

Underlying Assumptions

Tracy and Steve 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. Steve 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 Tracy if she knew what time it was and reminding her that it was time to go. Tracy was equally upset and frustrated by Steve's reminders and could not understand why he was always in such a hurry.

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

Steve 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 Steve'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 Tracy'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. Tracy'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.

Steve	Tracy
"If we don't arrive on time, then it will be disrespectful, and others will be upset with us."	"If we arrive on time, then it will pressure the hosts."

However, since Steve and Tracy were not yet aware of these assumptions, their conflicting assumptions guaranteed tension in their relationship.

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.