts shape their emotions, behaviors, and relationships.

Beliefs are the ideas we hold about ourselves, others, and the world around us. They are shaped by our experiences, relationships, culture, and the messages we've received throughout life. Some beliefs help us feel confident, capable, and secure—while others may limit us, create self-doubt, or keep us stuck in unhelpful patterns.

Beliefs often develop quietly over time, becoming part of the lens through which we interpret our experiences. When we pause to examine them, we gain the opportunity to decide which beliefs still serve us and which may need updating or reshaping.

By exploring and adjusting our beliefs, we can build a more accurate, compassionate, and empowering understanding of ourselves and our possibilities.

INPUTS
- Sources, Modeling, Content, etc.
- Environment, Experience, etc.
- Family, Culture, Social, etc.
- Self...

BELIEFS
- Influenced by the Inputs, Sources, etc.
- Not Required to Be True..Just True to You..
- What We Believe Influence our Attitude...

ATTITUDES
- Perspective, Appraisal View of Self, Situation,
- Impacts How we Feel.
- Impacts How we Act...

FEELINGS & EMOTIONS
- Actions & Behaviors are Influenced by How We Feel...
- Labels, Words, Language Has an Impact...

ACTIONS & BEHAVIOR
- What We Do or Don't Do Influenced by Emotions, Attitudes, Beliefs, and Inputs...

Beliefs come in many forms and understanding them can help us recognize how they shape our emotions, decisions, and behaviors. A few types include...

- **Core Beliefs**
  Deeply held ideas about ourselves, others, and the world. They often form in childhood and influence how we interpret experiences (e.g., *"I am worthy,"* *"People can't be trusted"*).
- **Intermediate Beliefs**
  Rules, assumptions, and attitudes we develop based on our core beliefs (e.g., *"If I don't succeed, I'm a failure,"* *"I must not ask for help."*).
- **Automatic Thoughts**
  Quick, reactive thoughts that pop up in response to situations often shaped by deeper beliefs (e.g., *"I can't handle this,"* *"They must be upset with me."*).

- **Cultural and Social Beliefs**
  Messages absorbed from family, community, and society about identity, roles, success, and behavior (e.g., *"I should always appear strong," "I need to put others first."*).
- **Personal Values-Based Beliefs**
  Beliefs tied to what we find meaningful and important—guiding our choices and sense of fulfillment (e.g., *"Relationships matter," "Growth is important to me."*).
- **Limiting Beliefs**
  Beliefs that restrict our confidence, potential, or options (e.g., *"I'm not capable," "Things never work out for me."*).

Schemas: Mental Templates

Schemas help us quickly interpret experiences, but they also shape and filter what we believe to be true. Because schemas form from early learning, repeated patterns, and cultural or relational influences, they guide what we notice, how we make meaning, and what we expect from ourselves and others.

When a schema is rigid or outdated, it can distort perceptions—causing us to interpret neutral events as threatening, assume negative intentions, or reinforce limiting beliefs. In this way, schemas don't just influence beliefs; they actively sustain them by shaping how we process and remember information.

SCHEMA'S

Structures of the mind that enable us to make sense of the world.

Guide and organize how we process information.

We develop schemas about our internal and external world.

Schemas are influenced and reinforced by personal and external experiences.

Self-Talk: The Stories We Tell Ourselves

Self-talk acts as the internal narrator that continuously reinforces or reshapes our beliefs. The tone and content of this inner dialogue influences how we interpret events, evaluate ourselves, and predict future outcomes.

When self-talk is harsh, catastrophic, or absolute, it strengthens limiting or negative beliefs and narrows our sense of possibility. When it is balanced, curious, and reality-based, it challenges rigid patterns and supports more accurate, flexible beliefs.

Over time, the way we speak to ourselves becomes a powerful driver of what we come to believe is true about ourselves and the world.

The words and language we use, the conversations we have, the stories we tell, and the narratives that we repeat to ourselves.

