

## The Bottom Line: Your Core Belief

At the heart of self-esteem lie your central beliefs about yourself and your core ideas about the kind of person you are. These beliefs normally have the appearance of statements of fact ('I am ...'). They look like straightforward reflections of your identity, pure statements of the truth about yourself. Actually, however, they are more likely to be opinions than facts — summary statements or conclusions you have come to about yourself, based on the experiences you have had in your life, and in particular the messages you have received about the kind of person you are.

As people grow up, they take with them the voices of people who were important to them. These need not be parents' voices. Other family members (grandparents, for example, or older siblings), teachers, child minders, friends and schoolmates — all can have a major impact on self-confidence and self-esteem. We may criticise ourselves in their exact sharp tones, call ourselves the same unkind names, and make the same comparisons with other people and with how we ought to be. That is, the beliefs we hold about ourselves in the present day often directly reflect the messages we received as children.

Along with this, we may re-experience emotions and body sensations, and see images in our mind's eye that were originally present at a much earlier stage. Lin, for example, when she submitted a painting for exhibition, would hear her mother's patient voice ('Well, I suppose if you like it, dear') and experience the same sinking feeling in her stomach that she experienced as a child.

Flashbacks like these, fed by painful memories, can be so vivid, so real, that it is as if what we experienced so long ago is happening all over again, right here and now, proving that nothing has changed; what we have always thought of ourselves is indeed true: our experiences have created a foundation for general conclusions about ourselves, judgements about ourselves as people. We can call these conclusions the 'Bottom Line' (or 'Core Beliefs').

Other experiences can also have an impact, such as:

- Failing to meet peer group standards
- Workplace intimidation or bullying, abusive relationships
- Getting older or having an accident etc. and losing previous abilities

Our Bottom Line Core Belief can often be summed up in a single sentence, beginning with the words: 'I am . . .' Below are some examples:

- I am bad
- I am not good enough
- I am fat and ugly
- I am all wrong
- I am worthless
- I am unlovable
- I am not important
- I am inferior
- I am stupid

## Your bottom Line

Now think about your own view of yourself and the experiences that have fed into it, while you were growing up and perhaps also later in your life.

1. What do you say about yourself when you are being self-critical?
2. What names do you call yourself when you are angry and frustrated?
3. What were the words people in your life used to describe you when they were angry or disappointed in you?
4. What messages about yourself did you pick up from your parents, other members of your family or your peers?

If you could capture the essence of your doubts about yourself in a single sentence

'I am ... ', what would it be?

'I am ...

You may find it hard at this stage to approach any sort of different view. Once the Bottom Line is in place, it becomes increasingly difficult to realise that in fact it is just an idea you picked up a long time ago, an old unhelpful habit of mind — something you could learn to detach yourself from, question and test. This is because it is maintained and, indeed, strengthened by **systematic biases in thinking**, which make it easy for you to notice and give weight to anything that is consistent with it, while encouraging you to screen out and discount anything that is not. It also leads to the development of **Rules for Living**: strategies for managing yourself, other people and the world, based on your assumption that the Bottom Line Core Belief is true.

Taken from 'Overcoming Low Self-Esteem: A self-help guide using cognitive behavioural techniques' (2016) Dr Melanie Fennell