

Break Free from ED

An Active Guide to Recovering from Your Eating Disorder

Module 13

Core Beliefs

Introduction	2
Core Beliefs	2
Core Beliefs and Eating Disorders	2
Identifying Your Core Beliefs	3
Challenging Negative Core Beliefs	4
Recording Evidence that a Core Belief is Not 100% True	4
Strengthening New Core Beliefs	5
My Core Belief Action Plan	7
My Weekly Progress Tracker	8
Module Summary	9
	10

If you are restricting your food intake, using self-induced vomiting, over-exercising, laxatives or diuretics for weight-control, or have lost weight recently, it is important that you talk to your medical practitioner and get a full medical check-up, as there are many physical complications that can arise as a result.

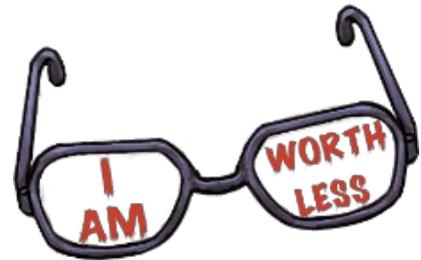
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Introduction

In this module, we will discuss **core beliefs** – these are beliefs that are central to how we see ourselves, others, and the world. We will help you identify core beliefs, understand their impact on your eating disorder behaviours, develop more helpful beliefs, and make a plan to engage in valued areas of your life that the eating disorder might have taken you away from.

Core Beliefs

Core beliefs are at the core of the thoughts and mental images we hold about ourselves, others, and the world we live in. They guide which information we pay attention to, filtering in information that supports the core belief and ignoring evidence that contradicts it. Some core beliefs are out of our awareness while others may be very noticeable, like lyrics of a song that we play over and over in our heads.



Core beliefs are shorthand rules for living that typically develop early in life and are strengthened through our experiences. Some core beliefs are helpful (e.g., 'It's important to be kind and respectful'). Others are unhelpful, rigid, and have not been 'updated' with recent information. For example, being bullied at school might lead to believing 'I am unlikeable' or 'I don't belong'. Having positive experiences of success that are highly admired by others might lead to believing 'I must never make a mistake'. We become so used to thinking in line with our core beliefs that we don't even consider the idea that we could change them in adulthood. For example, we may fear losing relationships even when we have a committed partner. When negative core beliefs are triggered, we experience more intense emotional reactions, such as anger, fear, shame, or hopelessness.

Core Beliefs and Eating Disorders

Many experiences can influence the core beliefs that people with eating disorders develop, such as:

- Body changes – for example, puberty is a time of rapid physical development that is sometimes experienced negatively, triggering shame, fear of growing up, or rejection of a male or female body
- Weight changes – this might include weight gain or weight loss (e.g. due to illness, pregnancy etc)
- Receiving negative comments about body weight, shape, or eating
- Positive experiences related to an unwell body (e.g. increased care when sick with an eating disorder)
- Observing others focussing on dieting or weight control
- Observing others being self-critical about their bodies
- Messages in media promoting thinness or muscularity as a symbol of popularity, success, beauty, or health
- Sexual or physical abuse
- Bullying or teasing (e.g. from others about appearance)



Early experiences such as these may lead to the development of negative core beliefs related to areas such as self-esteem, worth, likeability. What personal life experiences may have influenced how you think about yourself, others and the world? Pay particular attention to experiences related to eating, weight and shape.

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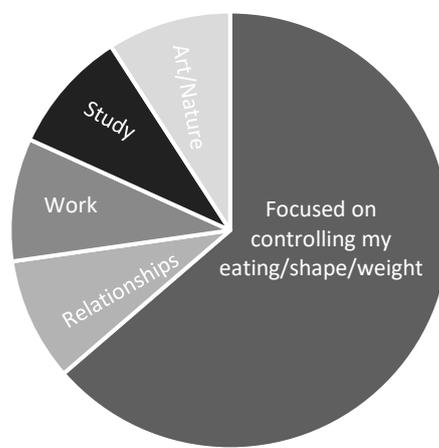
You may have identified many unpleasant or even traumatic experiences that lead to the development of the negative core beliefs you hold now. It is awful that you've been through these experiences and we cannot go back and change that. What's even more awful is how much these past experiences continue to impact your life in the here and now.

