

Challenging a Limiting Belief

The following exercise is a really powerful yet simple cognitive behavioural technique that I use a lot. You can try it to neutralize a negative emotion or limiting belief. The act of neutralizing a fearful or negative cognition or thought takes away its strength and hold on you. You are then free to replace it with something more useful!

Take a sheet of A4 paper and turn it to landscape to use. Write the following headings across the top of the paper:

1. Limiting belief (LB).
2. Thoughts and feelings associated with LB.
3. Evidence that LB is true.
4. Evidence that LB is not true.
5. How would my life/I be without this LB.
6. Alternative positive belief (APB).
7. Thoughts and feelings associated with APB.

Now to complete the exercise and challenge your own LB:

1. Under the first heading, write down your limiting belief in your own words—such as “I can’t get a better paid job.”
2. Under the second heading (associated thoughts and feelings), write down how this belief makes you feel and the thoughts that you tell yourself regarding this situation, such as ‘I’m scared that I won’t even get an interview,’ ‘I’m not good enough to apply for that job, there will be people applying with way more experience or ability than me,’ or ‘I feel helpless, stuck, and miserable,’ Don’t think too hard about exactly what to write; just start scribbling and soon, thoughts will come and flow onto the paper.

The more thoughts and feelings you can write, the better. This part of the exercise is really important—it gets you to process, express, and release these negative emotions and thoughts, rather than locking them inside you where they fester and take your energy.

3. & 4. The next two sections (evidence that the LB is true, followed by evidence it's not true) are where the accuracy of the LB actually gets challenged. This is one of the most important points of the process, as we realise that by re-enacting our LB, we're holding onto something that is not relevant to us anymore. It is at this point that the belief starts to get transformed. As you write under each of headings 3 and 4, there may be some points that you feel make the LB statement true, but most of what you will note here will show you that the belief is false and this confirmation gives you the power to change it!

List as many points as you can for 3 and 4 and I promise you that in 99% of the cases, the 'evidence that the LB is not true' column will be fuller than the previous column. For example, under the 'evidence that it's true' section, you could have points such as 'I went for an interview a few months back and didn't get the job' and 'The higher you go in this company, the fewer opportunities there are'. For the 'evidence that it's not true' section, you may list points such as 'I have a lot of experience in my job and therefore I should have a good chance of being successful. If I keep applying for positions, soon I should get an opportunity. There are most probably lots of options out there, I just need to look further afield,' and 'If I just keep trying, eventually I will get a "yes".'

5. By thinking, imagining, and listing under the next heading discussing what your life would be like without the LB, you will begin to mentally experience how your life could be and how happy and confident you can feel. This part of the process enables you to expand your mind and start to think differently and affirm that it is possible to have a better experience and outcome. This will give you the feeling that you have the power to change this for yourself. So, for example,

under this heading you may write things like, ‘Without this belief, I would be more confident and upbeat,’ and ‘I would be more energised about looking for jobs and spend more time applying for other opportunities,’ and ‘Without this belief, I would come across as a better candidate in interviews,’ and ‘I would see the whole process of looking for a better job as more fun and less stressful. I would be excited about the future!’

6. The next part of the process—naming an alternative statement or positive belief—is fun and feels great to do! The statement you decide upon should make you feel a warm, happy glow inside and it should ‘light’ you up with excitement when you say it. Take your time to create a statement that you really positively connect with emotionally. Come up with a sentence you feel really good about. For the above example, it could be something like, ‘I’m so excited that I will soon be offered my ideal next role’ or ‘I just know my dream job is not far away, I will keep looking and will soon find it!’
7. Your Alternative Positive Belief Statement (APB) is now your own personal mantra or affirmation and the last step of the exercise encourages you to expand on how you will feel and think when you have this new positive belief. It helps you to start transforming and replacing your belief within your subconscious mind. Thoughts and feelings give power to your new APB and sort of ‘turbo charge’ positive change. This is the reason that we use positive feeling words in our goal setting statements too.

So, feelings for the above example could be excitement, anticipation, and hopefulness, and thoughts could be: ‘I feel calm and confident that I will soon be moving forward in my career’ and ‘I will soon be earning more money and will be able to do so much more.’