The sum of your self-talk influences the beliefs you hold about yourself and the world you navigate.

What you say to yourself about yourself regarding situations tremendously influences what you experience.

Caution: Illusory Truth Effect

The illusory truth effect is the tendency to believe information as true simply because we've heard it repeatedly, even if it's inaccurate. With each repetition, the information feels more familiar and easier to process, and our brains often mistake that sense of ease for truth. As a result, repeated messages, whether positive, negative, or neutral can strongly influence our beliefs over time.

Mindset: Influencing Our Outcome

Be open to explore the idea, research, and conversation centered around *mindset*. Contemporary findings, especially the work of **Carol S. Dweck** and others highlight the significant impact, challenges, and benefits of disrupting unhelpful patterns of thought and replacing them with more intentional and preferred ways of showing up.

Growth Mindset

Carol Dweck's research into *Growth Mindset* has provided a foundational understanding of how our beliefs about learning and improvement shape our outcomes. I encourage you to view this short video in which Dweck discusses the concept:

- **Video**: *The Power of Believing You Can Improve*

In addition, the **Hidden Brain** podcast has produced a two-part series that dives deeper into the mindset topic, exploring how it influences our day-to-day state of being:

- **Part 1**: *Reframing Your Reality*
- **Part 2**: *Reframing Your Reality*

Clues: Words and Labels

Unproductive beliefs and outdated schemas often reveal themselves through the words and labels we use. For example - rigid "have to" thinking, emotional "I can't" reactions that feel bigger than the situation, and repetitive negative "never" patterns that keep showing up in relationships or behavior.

They can create internal tension, fuel worst-case assumptions, and reinforce self-limiting stories about worth, safety, or capability. These beliefs also tend to surface as defensiveness, reactivity, or avoidance when situations challenge one's sense of stability or identity.

Often, there are clues that can lead to understanding when unproductive beliefs are beginning to reveal themselves.
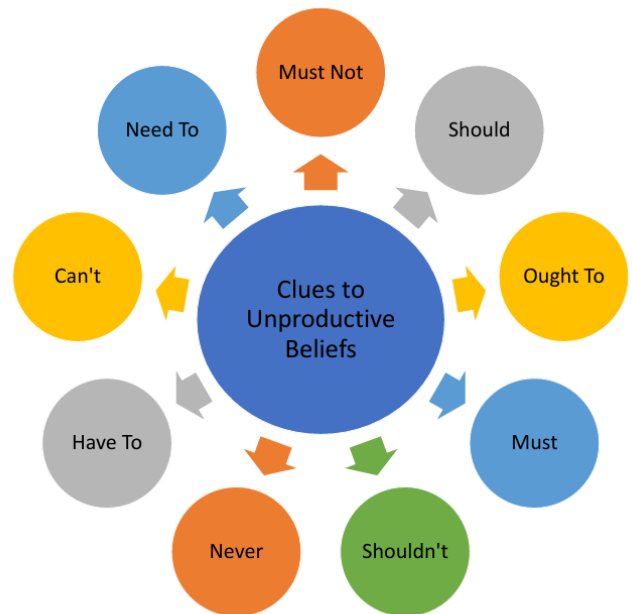
Strategy: Build awareness through identifying when these words offer clues to unproductive beliefs. Develop a process to evaluate, understand if the statements are congruent with how you prefer to show up. Are the words and beliefs congruent with your values? If not, reframe or reconstruct the beliefs through neutral or gray statements. Use facts to dispute the words and/or statements.

Clues: Motives of Beliefs

The motives help us make sense of the world and feel secure within it. They provide **predictability**, allowing us to organize experiences and reduce uncertainty. They support a sense of **control**, helping us feel capable of navigating challenges. Beliefs also fulfill **identity needs**, reinforcing who we think we are and how we fit into relationships or groups.

