

Understand the ways your thoughts
limit you and learn how to change
them!

Challenging Thoughts



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As a literature professor, I'm always trying to impress upon my students how our own life experiences frame our understanding of a work of literature. This becomes clear in our discussions about the literary works we read in class. There can be as many different opinions about the meaning of a literary work as there are students in the class. The same can be said of how we give meaning to all of life's experiences. Events or situations occur and we understand them based on our interpretations, limiting beliefs, and assumptions.

Just as with literature, sometimes we have a strong emotional reaction to life. Sometimes we act out of fear or anger without even realizing it at the time. Other times, our instinct is to hold back, to hide. This is because of our inner critic. Our thoughts, limiting beliefs, assumptions and inner critic limit us. Because of these automatic ways of thinking and feeling, we react to life without forethought. This creates the patterns we see in our lives – the recurring situations, the particular type of people we seem to attract – because we create our reality with our thoughts. And we can change our thoughts!

In my coaching practice, I frequently work with clients on challenging thoughts even when they come to coaching for another reason. In this report you will learn about different types of thoughts and beliefs. I'll illustrate these concepts with examples. Then I'll explain how to change them.

The secret of change is to focus all of your energy, not on fighting the old, but on building the new.

Dan Millman

Interpretations, Assumptions, and Limiting Beliefs

We often react to life through that lens of past experience without ever stopping to think whether our experience is really what is happening in this moment. We ascribe meaning to events and other people's behavior based on our beliefs and values. Our understanding of these things may have nothing to do with reality. This is an interpretation. Other people experiencing the same event with us, or people whose behavior we have observed, may have a completely different understanding of the situation and their behavior. In my literature class, one of the poems we study is "My Papa's Waltz" by Theodore Roethke. The poem is about a brief experience between a father and son who dance around the kitchen disturbing the pots and pans. Many students interpret the poem as being about an abusive relationship between a boy and his alcoholic father. The opening lines identify that the father had been drinking. Other lines describe the boy being scratched when his father stumbled and the father keeping time on the boy's head. Some interpret the poem differently. They find a happy memory about an evening's romp. Just like students interpreting literature, we interpret everything we see and experience. There will be as many interpretations about an experience as there are people involved. Interpretations are unique to us in the main. Others may interpret things similarly, but the experiences behind our interpretations are our own.

In contrast to the interpretation that is our own, a limiting belief is an idea that is believed by many people but that really has no basis in reality. We all have them. We learn them from our parents and other adults in our lives. Growing up, I heard people (mostly men, but even some women) say that women are not

good drivers. As a result, I was afraid to learn to drive. My instructor said he had never met anyone as nervous behind the wheel as I was. I eventually outgrew my fear but these types of generalizations about specific groups of people are judgments that are false and don't serve the people believing them or the group they are targeted at.

Unlike a limiting belief that is shared by the majority, an assumption is unique to our experience. When we believe that something that happened before will happen again, that is an assumption. Just because something occurred in the past doesn't mean the same thing will necessarily happen again or happen in the same way with the same outcomes. There is no one-size-fits-all answer. If we had a frustrating or undesirable experience with one person of a particular gender, ethnicity, in a position of authority, or in a particular job, it doesn't mean that all people who are of the same sex, race, authority or career will cause us the same upset. Just because one police officer gave you a lecture before citing you, it doesn't mean another one won't cut you a break. No two people are exactly alike and believing they are limits the possible outcomes in every interaction.

These ways of thinking limit us and others. They hold us back from seeing other perspectives and possibilities. Interpretations, limiting beliefs and assumptions lock us into a particular pattern of thinking, feeling and behaving. It restricts our ability to choose our response to people and situations. Instead, we are locked into courses of action that no longer benefit us. Our emotions are created by our thoughts and our behavior is strongly and frequently motivated

by our emotions. When we change our thoughts, our behavior and emotions change along with them.

Inner Critic

We all have that voice in our head that criticizes what we do, puts us down, and in every way prevents us from doing things we want to do. Whenever we are about to step outside our comfort zone or we are close to achieving a goal or dream, the inner critic gets very loud and abusive. With thoughts like “you’re lazy” or “you’ll never amount to anything” or simply “you’re not good enough”, resounding in our heads, we shrink back. We don’t stretch ourselves or reach our goals when we listen to that voice. This is our inner critic and it is much more powerful than interpretations, assumptions and limiting beliefs.

The inner critic comes from a very deep place inside of us, from a place of fear. It can be the result of a painful past experience – a child’s interpretation of what happened and why – that has hardened into a core belief. Possibly, we no longer remember the event that spawned this inner critic. The memory lurks in the shadows just out of sight. But, we feel the presence of something bad. It must have been very traumatic to make us so afraid, to create this inner critic that has worked diligently over the years to prevent a recurrence of such an event.

The thoughts generated by our inner critic can be more difficult to shift than other limiting thoughts. The voice has roots all the way back into the past. The emotions associated with the voice (the inner critic’s and ours in response) are more intense and paralyzing. However, recognizing the inner critic for what it is – an old friend that doesn’t fit us anymore – is a big step in overcoming the

fear engendered by the voice and its message. The inner critic is like an old friend because it tries to protect us. It wants what is best for us, and based on what happened when we were young, the inner critic believes that some things are not good for us. However, we are not children anymore. As adults, we have a different perspective on things. We can handle a lot more, and understand a lot more, than we could when we were young. We recognize that choice is better, stronger, more life-affirming than being a slave to an outmoded way of thinking and acting. We want to be able to consciously choose to expose ourselves to possible embarrassment, anger, or praise so that we can continue to grow and develop ourselves. As adults, we recognize that we only truly fail when we don't try. Being unsuccessful is an opportunity to try something different, to practice something new, and to continue to grow and develop. Recognizing this is the first step on the path to replacing the harsh messages with something more empowering.

