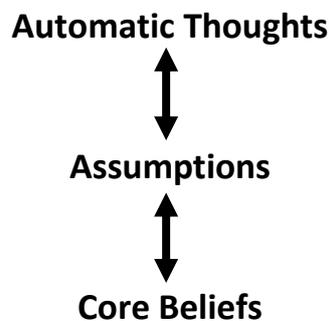


New Core Beliefs

If you have spent the time needed to develop proficiency with Thought Records, Action Plans and Acceptance, and Experiments, and you are still struggling with your moods, then the solution may lie in learning to identify and work with your "core beliefs."

The following diagram illustrates the connections among three different levels of thought: automatic thoughts, underlying assumptions, and core beliefs. Automatic thoughts, are the easiest level to identify. Automatic thoughts are the parts of the weeds or flowers that are above ground. Automatic thoughts are rooted beneath the surface in underlying assumptions and core beliefs. Notice that the arrows in the diagram go in each direction. This is because each of the three levels is connected to the other two. Therefore, when you work on any level of thought, you are also affecting the other two levels. This is why it makes sense to work on the simpler levels (automatic thoughts and underlying assumptions) first. For a lot of people, once they change the top two levels, the core beliefs take care of themselves, and that is all they need to do to bring about enduring positive changes in mood.



Automatic thoughts can be described as words or images that come into our minds automatically. As you learned earlier, underlying assumptions are not as obvious, but you can identify them when you put a behaviour or situation that triggers a strong emotion into a sentence that begins with "If ... ," follow that by "then . . . ," and let your mind complete that sentence.

Core beliefs are all-or-nothing statements about **yourself**, **others**, or **the world**. Marissa's core beliefs about herself included "I'm worthless," "I'm unlovable," and "I'm inadequate." Her core beliefs about others included "Others are dangerous," "People will hurt you," and "People are mean." She also believed that "The world is full of insurmountable problems." All of these beliefs are "all-or-nothing" beliefs — there are no qualifications. Marissa did not think, "I'm sometimes worthless"; she believed, "I am worthless" (absolutely). Everybody has both negative and positive core beliefs. This is normal.

Generally we work with automatic thoughts and underlying assumptions first, because changes in these levels of thought occur more quickly and will usually lift our moods. That is why Thought Records, Action Plans, Acceptance, and Experiments are the best first steps to improve mood. When changes at the levels of automatic thoughts and underlying assumptions don't create the mood changes you hope for, this may be a sign that your positive core beliefs are much weaker than your negative core beliefs and need to be strengthened.

Just as you learned to identify and evaluate your automatic thoughts and underlying assumptions, you can learn to identify and evaluate your core beliefs. If you have negative core beliefs that are active most of the time, then you will usually want to identify and strengthen your positive core beliefs. Once your positive core beliefs are more active, you are likely to feel better and enjoy a more rewarding life. For example, as long as Marissa saw herself as unlovable (a negative core belief), she did not allow people to get to know her. She behaved in withdrawn and protective ways. As Marissa developed a new positive core belief, "I am likable," she was more willing to get close to people. With this new belief, Marissa became more relaxed over time and had more positive interactions with others.

Where do core beliefs come from? Very often we have had them since childhood. We first learn about ourselves and the world from our family members and other people around us. They teach us things like "The sky is blue. This is a dog. You are worthless." So many of the messages we are given are correct ("The sky is blue," "This is a dog") that we believe all the things we are told, even things that may be wrong ("You are worthless").

Because core beliefs help us make sense of our world beginning at a young age, it may never occur to us to evaluate whether they are the most accurate or helpful ways of understanding our adult experiences. Instead, as adults, we act, think, and feel as if these beliefs are still 100% true. This is understandable, especially since some of our core beliefs may have been accurate and helpful for us as children. For example, if we grow up in abusive and alcoholic homes like Marissa's home, it may be adaptive to view others as dangerous and to remain constantly alert to signs of aggression. However, these same core beliefs that helped protect Marissa in abusive relationships interfered with her ability to form close, trusting relationships with people who were not hurtful to her. With a fixed core belief that "People are dangerous," Marissa was at risk of misinterpreting everyday behaviours as negative and aggressive.

It would help Marissa to develop new positive core beliefs — for example, that many people are loving and kind. Developing this companion positive core belief would give Marissa the mental flexibility to draw on the core belief that was most accurate and adaptive for the person she was with at any given time ("People are dangerous," "People are kind"). If we hold both types of core beliefs (positive and negative), then we are able to experience our lives on a full continuum — from very negative to neutral to very positive. When we hold only negative core beliefs, then every life experience becomes negative in some way, because it is viewed through these negative, inflexible lenses.