

## Underlying Assumptions and Behavioural Experiments

Shauntelle and Trey had been married for one year and were deeply in love. But despite their affection for each other, there was a great deal of tension, and they frequently argued when they were getting ready for parties. Trey was always ready 10 minutes before it was time to leave and would stand at the door, tapping his foot. Every few minutes he would text her, asking Shauntelle if she knew what time it was and reminding her that it was time to go. Shauntelle was equally upset and frustrated by Trey's reminders and could not understand why he was always in such a hurry.

Trey's and Shauntelle's reactions to getting ready for a party seem a bit puzzling at first. Why did Trey continue to stand at the door and text reminders to Shauntelle, when he could clearly see that this upset her? Why did Shauntelle wait so long to get ready, when she knew that this irritated Trey? The **underlying assumptions** Trey and Shauntelle held can help us make perfect sense of their responses.

Trey grew up in a family that valued punctuality and operated under the rule that an invitation for a party or get-together at 7:00 meant that the guests were expected to arrive at 7:00. In Trey's family, arriving later than 7:00 was a sign of disrespect. Therefore, he held the underlying assumption "If we don't arrive on time, then it will be disrespectful, and others will be upset with us." However, in Shauntelle's family, a party's starting time was viewed as somewhat of a suggestion. No one was expected to be there at the starting time. In fact, in her family, arriving at the stated starting time was unexpected and would put pressure on the hosts, who most likely were still preparing for the party. Shauntelle's underlying assumption was "If we arrive on time, then it will pressure the hosts." It is easy to see how each of their underlying assumptions guided their behaviour. However, since Trey and Shauntelle were not yet aware of these assumptions, their conflicting assumptions guaranteed tension in their relationship.

Similarly, if you always react to being home alone on Saturday night with sadness, then this is a clue that an underlying assumption is operating in the background. You might be assuming, "If it is Saturday night, then I should be doing something fun. If I am at home and not doing something fun, then this means I am a loser." Someone who holds a different underlying assumption may feel contentment instead of sadness: "If it is Saturday night, then I can do whatever I want to do. Being home alone is a chance to relax and have a nice quiet evening." Underlying assumptions are sometimes the most important level of thought to identify and test:

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

- 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," or "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

### 1. Doing the "If ... " part of our belief and seeing whether the "then . . ." part happens or not

1a) Mike experienced a lot of anxiety in social situations. When he was in work meetings, he avoided eye contact, hoping that his supervisor wouldn't call on him to speak. At parties, he wanted to meet other people, but felt very shy and stayed on the edges of the crowd, because he was afraid of looking or sounding foolish. He identified his underlying assumption as:

ASSUMPTION TESTED		<i>If I say something, then I will sound stupid, and people will make fun of me or say something negative.</i>			
Experiment	Prediction	Possible problems	Strategies to overcome these problems	Outcome of experiment	What have I learned from this experiment about this assumption?
Talk about my weekend plans with three store clerks.	<i>I will sound stupid, and at least two of the clerks will make fun of me or say something negative.</i>	<i>I will feel too nervous and avoid doing it.  I may avoid eye contact and not get the evidence I need.</i>	<i>Remind myself that it is important to test my assumption. It is OK to be nervous, and this will be over in a few minutes. My therapist told me that being nervous means I am on the right track.  Make sure I look at the clerk while I'm talking.</i>	<i>First clerk: Smiled and told me her plans for the weekend.  Second clerk: Seemed to listen but did not say much back.  Third clerk: Joked with me, but it did not seem like he was making fun of me. He was just being friendly.</i>	<i>Even though I was nervous, nothing happened that supported my prediction that I would sound stupid.  None of the clerks laughed at me or said anything negative.  Two clerks seemed to enjoy talking with me.</i>
<b>ALTERNATIVE ASSUMPTION THAT FITS WITH THE OUTCOME(S) OF MY EXPERIMENT(S)</b>		<i>If I talk to people, some of the time they seem genuinely interested, and they don't look like they are criticizing me.</i>			