Changing Thoughts and Beliefs

Knowing where thoughts and beliefs come from can facilitate the process of change, but it isn't necessary. Sometimes, the need to know can hamper the change process. However, if you want to do some exploring try the following.

1. Find a quiet place where you won't be disturbed.
2. Center yourself by taking slow, deep breaths until you feel yourself slowing down. As you breathe out, it might be helpful to think "I release all tension" or "I release any cares" or "I am relaxed."

3. For those who are more analytical, pick one or more of the following questions that resonate with you and just see what comes up when you ask.
 - a. When have I thought this same thought before?
 - b. Where does this thought come from?
 - c. How has this thought helped me in the past?
 - d. In what ways does this thought hinder me now?
4. For those who are more creative and empathetic, try the following questions.
 - a. Where do I feel this thought in my body?
 - b. What does it feel like?
 - c. What images or feelings come with it?
 - d. What does it remind me of?

Whatever answers you find, it is important to remember that these thoughts and beliefs have served you in some way in the past. Acknowledge that you did the best you could at the time and move on. Know, too, that one of the functions of our brain is to categorize and process information as soon as possible. It is very good and quick at this job, like a computer. It's a complicated process that involves accessing memory and processing related sensory input. This makes information processing a very subjective process and unique to each individual. It also happens largely outside our awareness. Don't judge yourself for how you've reacted to life in the past. Your brain was just doing its job.

While it may be normal, this type of thinking about, and reacting to, people and situations doesn't always serve us. The great news is we can change

it! We can make a choice about how we respond to the world, rather than reacting automatically. We will feel better about ourselves and how we engage with others and life when we learn this two-step process. It's simple, but not easy. Focus, engagement and determination are necessary. You're replacing one habit that no longer supports you with another that serves you better.

The first step is becoming aware of when we make assumptions, interpretations, judgments based on limiting beliefs, or hold back due to our inner critic. Write in a journal about situations that don't go the way you would have liked. Describe what happened and the thought that triggered it. Don't beat yourself up over it. You're trying to change. Give yourself a pat on the back for that. After just one week, it should be pretty clear how your thoughts are creating experiences that may not be what you want.

Once you notice how your thoughts and beliefs are creating your day to day to life, you can create a new reality! We choose what we believe, what we create and in the moment, how we respond to life. Consider how you would rather think when those limiting beliefs, assumptions, interpretations, and the inner critic surface in your life. Write it down in your journal. Rather than the generalization that all women are bad drivers, how could those adults in my childhood have believed instead? What would have been less judgmental and less limiting to women? Some women are bad drivers? Some people are bad drivers? What would you like to believe instead of your assumptions and limiting beliefs? What are some other ways of looking at events and interactions rather than interpreting them under the same light that has not served you in the past? How will you respond to your inner critic?

A helpful additional step would be to talk to someone you trust, someone who will be objective and hold your agenda rather than their own. Speaking with another person will help you see things from another perspective. It can be tricky talking to family and friends because even though they love you, support you, and want the best for you sometimes their idea of what is best for you is not the same as yours. Find one or more people who will help you see different perspectives and possibilities but who won't tell you what it means to you or what you should do about it. Those answers can only come from inside of you.

What would your reality be like if you could think about life in a new way, a way that opened up possibility instead of limited you? Because you can. Our thoughts create our reality. If you don't like how you interact with others, if you don't like the similar situations you seem to find yourself in, create something different. Create the life you want. It's not easy, but it's simple (and it will become easier with practice). Just apply the two step process diligently and you will see the difference!

To sum up:

1. Notice when your thoughts about people, situations and life limit you (and the other person) in some way. The different types of automatic thoughts:
 - a. Interpretations – how we perceive people or events through the lens of past experience
 - b. Assumptions – if it happened once, it will again
 - c. Limiting Beliefs – generalizations about a group of people that are not true of everyone in the group

- d. Inner Critic – The voice that stops you from doing the things that cause you to step outside your comfort zone
- 2. Replace the limiting thoughts with new ideas and possibilities that you determine will create the life you want.
 - a. Interpretations – what is a different way to look at this situation, or to think about this person, that is more beneficial?
 - b. Assumptions – what are some of the different outcomes possible?
 - c. Limiting Beliefs – how accurate is this belief? What might be more true?
 - d. Inner Critic – how much do I want this? How much do I deserve this? What are some things I can do to move forward? How can I respond to my inner critic when it gets in my way?

This, like life, is a process. If you're not getting the results you want, try some new thoughts and beliefs. Make adjustments. Don't be afraid to play around with this. Have fun. Be creative. Be imaginative. Experiment. This is your life – your reality – you are creating. Don't settle for okay when you can have greatness. You deserve to be happy and realize your full potential!

**Your greatest self has been waiting your whole life; don't make it wait any longer.
Steve Maraboli**