

## IDENTIFYING UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS

Even though underlying assumptions lie “beneath the surface” they are easy to identify if you know where to look. Since underlying assumptions guide our behaviors and emotional reactions, we know they are active when we want to change a behavior but find it very difficult to do so, when we are avoiding something, and/or when we have strong emotional reactions.

To identify your underlying assumptions in these circumstances, put the behavior or the situation that triggers your reaction (avoidance or strong emotion) into a sentence that begins with “If . . .” and follow that by “then . . .” – and let your mind complete that sentence. It can also be helpful to write a sentence that says the opposite: “If I don’t . . . then . . .” Here are a few examples:

RITA: *I can’t start my exercise plan.*

Rita wants to exercise so she can lose weight, but she can’t figure out why she never begins, even though she has the best intentions. She identifies her underlying assumption by writing:

*If I exercise to lose weight, then . . .*

When Rita looks at this sentence, her mind quickly completes it like this:

*If I exercise to lose weight, then I will just gain it back, so what’s the use?*

She also considers what the “If I don’t . . . then . . .” assumption might be:

*If I don’t exercise to lose weight, then I won’t have to get up so early in the morning.*

These two assumptions help Rita understand why she hasn’t begun her exercise plan.

DERRICK: *I need it to be perfect.*

Derrick is a perfectionist. He spends hours and hours working on a project at work, but he never hands it in because “it could still be better.” What is his underlying assumption? He figures it out by writing:

*If I hand in my project before it is perfect, then . . .*

After a few seconds of thought, Derrick completes his assumption this way:

*If I hand in my project before it is perfect, then I'll get criticized, and my manager won't ever consider me for a promotion.*

**KELLY:** *I'm so ashamed.*

Kelly doesn't want people to know what is going on in her personal life, because she is ashamed that she is unemployed and still single at age 35. This is something she accepts about herself, so she is puzzled why she is so ashamed for others to know. Her underlying assumptions help her figure this out:

*If others know I am unemployed and single, then they will think I am a loser, gossip about me, and post nasty comments on the internet.*

*If I don't let them know I am unemployed and single, then I won't feel anxious, and I'll have a better time.*

You can't really know what people's underlying assumptions are just from looking at their behavior or emotional reactions. For example, Derrick is perfectionistic because he fears criticism. Other people may be perfectionistic because they take pleasure in doing something better than anyone else and they hope for compliments. Only you know what your underlying assumptions are.