Finally, they serve **emotional motives**, offering comfort, protection, or justification for how we feel. Together, these motives shape and sustain the beliefs we hold—whether or not those beliefs are fully accurate or helpful.

Achievement	Acceptance	Control
• Underlying beliefs that success is extremely important. Strong desire to succeed. Set high standards and tendency to over-focus on mistakes and imperfections. Often identify self as "perfectionist."	• Beliefs that revolve around acceptance, the need to be liked, accepted, praised, and included by others. Tendency to notice then overact to slights and conflict. Ambiguity trigger's assumptions.	• A focus on being in control and being in charge. Can become triggered when a sense of being out of control or not in charge is felt. Feel as though they cannot change the outcome. May describe self as "control freak."
• "Being successful matters..." • Failure is a sign of my weakness..." • "I can't give up..."	• "What matters most is being loved..." • "It's my job to please people and make them happy..." • "I want people to think the best of me..."	• "Only weak people can't solve their own problems..." • "Asking for help shows that your not in charge..." • "I can't admit I don't know how..."
• Watch for: **Tunnel Vision**	• Watch for: **Jumping to Conclusions and Personalization**	• Watch for: **Personalization, Magnifying or Overgeneralization**

Questions to ask yourself | What is this costing me? How is it helping me? How can I change or learn to manage this?

Clues: Explanatory Style

Explanatory styles describe the habitual ways people explain why events happen, and they strongly shape beliefs about oneself, others, and the world.

Generally, people tend to interpret events along three dimensions: **internal vs. external** (whether the cause is about me or something outside me), **stable vs. unstable** (whether the cause is lasting or temporary), and **global vs. specific** (whether it affects many areas of life or just this situation).

For example - a more pessimistic explanatory style leans toward internal, stable, and global explanations, often leading to hopelessness or self-blame. An optimistic style tends toward external, temporary, and specific explanations, supporting resilience and flexible belief patterns.

Permanence	**Pervasiveness**	**Personalization**
• Temporary • Permanent	• Specific • Universal	• External • Internal
• "I yell at my kids EVERY day..." • It's ALWAYS going to be like this..." • "I've NEVER been good at relationships|feelings..."	• "I NEVER apologize for anything..." • "It's going to ruin EVERYTHING else in my day..." • "My FRIENDS|PARTNERS hate me..."	• "I'm disgusted with MYSELF..." • "It's MY fault...." • "I'm not GOOD ENOUGH to have close friends..."
"ALWAYS" | "NOT ALWAYS"	*"EVERYTHING" | "NOT EVERYTHING"*	*"ME" | "NOT ME"*

Strategy: Know Your ABCs

While current research is illuminating, these ideas are rooted in earlier psychological theories.

Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT)

Developed by psychologist **Albert Ellis**, REBT addresses emotional and behavioral patterns by focusing on the **beliefs** that underlie them. A key component of REBT is the **ABC model**: *The ABC Model*

- **A** – Activating Event
- **B** – Belief about the event
- **C** – Consequence (emotional/behavioral reaction)

This model emphasizes building awareness of incongruent or irrational beliefs and developing the skills to navigate difficult situations more effectively.

This foundational model was later integrated into **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)**, which continues to be one of the most researched and widely used therapeutic modalities.

Albert Ellis's ABC model explains how our emotional reactions are shaped not by events themselves but by the beliefs we hold about those events.

Ellis emphasized that it's our beliefs at **B**, especially rigid or irrational thoughts, that drive distress at **C**, not the event at **A**.

By identifying and challenging these beliefs, we can shift our emotional outcomes and respond more flexibly and effectively.