Eating disorders offer a false sense of purpose and identity and a means to 'feel better', or 'achieve' or 'feel connected' – eating disorders promise to solve the problems that are at the heart of your negative core beliefs! In reality, eating disorders end up making things worse, leading to social isolation and poor physical and mental health. Instead of having a balance between valued areas of life, such as friends, family, health, study and work (as shown in the left 'pie chart' below), eating disorder beliefs and behaviours take up so much space that these other areas have to 'shrink' to make room (as shown in the right 'pie chart' below).

WITHOUT EATING DISORDER



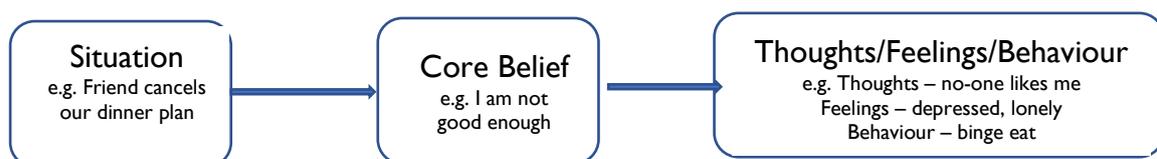
WITH EATING DISORDER



Before we begin to challenge your negative core beliefs, take a moment to think about which areas of your life have 'shrunk' to make room for your eating disorder, and what you would be doing differently if you had completely broken free from your eating disorder:

Identifying Your Core Beliefs

It is important to identify and address negative core beliefs, as they keep you stuck in the eating disorder cycle, as shown in the diagram below. In this example, this person's core belief "I am not good enough" was activated by their friend cancelling plans, leading them to think that nobody likes them, feel depressed and lonely, and ultimately engage in binge eating. As we know, this behaviour likely reinforces their belief that they are not good enough!



There are several ways to uncover core beliefs.

1. Review your self-monitoring forms and behavioural experiments. What do you say to yourself at times when you experience strong negative emotions or increased urge to engage in eating disorder behaviours? What do the predictions you make in experiments suggest about your negative core beliefs?
2. Highlight any core beliefs that you recognise below:
 - *I am worthless*
 - *I am not good enough*
 - *I am inadequate*
 - *People will reject/hurt me*
 - *I have to do things perfectly*
 - *The world is harsh and judgemental*
 - *I am nothing without my eating disorder*
 - *I am helpless and cannot manage on my own*
 - *Others' needs are more important than mine*
 - *I am disgusting*

What negative core beliefs can you identify?

Beliefs about myself: (these usually begin with “I am”)

Beliefs about others/the world: (these usually begin with “others are”, “the world is”)

Challenging Negative Core Beliefs

As negative core beliefs are often long-standing and held as absolute truths, it is not surprising that they can be the hardest beliefs to shake. To challenge a negative core belief directly you will need to start paying attention to evidence that the belief is not 100% true. Use the worksheet on the next page to keep track of all the evidence that might not fit with your negative core belief, even if it seems small or unimportant.

- Select one of your negative core beliefs to examine.
- Ask yourself “*what experiences do I have that show that this belief is not completely true all the time?*”
- Collect evidence: You might need to look really hard over the course of a week or two. Write down at least one piece of evidence each day until you have 10 or more items on your list.
- Develop a balanced, core belief.

Tips for collecting evidence:

- Be as specific as possible - describe specific people, events, and actions.
- Write down everything – even small experiences count. Focus on the last 2 weeks and consider everything objectively.
- Be kind to yourself: What would you say to a friend if they shared the same belief? What would you say to your child if they held this belief? This may feel forced or insincere at first, but we encourage you to keep at it, as we know that all new ways of thinking and behaving require time and practice.

