The Role of Mistaken Beliefs and Anxiety

Part 5 of the “Don’t Panic! Coping With Anxiety” workshop series.

Adapted from the book “The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook by Edmund J. Bourne

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What are mistaken beliefs?

- Mistaken beliefs are where negative self talk originates from.

- They are deeper-lying beliefs or assumptions about ourselves, others and life in general.

- Most often, such beliefs are **unhelpful** or just **incorrect**.

- We usually learn such beliefs from our parents, teachers, peers and the larger society around us.

- We tend to take them for granted, not even realising that they are beliefs at all, we just assume that they reflect **reality**.
Examples of mistaken beliefs are...

- "Life is a struggle",
- "I should always act nice no matter how I feel"
- "I am nothing unless others love and approve of me"
- "I am unimportant. My feelings and needs are unimportant"
- "I can’t cope with difficult or scary situations"

Such mistaken beliefs about yourself and 'the way life is' are at the root of the anxiety you experience.

Letting go of such beliefs could help you to feel less worried, stressed and unhappy.
Mistaken beliefs hold you back from what you want in life.

For example:

❖ "I can't afford to have what I want", or
❖ "I don't have time“, or
❖ "I don't have the talent“, or
❖ At an even deeper level "I don't deserve to have what I truly want“

Believing this means that you will not even try to get what you want, the surest way to guarantee that you won’t!
Mistaken beliefs set limits on your self-worth…

- Mistaken beliefs often contain the idea that self-worth depends on something outside of yourself such as social status, wealth, material possessions, the love of another person or social approval.

- Believing that "success is everything" or "my worth depends on what I accomplish" places your self esteem outside of you and stops you realising that you have many talents and qualities regardless of your outer accomplishments.

- As your self-esteem grows, you can learn to respect and believe in yourself apart from what you have accomplished and without relying on another for your good feeling.
Discover your own mistaken beliefs

You will have developed your own set of mistaken beliefs through:

- Direct messages from others like "Nice girls don't get angry"
- A reaction to being criticised by others (thus "I'm worthless"), ignored (thus "my needs don't matter") or rejected (thus "I'm unlovable")

Unfortunately, holding these beliefs mean that you tend to act in a way (and get others to treat you in a way) that confirms them (self fulfilling prophecy).

It is important to understand how your set of mistaken beliefs came to be before you can go about reprogramming yourself with more functional and supportive beliefs.
Examples of mistaken beliefs and counter-statements

**MB:** I’m powerless. I’m a victim of outside circumstances.

**A:** I’m responsible and in control of my life. Circumstances are what they are, but I can determine my attitude toward them.

**MB:** If I take a risk, I’ll fail. If I fail, others will reject me.

**A:** It’s okay for me to take risks. It’s okay to fail – I can learn from every mistake. It’s okay for me to be a success.

**MB:** Life is a struggle. Something must be wrong if life seems to easy, pleasurable or fun.

**A:** Life is full and pleasurable. It’s okay for me to relax and have fun. Life is an adventure – and I’m learning to accept both the ups and downs.

**MB:** I’m unimportant. My feelings and needs are unimportant.

**A:** I’m a valuable and unique person. I deserve to have my feelings and needs taken care of as much as anyone else.
More examples…

**MB:** I always should look good and act nice, no matter how I feel.

**A:** *It’s okay simply to be myself.*

**MB:** If I worry enough, this problem should get better or go away.

**A:** *Worrying has no effect on solving problems, taking action does.*

**MB:** I can’t cope with difficult or scary situations.

**A:** *I can learn to handle any scary situation if I approach it slowly, in small enough steps.*

**MB:** The outside world is dangerous. There is only safety in what is known and familiar.

**A:** *I can learn to become more comfortable with the world outside. I can look forward to new opportunities for learning and growth that the outside world can offer.*
The Mistaken Beliefs Questionnaire

- Just recognising your own mistaken beliefs is the first and most important step to letting go of them.

- Use the ‘Mistaken Beliefs Questionnaire’ (from the “Anxiety and Phobia Workbook”) to help you work out which some of the mistaken beliefs you hold.

- The second step is to develop your own positive affirmations to deprogram the mistaken beliefs.
Countering Mistaken Beliefs – assessing the level of your belief

How strongly do you hold your belief?

1. You don't really believe it and can recognise that it is a bad mental habit that you are truly ready to give up. If this is the case, then you are ready to develop a positive affirmation to counter the belief.