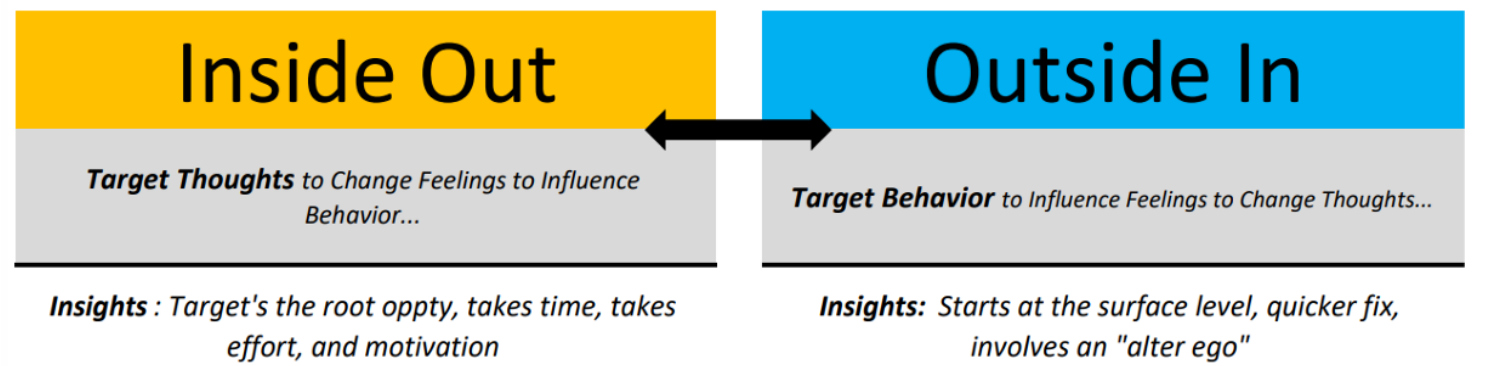|		Insight	Explanation	Example
A	**Activating Event**	"Something Happens"	Reaction or behavior that has an impact on us.	Leaky faucet, Frown from a friend, Car cuts you off, etc.
	Action: Try to Identify/label the event as neutral as you can. Try NOT to interpret what the person/situation "may have been feeling or implying."			
B	**Belief**	"I Tell Myself Something"	Thoughts unfold as beliefs and can become habitual. They become how we interpret the adversity/challenges we are experiencing. I.e., The "script" or "narrative"	I feel incompetent, "H/She was unfair", or "I just blew my diet"
	Action: Notice and document the belief you have curated within your mind.			
C	**Consequence**	"I Feel Something"	Feelings and behaviors are the consequences of the curated or authored beliefs.	I had no energy, "I went to bed", or "I had a plan to get them to apologize"
	Action: Track the consequences you experience. I.e., Did you feel anxious, joyful, guilty, sleepy, run from or avoid the situation, etc.			
D	**Dispute**	"Challenge it"	Skills intended to dispute the thoughts/beliefs that are ruminating and influencing us.	"It doesn't help to compare when I was a teenager", "It's a different world these days", or "It's true, I didn't know about what they were doing"
	Action: Use challenge or dispute skills to counter the thought/belief. I.e., Evidence, Alternatives, Implications, Usefulness			
E	**Energy**	"Feel the Difference"	How we feel/experience when we actively implement a new skill and experience a different result.	"I was able to relax", "I was able to settle down", or "I felt relieved afterwards"
	Action: Identify and experience the energy you feel when you dispute the unhealthy thought/belief. Create an emotional "bookmark."			

Strategy: Explore CBT

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) influences beliefs by helping individuals identify, question, and reframe unhelpful or distorted thought patterns. Through structured techniques—such as examining evidence, testing predictions, and practicing new behaviors CBT challenges automatic beliefs that fuel emotional distress or rigid reactions. As people gather more accurate information and experience different outcomes, their core beliefs gradually shift to becoming more balanced, flexible, and aligned with reality. Over time, these new beliefs support healthier emotions and more adaptive coping strategies.

Strategy: Outside In vs. Inside Out

The **Inside out** and **Outside in** strategies describe two pathways for shifting beliefs. **Inside out** starts with intentionally changing internal processes—such as self-talk, mindset, or emotional awareness—which gradually shapes new behaviors and reinforces updated beliefs.