Recording Evidence that a Core Belief is Not 100% True

Core belief to be challenged:

e.g. *I am not good enough*

Strength of belief (0 = completely untrue – 10 = completely true)

Before challenging: 10

After challenging: 4

Experiences from the last 2 weeks that show that this belief is not COMPLETELY true ALL the time:

1. *I am captain of my netball team*
2. *Mum tells me all the time how proud she is of me*
3. *I've been in a relationship for the past year, my girlfriend Bonnie tells me she loves me*
4. *In the last 2-weeks I have kept up with cleaning the house and doing the washing*
5. *I passed my driver's licence test*
6. *I was invited to join my netball club's student tour as a volunteer helper*
7. *I gave my spare change to someone sleeping outside of the shops*
8. *I offered to drive my friend home the other day so she didn't have to take the bus in the rain*
9. *My friend asked me to go out for coffee*
10. *I completed a difficult task at work*

When you have considered all the experiences you have written down, develop an alternative, balanced core belief. Write this down.

Balanced core belief:

I have had a lot of different experiences that suggest I am actually good enough

Strength of this belief: 6 (0 = completely untrue – 10 = completely true)

Now, it's your turn. Choose a core belief and complete the worksheet on the next page.

Recording Evidence that a Core Belief is Not 100% True

Core belief to be challenged: _____
Strength of belief (0 = completely untrue – 10 = completely true) Before challenging: ____ After challenging: ____

Experiences from the last 2 weeks that show that this belief is not COMPLETELY true ALL the time:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

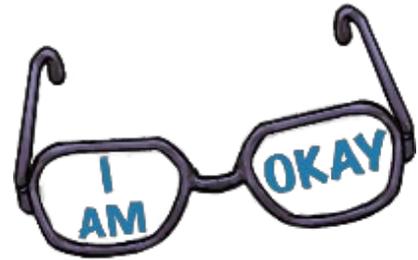
When you have considered all the experiences you have written down, develop an alternative, balanced core belief. Write this down.

Balanced core belief: _____
Strength of this belief: ____ (0 = completely untrue – 10 = completely true)

Strengthening New Core Beliefs

When you have updated your negative core beliefs with more recent and balanced information, you will need to find ways to strengthen them until they are more believable. This will require practice! One way we can strengthen new beliefs is to act 'as if' they are true. Ask yourself, 'If I really believed my balanced belief, what are the things I would be doing differently?' Then, go out and do those things!

By engaging in activities and relationships that you value, your focus of attention shifts away from eating disorder thoughts and behaviours. These new experiences will help strengthen your balanced core beliefs, improve your self-worth and increase your motivation to maintain recovery behaviours in the long-term. You may not believe the balanced beliefs straight away and will most likely feel anxious about trying these things. That's OK – it will take time and practice to shift your core beliefs, just like it has taken time for you to shift your beliefs about eating, weight and shape!



The table below provides some examples of new, balanced core beliefs as well as some example actions you could take to strengthen these beliefs:

New core belief	Action I could take to strengthen this belief <i>What would I be doing differently if I really believed this?</i>
Not all people are judgmental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intentionally speak up more in social situations • Ask for help at work when I am finding a task difficult
I don't have to be perfect My body is okay the way it is	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritise a self-care task over cleaning the house this weekend • Eat a meal out in public, and order whatever I feel like • Wear clothes that I want to wear
I am worthy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Treat myself to a massage, try a new hobby, self-care • Be assertive - say 'that's not okay' if someone comments on my weight/shape/eating or say 'no' to others if I need to focus on myself
The world holds opportunities for me, the world is safe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be active and engaged in my life - try a new sport or activity • Approach situations that may still trigger some anxiety e.g. going to a gym class with a friend or asking a friend to go out for dinner • Try a new activity or sport this week
I can cope	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do a difficult work task first thing in the day rather than postponing • Sit with strong emotions without restricting, binge-eating, purging or exercising and see that they pass

Core belief action plans are a tool for helping us to generate ideas for how we want to operate within our new core belief system. The action plan on the next page will assist you to identify areas of your life that you would like to work on, such as relationships, work/study/career, leisure/hobbies, and health/well-being. It also prompts you to plan different tasks and actions to 'act out' these new beliefs in your daily life.

