

Working with self-diminishing beliefs

“Your beliefs create your thoughts, your thoughts create your words, your words create your actions, your actions become your habits, your habits create your character, and your character becomes your destiny”

Saying by Mahatma Gandhi –

One of the primary causes of suffering for human beings is that we believe our thoughts to be true without ever observing and questioning them. **A thought on its own is harmless unless we believe it to be true. It's our attachment to them that generates suffering.** Hence, much of our distress is the result of not investigating our familiar, taken for granted (but often outdated) assumptions, thoughts, deeply held beliefs, stories, judgements and expectations about ourselves, others and the world e.g. *That I should be perfect, beautiful, strong, smart, successful. If I make a mistake, I'm a failure. Or that reality should go according to plan, and things should go my way.*

When we believe we are our thoughts and thought patterns, and believe everything we tell ourselves without awareness and investigation, we are much more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, busy mind syndrome and over time, symptoms of accumulated stress e.g. body tension, somatic complaints such as chronic pain, headaches and other syndromes. We then become identified or blended with the thoughts and take them to be who we are. Our often unhelpful thoughts and stories about ourselves and others generate our uncomfortable feelings, directing our attention towards what's wrong or needs fixing, triggering stress hormones, strengthening familiar neural pathways in our brains and leading to predictable habits of behaviour. The results of our behaviour (habitual coping styles) often sadly generates more evidence to prove our thoughts and negative stories are right, ironically even attracting the very situations in our life that we are consciously trying to avoid. This suffering then drives our search for happiness, love and peace outside ourselves, believing it's the outside conditions that will make everything better. All of this deeply effects the trajectory of our lives. And then we call it our fate! LOOPING is this process where these feelings and habits of behaving then reinforce and fuel our familiar thoughts, which in turn re-triggers the same distressed feelings. Even though our environment is always impacting on us, this is how we contribute so much of our own experience of reality!

On a deeper level of investigation, we often discover that we are unconsciously holding onto our self-defeating beliefs and thought patterns because they are tied up with our need to know ourselves, to make reality or ourselves feel safe, predictable or protected in some way. As Virginia Satire once said, ‘better the certainty of misery than the misery of uncertainty’. Often, we unconsciously look for evidence to reinforce our painful beliefs about ourselves. Why do we do this? Maybe because these beliefs and their associated survival strategies are highly associated with *safety, security, feeling right, a familiar and predictable identity, self-protection*, and a substitute for feeling vulnerable. **For many, we actually take our thoughts not only to be true, but to be who we are. I am my thoughts.** Is this really true?

Remember – **Beliefs and stories are simply thoughts that we keep on repeating.** It's not just what happens to us that causes disturbance, but our unquestioned thoughts and interpretations about what happens to us! Our common ruminative, worry based, cynical or self-critical thoughts are no more than sound bites, or representations and generalizations of past experiences that have become imprinted as the truth of reality. But can any story about yourself and the world ever capture the whole mysterious, complex, vast, unfathomable truth of your spirit, of reality or who you really are. Our stories may feel real, but they are not necessarily true or even helpful. Reality is much bigger than any thought or story we have about reality! You really don't have to believe everything you tell yourself! **Thoughts are not FACTS, and You are not your thoughts.** In fact, I would suggest to you that *often, (not always!) reality is friendlier than the beliefs we have about it! What would happen if you chose not to entertain that old story?*

The most important thing is to **observe** your beliefs and thoughts, **question them**, and choose to not entertain them if they are not serving you. After all thoughts are wonderful servants, but terrible masters as Ram Dass once said. When you can name them (e.g your tendency towards rumination about past mistakes), you can begin to tame them, rather than get hijacked by them. When we can see our thoughts, we can see through them, and realize that there is someone or something much vaster that is noticing our thoughts. As Lock Kelly describes it, “We must look to unhook”.

The following 7 questions are a useful way to work with, inquire into and then loosen up unhelpful and out of date beliefs that no longer serve us.

- 1) **What am I believing?** - When you know that you are triggered into some feeling of suffering, reactivity and feeling ‘upset’, ‘off balance’ you can simply ask yourself – What am I believing? What are my typical thought pattern tendencies? For example, to worry about the future, to ruminate about the past, to constantly plan and predict, to become cynical, or to become self-critical or other critical, to jump to conclusions without checking them out.
- 2) **Is it really true?** – This is step we often forget to take. The simple power of questioning our often unquestioned assumptions about ourselves, others and the world. It doesn't matter if it's true or not. However, just be %100 sincere. Stop, slow down and then ask yourself, “In my deepest knowing, is this story really true?” Where is the evidence for it? Separate the facts from the belief or interpretation of the facts. Then following this, you can also simply ask yourself – **Is this thought helpful?**
- 3) **What's it like living with this thought/belief when I believe it to be true?** – Ask yourself how it effects you in your body, emotionally, how it makes you treat yourself and behave in the world and with others. Get to know the ripple effect of this belief when you believe it to be true. Does it lead to self-fulfilling prophecies and vicious circles?
- 4) **What is good about believing this thought? What stops you from letting this thought go?** This helps us to begin to consider what is our unconscious purpose and secondary gain in entertaining or agreeing with this thought or belief? What kind of vulnerability does it help me avoid feeling or what

actions do I avoid doing by holding onto this belief? Often our worst beliefs about us help us feel safer in some way and protect a deeper fear and vulnerability. What is the deeper core fear your story protects you from?

- 5) **What would be different if I let go of believing this thought?** Take time to imagine and visualize how your life would be different if you didn't buy into this thought pattern or belief? How would you act differently? What would you feel differently? How would you be relating to people differently? What risks would you take?
- 6) **Who would I be if I let this thought pattern or story go?** This question adds on the last one, but helps you to start to look at your identity. Who would you take yourself to be without believing the old though or story? Who could you become without it? For some, the deepest fear is not knowing who I am anymore, which for some can feel terrifying and disorientating, which can drive us back to our old stories. However, we cannot discover new oceans unless we're willing to lose sight of the shore!!
- 7) **What would you like to believe if you were more self-compassionate and kind to yourself? What difference would this make if you focused on this thought?** What would be a more self-compassionate and honest self-statement that you could make that would be more supportive, accurate and or helpful. This question helps you to begin to imagine an alternative reality, and begins to help build a new neural pathway in your brain towards greater wellbeing, self-acceptance and inner freedom.
- 8) **Disengaging from your inner critic** – If your unhelpful thoughts are coming from your 'inner critic' attacking you with judgements or perfectionistic standards or shoulds, imagine getting to know your critic, understanding and appreciating its original and current positive intention, but setting a clear assertive statement telling it to 'back off' from the unhelpful effects of its voice. As you do this imagine putting your hands out and setting a boundary with the critic.