

STRENGTHENING CORE BELIEFS WITH BEHAVIORAL EXPERIMENTS

In Chapter 11, you learned to use behavioral experiments to test your underlying assumptions. Behavioral experiments can also help strengthen new core beliefs. It is hard to develop confidence in a new core belief just by thinking about it. Usually our confidence in a new core belief increases only after we begin to experiment with new behaviors that are linked to the new core belief. For example, Vic developed confidence that he could control his anger only after he began experimenting with behaviors that helped him stay in control.

One woman, Carla, saw herself as unacceptable and unimportant. Carla believed that others were more important than she was, and therefore she always did what other people wanted and put their needs above her own. She also avoided conflict in her relationships, because she felt bad when others were upset with her. This was especially true because whenever there was conflict, she assumed that it was her fault, and she felt horrible. As she worked her way through the worksheets in this chapter, she decided she wanted to build three new core beliefs: “My needs are also important,” “Conflict is normal in relationships, because different people often want different things,” and “If I stand up for myself and tolerate my discomfort, I’ll feel better in the long run.” She decided to do one or more of several behavioral experiments each day:

1. “I will pay attention to what I want and speak up for myself.”
2. “When I disagree with someone, I will express my point of view. I will tolerate my discomfort and not compromise with someone else just to avoid conflict.”
3. “I will spend some time every day doing something for myself that is important to me.”

Carla made predictions based on her old and new core beliefs about what would happen in these experiments. Her old core beliefs predicted that people would get upset or criticize her when she did these things, and she would feel worse. Her new core beliefs predicted that although there might be discomfort in the short term, she would feel better about herself in the long term.

Since Carla was especially concerned about what her closest friends and family would think about her if she made these changes, she practiced her experiments the first few weeks with strangers. Several things surprised Carla when she behaved in these ways with shopkeepers, clerks, and new people she met. First, contrary to her predictions, most of the time people did not even seem to react when she spoke up for herself and made it clear what she wanted. Some people even responded favorably and said things like “Oh, I can see what you mean.”

With these encouraging results, Carla decided to begin doing similar behavioral experiments with family and friends. In these relationships, she sometimes received positive or neutral responses, but she noticed that certain family members got quite upset with her when she asserted herself. When she continued to speak up for herself, Carla

was surprised that even though she felt discomfort at first, she sometimes felt a bit better even when the disagreement continued. She was beginning to realize that it was OK to express her needs, whether all family members agreed with her or not. Also, she recognized that she could be acceptable and expressing her needs was important, even when others in her family did not agree with her.

As she thought about her experiments, Carla realized that some family members had come to expect that she would always give in to their opinions and preferences. When she did not, they reacted negatively. Therefore, she decided to talk to them and explain that she wanted to be more direct in expressing her own wants and needs. It took some time, but she gradually changed her role in her family. As Carla more regularly voiced her opinions, she discovered that others often were willing to compromise and resolve differences in ways that met her needs as well as their own.

These experiments required Carla to tolerate discomfort, especially in the beginning. She was pleasantly surprised to learn that her discomfort didn't last, and that it decreased as she did more and more experiments. Once she did her experiments, it increased her confidence when people paid attention to her and went along with what she wanted. When people did not respond to her requests, she was able to see that differences of opinion did not mean she was unimportant. She was able to understand that conflict is a normal part of relationships, because even people who care about each other often want different things.

EXERCISE: Behavioral Experiments to Strengthen New Core Beliefs

At this point, you may be ready to do some behavioral experiments to strengthen some of your new core beliefs. Use Worksheet 12.9 to do the following:

1. Write out two or three new behaviors that are linked to your new core belief. You are likely to feel a bit nervous or hesitant about doing these behaviors. That's a sign that you are probably on the right track.
2. Make predictions about what will happen, based on your old and new core beliefs.
3. If possible, try these behaviors out with strangers first (e.g., shop clerks, people in town you don't know). This can be helpful, because strangers don't expect you to act in any particular way.
4. Once you have done the experiments a number of times with strangers, try out these new behaviors with people you know. If appropriate, you can tell your family and friends what new behaviors you are trying and why this is important for you.
5. Write down the outcome of your experiments and what you learn from them, especially as they relate to your new core beliefs and your predictions (see item 2 above). Do your new behaviors and the outcomes support your new core beliefs even partially?