My Core Belief Action Plan

Complete your action plan following the steps below:

1. Identify the **new core beliefs** that you want to strengthen and write these into the table.
2. Ask yourself, “*If I really believed my new core beliefs, would I be doing things differently in my life?*”. Think about what you could do to collect more evidence for your new core beliefs. Be specific. Ask yourself, “*what new behaviours will I need to try out? How will I be behaving differently to before?*” Record your ideas into the ‘**Action**’ column.
3. Remember to set a **realistic timeframe** for when you would like to implement these goals and actions. Record this in the ‘Timeframe’ column
4. Identify potential obstacles that may come up. Based on what you have developed from the modules so far, what skills and strategies do you now have to manage these obstacles if they arise? Record them under the “**Strategies to overcome potential obstacles**” column.

Once you have some ideas written down on your action plan, the next step is to go out and do it! Reflect on what you learn as you make changes. You can treat each action within your action plan as a behavioural experiment. Evaluate if the results are consistent with your new, more balanced core beliefs.

New Core Belief	Actions I could take to strengthen this belief	Timeframe	Strategies to overcome potential obstacles
e.g. <i>I am likeable</i>	e.g. <i>initiate more social outings - contact friend I haven't talked to in a few months to organise a catch-up</i>	e.g. <i>call friend tomorrow and ask if she wants to catch-up for dinner next week</i>	e.g. <i>if friend doesn't answer the first time, call again the next day or send a text. Might need to give more notice.</i>

Tips for Strengthening New Core Beliefs:

- Remind yourself that new core beliefs take time to develop and become believable.
- Continue collecting evidence regularly to help “feed” and strengthen them.
- Start by finding 1 piece of evidence each day and then look for 2-3 pieces of evidence each day
- Write your balanced core belief(s) on flashcards that you can carry around with you as a reminder when your old core beliefs are activated.

My Weekly Progress Tracker

First, complete your symptom tracker:

Eating Disorder Behaviour	Frequency (# days per week)	
Restrict or dieting		
Exercise (including time spent)		
Binge eating	# days	# episodes
Vomiting to control my weight/shape		
Laxative misuse		

Second, reflect on your self-monitoring:

What did I learn from my self-monitoring this week?

Third, review your homework from last week:

Task	Completed? Y/N
Weekly weighing	
Self-monitoring daily and in real-time	
Eating regularly (i.e., 3 meals and 2-3 snacks daily)	
Eating adequate quantities of food	
Include feared foods	
Practice urge surfing	
Reduce checking	
Mirror exposure and other body exposure experiments	

Finally, set some goals! What do you want to work on this week?

(e.g., seek one piece of evidence against my core beliefs each day, complete my core belief action plan)

Module Summary

- Core beliefs are beliefs that we hold about ourselves, other people, and the world we live in.
- Core beliefs develop over time, usually from childhood and through the experience of significant life events or particular life circumstances (e.g., body changes, negative comments about our appearance).
- Core beliefs can maintain and even worsen an eating disorder by influencing the way we interpret events, often creating a bias or filter for how we view our surroundings.
- Reviewing your self-monitoring and behavioural experiment records will help you to uncover personal negative core beliefs.
- An important way that we can start to challenge a core belief directly is by paying attention to, and recording, evidence that this belief is not 100% true.
- In addition to ongoing collection of evidence to support your new, more balanced core beliefs, it is also important to act in ways that are consistent with these updated core beliefs.
- Follow through on your balanced core beliefs by putting them into action with the Core Belief Action Plan.
- Strengthening new core beliefs takes time and can feel challenging at first – the more we act according to our new beliefs, the easier it will get over time.

Coming up... Maintaining Your Gains and Dealing with Setbacks.

About the Modules

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These are some of the professional references used to create the modules in this information package.

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IMAGES

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