

Behavioural Experiments

Underlying assumptions are sometimes the most important level of thought to identify and test:

1. When we are anxious, many of our hottest thoughts are "If . . . then . . ." assumptions, such as these examples:

"If I talk, then I'll make a fool of myself"

"If my heart beats fast, then it means I am having a heart attack"

"If something bad happens, then I can't cope."

2. In our relationships, many misunderstandings come about because each person holds different underlying assumptions. For instance, one partner may assume:

"If you care, then you will know what I want without me asking,"

But the other partner may assume:

"If you want something, then you will let me know."

2. Behaviours that we do to extremes, such as alcohol or drug misuse, overeating, and even perfectionism, are often driven by underlying assumptions:

"If I drink, then I'll be more social,"

"If I've had a hard day, then I deserve to eat a large dessert,"

"If something isn't perfect, then it is worthless."

Identifying our underlying assumptions provides a deeper understanding of the roots of our behaviours and our automatic thoughts. Identifying our assumptions allows us the opportunity to evaluate whether they are helpful or unhelpful, and gives us a chance to look at the possibility of constructing new assumptions that may work better in our lives.

Underlying assumptions can be identified and tested. The ideal way to test an underlying assumption is to do a series of behavioural experiments. Behavioural experiments are active tests to see if the "If . . . then . . ." rule predicts accurately what happens. There are many types of behavioural experiments, here are three common ones:

1. Does "then . . ." always follow "if . . . "?

2. Observing others and see if your "If . . . Then . . ." rule applies to them.

3. Trying out a new behaviour to find out what happens. For example doing the opposite and seeing what happens

1. Does "then . . ." always follow "if . . . "?

Underlying Assumption: "If I say something, then I will sound stupid, and people will laugh at me."

Assumption Tested: "If I say something then I will look stupid and people will make fun of me or say something negative

Experiment: Talk about my weekend plans with three store clerks

2. Observing others and see if your “If . . . Then . . .” rule applies to them.

Underlying Assumptions: “If what I do is not perfect, then I’m a failure. If something is not perfect then it’s worthless”

Assumption Tested: “If something is not perfect, then it is worthless, and the person doing it is a failure”

Experiment: Observe other waitresses at the restaurant making mistakes or errors.

3. Trying out a new behaviour to find out what happens. For example doing the opposite and seeing what happens

Underlying Assumptions: “If I worry, then I can anticipate bad things and protect my children. If I don’t worry then my children will be more vulnerable. If I don’t worry, then I’m not being a good mother”

Assumption Tested: “If I don’t worry then something bad will happen to my daughter and if I don’t worry, then I am not being a good mother

Experiment: Instead of worrying while my daughter is out with her friends, I’m going to enjoy myself at a game night party with other children and neighbours.