In contrast, **Outside in** focuses on changing actions, routines, or environments first; these new experiences then provide evidence that challenges old beliefs and supports more adaptive ones.

Using both strategies together helps create a feedback loop where internal shifts and external behaviors work in tandem to reshape belief patterns.

Inside Out	Outside In
Target Thoughts to Change Feelings to Influence Behavior...	**Target Behavior** to Influence Feelings to Change Thoughts...
Insights : Target's the root oppty, takes time, takes effort, and motivation	**Insights:** Starts at the surface level, quicker fix, involves an "alter ego"

Strategy: Socratic Questioning

Socratic questioning influences beliefs by guiding individuals to examine their thoughts with curiosity rather than judgment. Through open-ended, evidence-based questions, it encourages people to explore the origins, accuracy, and usefulness of their beliefs.

This process uncovers assumptions, identifies cognitive distortions, and highlights alternative perspectives. As individuals recognize gaps or inconsistencies in their reasoning, rigid or unhelpful beliefs naturally weaken, making space for more balanced, flexible, and reality-aligned beliefs to emerge.

Clarification	Challenge Assumptions	Alternative Viewpoint(s)	Evidence & Reasoning
What do you mean when you say X? Could you explain that point further? Can you provide an example?	Is there a different point of view? What assumptions are we making here? Are you saying that… ?	Are there alternative viewpoints? How could someone else respond, and why?	Can you provide an example that supports what you are saying? Can we validate that evidence? Do we have all the information we need?

Strategy: Yes, and…

"Yes, and" helps with beliefs by encouraging openness rather than defensiveness when confronting new information or perspectives. Instead of rejecting or minimizing an idea, **"Yes, and"** acknowledges what is true or valid ("yes") and then adds new information, nuance, or possibilities ("and").

This approach softens rigid beliefs, reduces all-or-nothing thinking, and supports cognitive flexibility. Over time, it allows individuals to expand or update their beliefs in a collaborative, non-threatening way that promotes growth and psychological resilience.

Strategy: As If…

The **"As If"** strategy helps shift beliefs by encouraging individuals to act in ways consistent with a desired belief, even before fully accepting it as true. By behaving *as if* a new perspective or confidence already exists, people generate experiences and feedback that challenge old beliefs and reinforce more adaptive ones.

Over time, these actions create evidence that supports internal change, making the new belief feel genuine and natural. This approach bridges the gap between thought and behavior, promoting belief flexibility and personal growth.

Strategy: If then…

The **"If then"** strategy helps shape beliefs by linking specific situations to intentional thoughts or actions. By creating conditional plans **"If X happens, then I will do Y"** individuals can practice responses that align with desired beliefs, even in challenging circumstances.

This repeated practice provides experiential evidence that supports new ways of thinking, gradually weakening old, unhelpful beliefs and reinforcing more adaptive, flexible ones. It effectively translates intention into actionable steps, strengthening belief change through consistent experience.

Strategy: What for...

The **"What for"** strategy helps examine the purpose and utility of a belief by asking, **"What is this belief doing for me?"** This approach encourages individuals to consider whether a belief serves their goals, supports growth, or protects them in helpful ways or if it limits, distorts, or causes unnecessary distress. By clarifying the function of a belief, people can make conscious choices to retain, modify, or release it, fostering more intentional, adaptive, and flexible thinking.


Strategy: Alternative Interpretations

The concept of **"Same territory, Different maps"** highlights that people can experience the same situation but interpret it through different beliefs, perspectives, or mental frameworks.

Each person's "map" is shaped by prior experiences, values, and assumptions, influencing how they perceive meaning, assign cause, and decide how to respond.

Recognizing this concept helps individuals understand that differing beliefs are not necessarily right or wrong, they are simply alternative interpretations of the same reality. This awareness can foster empathy, reduce conflict, and open the door to exploring more flexible or balanced beliefs.

