

adjusting rules & assumptions



Helpful & Unhelpful Rules

Rules and assumptions for living guide our behaviour and enable us to cope with our everyday lives. They are necessary for us to make sense of the world around us and to help us function on a day-to-day basis. So, having rules, in itself, is not unhelpful. There are many rules for living that are helpful (eg. you should not drink and drive). **Helpful rules** are realistic, flexible, and adaptable, and they enable us to function healthily and safely. **Unhelpful rules** are unrealistic, unreasonable, excessive, rigid, and unadaptable (eg. I must never ask for help). We will probably feel strong negative emotions when these rules are broken, which is quite likely given that they are unrealistic.

Rules are learned. It is not often that unhelpful rules are formally taught. Rather these are developed through trial and error and observations you made in your earlier life experiences.

Rules can be culture-specific. The rules and assumptions for living that you have developed reflect the norms and culture of the family and the society or community in which you grew up.

Rules can be stubborn and resist change. Rules for living not only guide your behaviour, they also influence how you perceive, interpret, and absorb information throughout your life. We tend to only pay attention to, and make sense of, those things that are consistent with our beliefs and rules. This is why unhelpful rules for living and negative core beliefs can be resistant to change.

Unhelpful Rules & Low Self-Esteem

To help you get by and manage from day to day, you might have developed rules and assumptions to help protect your self-esteem. You will have developed rules and assumptions as best you can in the world, given the low opinion you have of yourself. These rules and assumptions are usually unrealistic, unreasonable, rigid, and unadaptable. If you are able to stick to, and carry out, these rules and assumptions, you might feel okay about yourself, because then no one will know how bad or worthless you think you are.



But these rules actually keep your negative core beliefs and your low self-esteem in place. Living up to such rules and assumptions means that your behaviour is restricted in such a way that these rules and your negative core beliefs do not have the opportunity to be challenged to see if they are accurate

Identifying Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions

To identify what unhelpful rules and assumptions you might have developed to get by given your negative view of yourself, ask yourself:

What do I expect of myself when I am at work or school?

What standards do I expect myself to meet?

What do I expect of myself when I am socialising?

What do I expect of myself in my various roles – child, friend, partner, parent, staff member/supervisor?

What do I expect of myself regarding leisure or fun activities, and self-care?

In what types of situations do I put myself down?

What aspects of myself do I criticise most?

What might happen if I relax my standards?

What don't I allow myself to do?

What do I criticise in other people? What standards do I expect them to live up to?



You might also identify rules and expectations by:

- Reviewing your thought diaries
- Considering themes which are common to your issues
- Recalling direct messages or family sayings about rules, such as *the only person you can depend on is yourself* or *if you don't aim high you'll never be successful*

Adjusting The Rules

Adjusting the rules isn't easy, but it might not be that difficult if you have already had some practice at challenging your biased expectations and negative self-evaluations. We suggest the worksheet *Adjusting The Rules* which helps you challenge unhelpful rules and assumptions through:

- Questioning their impact and helpfulness
- Identifying their advantages and disadvantages
- Developing new balanced rules and assumptions
- Thinking of new ways of behaving that would put the new rule into practice.

It might be a good idea to write down your new rules on a card that you can carry around with you and review every now and again. It is important to put the new rule into practice through new behaviours. That is, by acting as if the new, more flexible and realistic rule were true, and seeing what happens! Although it might seem difficult to you now, it will get easier as you keep practicing.