

Underlying Assumptions

Underlying Assumptions are beliefs and rules that lie beneath the surface and guide our

- automatic thoughts,
- emotional reactions,
- behaviours

They help explain why the same types of automatic thoughts come up over and over again in therapy discussions and thought records.

Psychotherapy aims to identify and test the underlying assumptions that give rise to automatic thoughts that maintain distressing moods and behaviours

Developing new underlying assumptions can lead to meaningful change and greater happiness

Identifying Underlying Assumptions

Look through your thought records or memory and identify some specific times when you have had especially strong emotional reactions (e.g., someone criticises you, you make a mistake, people are late, you get interrupted, someone tries to take advantage of you, a telemarketer calls you).

To identify underlying assumptions, put a *behaviour* or *situation* that triggers a *strong mood* into a sentence that begins with "If . . ." and follow that by "then . . ." and let your mind complete the sentence.

1. Let's take some mood related examples

Shame

- > If someone corrects me, then . . . that proves I'm inadequate
- > If I've done something wrong, then . . . I don't deserve good things in life

Anger

- > If someone hurts me, then . . . I have the right to hurt them back
- > If someone's shows me disrespect and I don't push back hard, then . . . I will look weak, and they will take even greater advantage of me

Rejection

- > If someone gets upset or ignores me, then . . . they are rejecting me
- > If I let people down in any way, then . . . (what am I afraid of?) . . . they will reject me

Addictions

Behaviours that you keep doing even when it would be better for you not to do them (e.g., staying up late watching television, drinking too much alcohol, overeating, criticising someone, dating the wrong types of people, cleaning the house all the time).

- > If I have an urge, then . . . (what am I afraid will happen?) . . . it will just get worse until I give into it
- > If I have an urge, then . . . I can't stop myself
- > If I've had a hard day, then . . . I deserve to eat a large desert
- > If I feel hungry, then . . . I need to eat, or the feeling of hunger will become intolerable
- > If I've gone off my diet then . . . I might as well binge because my diet is ruined for today
- > If I drink, then . . . (what do you hope will happen) . . . I will be more social
- > If I want to be with my friends, then . . . I have to use drugs and/or drink

Relationships

- > If you care, then . . . you will know what I want without me asking

- > If someone loves me, then . . . he will know what I need and meet those needs.
- > If my partner hurts me, then . . . that means she doesn't love me
- > If my partner loves me, then . . . he will do what I want, even when we disagree
- > If my partner breaks one of our agreements, then . . . she is completely untrustworthy

If someone doesn't like me or want to be in a relationship with me, then I am unloveable

If I can't be with X, then I'm doomed to a lifetime of unhappiness

If I am not attractive in Y ways [e.g., beauty, wealth, ability], then no one will want to be with me.

2. Behaviour –Related Underlying Assumptions

To identify underlying assumptions that *maintain avoidant behaviours*, then as well as trying the above method it can sometimes be helpful to put the frequent behaviour in the "If . . ." part, and follow with "then what am I afraid might happen?"

- > If I exercise to lose weight, then . . . "what am I afraid might happen?" . . . I will just gain it back again, so what's the use

Avoidance behaviours (Anxiety)

- > If my heart beat fast, then . . . "what am I afraid might happen?" . . . I will have a heart attack
- > If something goes wrong, then . . . "what am I afraid might happen?" . . . I will not be able to cope
- > If I don't worry, then . . . "what am I afraid might happen?" . . . something bad will happen
- > If I'm driving in heavy traffic, then . . . "what am I afraid might happen?" . . . I will have an accident because the risk of an accident goes up in heavy traffic

Avoidance behaviours (shame)

- > If I sound foolish, then . . . "what am I afraid might happen?" . . . others will laugh at me and I will feel humiliated
- > If I try something new, then . . . "what am I afraid might happen?" . . . I will fail
- > If I go out to meet people when I don't yet feel ready, then . . . (then what am I afraid might happen?) . . . I'm afraid I will blow it and do something weird and ruin my chances in that place
- > If others know I am unemployed and single, then . . . (what am I afraid might happen?) . . . they will think I am a loser, gossip about me, and post nasty comments on the internet.

Avoidance behaviours (Perfectionism)

- > If something is not perfect, then . . . (what am I afraid might happen?) . . . it proves it is worthless, which proves I am useless
- > If I hand in my project before it is perfect then . . . (what am I afraid might happen?) . . . I'll get criticised and my manager won't ever consider me for a promotion

Avoidant behaviours (relationships)

- > If someone doesn't like me or want to be in a relationship with me, then . . . (what am I afraid might happen?) . . . that means I am unloveable
- > If I can't be with X, then . . . (what am I afraid might happen?) . . . I'm doomed to a lifetime of unhappiness
- > If I am not attractive in Y ways [e.g., beauty, wealth, ability], then . . . (what am I afraid might happen?) . . . no one will want to be with me.

3. It can be helpful sometimes with avoidance type behaviours to write a sentence that says the opposite: "If I don't . . ." then . . ."

"If I stay home this week and **don't** go out to meet people, then . . . (what do you **hope** will happen?) I hope that one of these days, I'll really feel ready to go out, and it will be easier to meet people when I'm in a more confident mood"

Avoidance

- ❖ If I exercise to lose weight, then . . . (what am I **afraid** might happen?) . . . I will just gain it back again, so what the use
- ❖ If I **don't** exercise to lose weight, then . . . (what do you **hope** will happen?) . . . I won't have to get up to early in the morning

- ❖ If I go out to meet people when I don't yet feel ready, then . . . (what am I **afraid** might happen?) . . . I'm afraid I will blow it and do something weird and ruin my chances in that place
- ❖ If I stay home this week and **don't** go out to meet people, then . . . (what do you **hope** will happen?) I hope that one of these days I'll really feel ready to go out, and it will be easier to meet people when I'm in a more confident mood

Avoidance (Shame)

- ❖ If others know I am unemployed and single, then . . . (what am I **afraid** might happen?) . . . 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 . . . (what do you **hope** will happen?) I won't feel anxious and ashamed, and I'll have a better time

Addictions

- ❖ If I use, then . . . (what do you hope will happen?) I'll feel and perform better
- ❖ If I **don't** use, then . . . (what am I afraid might happen?) I'll get edgy, and this will continue until I use again

In short then you can try these three methods and see what you come up with:

1. If (Insert a situation that triggers an intense mood, or behaviour your struggling with or avoiding), then ...
2. If (Insert behaviour you struggling with) then ... (what am I **afraid** might happen?) ...
3. If (Insert behaviour you are avoiding then ... (what do I **hope** might happen?) ...