SAME TERRITORY | DIFFERENT MAPS
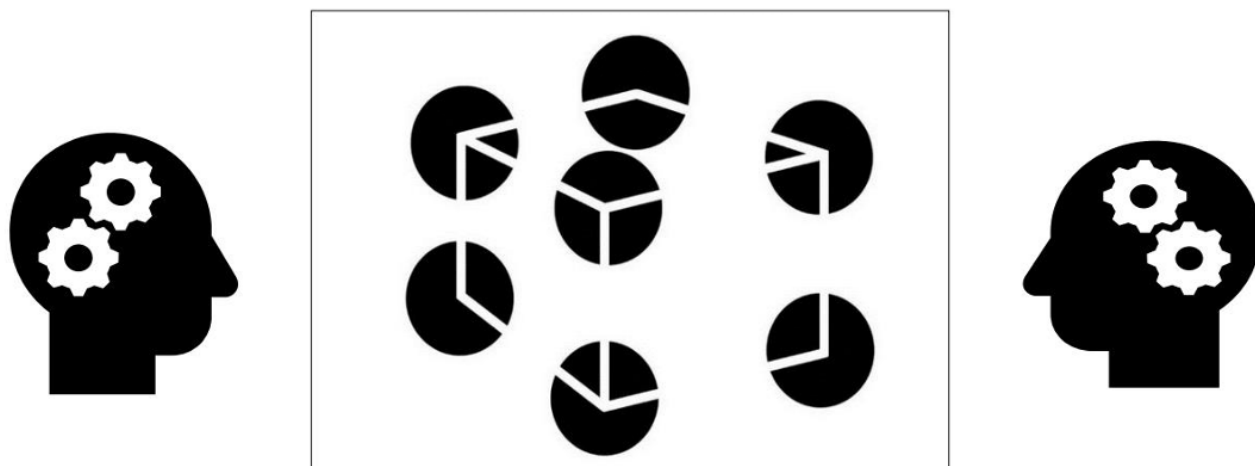
Strategy: Additional Considerations

Explore beliefs through asking **evocative questions** and journaling, tracking patterns vs. words, **exploring emotions** to understand the reactions within them, explore different **"parts"** of the self that hold different beliefs, use the **empty chair** technique to speak to the parts and their beliefs, let beliefs emerge through **expressive mediums** such as art and/or lyrics (music), be open to **attuning to your body** through somatic work that involves beliefs that may be stored in the body tension or physical sensations.

Take-Aways:

Beliefs come in many forms and understanding them can help us recognize how they shape our emotions, decisions, and behaviors.

- **Are Learned, Not Fixed**
  Most beliefs are shaped through experiences, relationships, and repeated messages not through objective truth. Because they are learned, they can also be updated.
- **Influence Emotions and Behavior**
  How we interpret a situation is often more powerful than the situation itself. Beliefs guide how we feel, what we expect, and the choices we make.
- **Can Operate Outside of Awareness**
  Many beliefs work in the background, influencing us automatically. Bringing them into awareness is a major step toward change.
- **Often Feel Like Facts**
  Even when a belief is inaccurate or outdated, it can feel *true*. This can make unhelpful beliefs seem harder to question.
- **Serve a Purpose**
  Even limiting beliefs often developed as a form of protection or survival. Understanding *why* a belief formed can create compassion and clarity.
- **Can Be Reinforced Over Time**
  We tend to focus on experiences that confirm what we already believe ("confirmation bias"), which can strengthen unhealthy patterns.
- **Are Changeable with Practice**
  Through reflection, new experiences, and intentional thought patterns, beliefs can shift. This process takes time, consistency, and self-compassion.
- **Improves Well-Being**
  Updating beliefs—especially about worth, capability, and safety can reduce distress, increase confidence, and open up healthier ways of living.