2. You don't really subscribe to the belief on an intellectual level, but it still has an emotional grip on you and influences the way you act. If this is the case, then you probably don't want to believe it, but it is hard to get the belief out of your system. You may need to subject your mistaken belief to some challenging questions (4 and 5 on the next slide).

3. You may really have faith in a particular belief. You're not convinced it is inaccurate and will need some persuading before you are ready to give it up. If this is the case, then you probably think that substituting a positive affirmation for this belief is naïve and superficial. You may need to subject your mistaken belief to some challenging questions (1-3, on the next slide), which are designed to test the logic of your mistaken beliefs.
Five questions for challenging mistaken beliefs

1. What is the evidence for this belief? Looking objectively at all of my life experiences, what is the evidence that this is true?

2. Does this belief *invariably* or *always* hold true for me?

3. Does this belief look at the whole picture? Does it take into account positive and negative ramifications?

4. Does this belief promote my well-being and/or peace of mind?

5. Did I choose this belief on my own or did it develop out of my experiences of growing up in my family?

Remember that whatever value your mistaken beliefs may have held in the past, they have long lost their usefulness and only serve to create anxiety or stress for you now.
Guidelines for constructing affirmations

Affirmations can be 'compact' statements that you can repeat to yourself, write repetitively on paper or listen to on tape to replace the mistaken beliefs you hold in your mind. Follow these guidelines in creating your affirmations:

1. **Short, simple** and **direct** (eg. 'I believe in myself').

2. **In the present tense or present progressive tense** (eg. "I have strengths" or "I am developing strengths")

3. **Avoid negatives** (eg. instead of "I'm no longer afraid of public speaking", try "I'm becoming fearless about public speaking")

4. **Start with a direct declaration of the positive change you want to make in your life** (eg. 'I am (or I am willing to) making more time for myself each day').

5. **Have some belief in or some willingness to believe in your affirmations**, the goal is to slowly shift your beliefs towards the affirmations, but you do need to begin with some level of belief in them.
Ways to work with affirmations

❖ Choose just a few affirmations to work with.

❖ It is best to work with 2-3 at a time, unless you make a tape containing all of them.

❖ There are several ways to work with your affirmations, choose the method that you think you will be most likely to use and are most comfortable with
Write out an affirmation repetitively

- Write an affirmation repetitively 5-10 times a day for a week or two.

- Allow yourself to write your doubts on the reverse of the page, until they gradually reduce.

- You could also answer your doubts with positive counterstatements.

- For example for the affirmation "I'm learning to be fine by myself", your doubt might be "I'm not sure I'll be able to do this". A counterstatement to answer this doubt might be "If I break this down into small enough steps, I know I can do it".
Write out your affirmation in a strong and distinctive way

- Write your affirmation in GIANT LETTERS and in a strong colour
- You can then put up your affirmations around your living space where you will see them daily.
Put a series of affirmations on tape

- You could use your own voice or ask someone else to do it.
- Leave 5-10 seconds between each to allow them to sink in.
- Listen to the tape regularly - it will be most effective when you are in a relaxed state, so try a deep relaxation exercise first.
Work with a partner

- Repeat affirmations to each other, and state your agreement with them "yes I know" or "yes it's true" while maintaining eye contact with each other.
Take a single affirmation with you into meditation

- Meditation is a way to experience 'just being', to experience yourself as a whole.
- Repeating an affirmation while doing this can have a strong impact.
Increasing the power of an affirmation

There are two fundamental ways of reinforcing an affirmation or any new habit of thinking:

**Repetition:** You developed your mistaken beliefs in the first place by repetition, so by the same token, repetition can help you to instil positive affirmations in your mind to replace the original false belief.

**Feeling:** Getting the belief into your heart and saying affirmations with conviction and feeling gives it the greatest power and efficacy. Try a relaxation first, so that you are more receptive, and then repeat your affirmations with a sense of conviction.
Active integration

- You can further strengthen affirmations by developing a vigilance for events that confirm it.

- This process of **active integration** involves looking for events or situations in real life that confirm your affirmations and writing them down.

- Knowing that you want to write them down also helps you to notice them more.

- For example, if you are working with the affirmation "I'm learning that there is more to life than success in my career or at school", then list all of the occasions when you derived enjoyment from other activities to demonstrate the truth of this new belief.