
Underlying Beliefs

Remember the story of the Titanic, the unsinkable shipwrecked by an iceberg that was just below the water's surface? The iceberg is like our Underlying Beliefs – we may not see them but they are there and they are often the reason we don't start or complete the journey toward what we truly want.

These beliefs are ideas, thoughts, and assumptions we perceive as absolute truths. They are emotional and psychological and often irrational. They are formed through our experiences and interactions with the world and make up our mental model.

Some beliefs we are unaware of and often do not serve us but rather hold us back from pursuing our goals and living freely and fully to our potential.

What is an Underlying Belief?

We are aware of some of our beliefs since we have made them consciously. When we decide to set goals for ourselves such as: getting married; saving money; losing weight; running a marathon, etc. we then begin to create a list of behaviors to achieve these goals.

This is a conscious decision, we are aware of creating new behaviors or observing existing behaviors so they align with the goals.

There is, however, another kind of behavior. It is the behavior that is programmed into us based on a belief formed some time ago. This is an Underlying Belief picked up somewhere in our lives as a result of a totally different set of circumstances or perceptions to the ones we may find ourselves in now.

Underlying Beliefs often live alongside more conscious stated beliefs with no difficulty. We may make a conscious thought and follow through on it without any problem at all. We create that thought and manage to maintain it in our lives and gain fulfilment in that area. However, sometimes our conscious thoughts can conflict with, or even be in complete opposition to a belief and this is where they become problematic.

There are times when no matter how hard we try we are unable to experience that which we say we want in our lives. We set a goal, keep trying to make it happen but it just doesn't occur. This experience can be frustrating and detrimental to our confidence and self-esteem. But rather than judging ourselves, allowing this experience to define who we are, and developing or enforcing a belief as a result of this, the key is to use this opportunity as a place of exploration. By approaching the experience with curiosity and inquiry, you can unlock the belief that stops you from achieving your goal.

Let's look at a belief you may have around learning. Ask yourself "What type of learner am I?" "Observe where your thinking goes when you answer this question. Are you thinking back to your school experiences, are you equating the type of learner you are with the success you had in learning? All of these thoughts are based on the beliefs you have about yourself as a learner.

Essentially, whenever we are frustrated in fulfilling one of our conscious commitments, it is because there is an Underlying Belief lurking in the background. These beliefs are not only unconscious (underlying), but they are so automatic that they drive us despite what we say to the contrary. These beliefs are working away, continually causing the kind of outcome that we say we do not want in our lives.

Examples of Underlying Beliefs

Many of our beliefs were formed and accumulated throughout our childhood. We picked them up through our interactions with others – like when we were scolded or punished for doing something wrong or not doing something the way our parents expected us to. A common resulting belief is I'm not good enough, which then bleeds into other beliefs that affect us during adulthood, like, I'm not capable enough or I'm not talented or I'm stupid.

While people are different, there are universal limiting beliefs identified by experts and used, for example, in the work of Byron Katie who published a list of them which include:

- I need to know what to do.
- I know what is best for others.
- Something terrible is going to happen.
- People should not lie.
- People should respect me.
- I can control how others feel about me.
- Life isn't fair.
- Parents should love their children.
- I need to make a decision.
- I can't do anything right.
- I don't want to look foolish.
- There's not enough time.
- I am worthless.
- I need a partner to be happy.
- I am a failure.

Think of a building. A new design can only be constructed with a very complete understanding of the foundation. When we want to make any changes to our lives we need to know the foundation the changes will be built on. This ensures that our foundation is aligned with the new changes we want to make or if the foundation needs to also go under a little construction.

However, this must be done with a complete understanding of what the foundation is and whether it is still aligned with who we want to be.

Our decision to renovate can be for a range of reasons – you want more balance, energy or to make a dream come true! Whatever the reason, you need to start with a firm foundation, rather than constructing from the roof down. We can sometimes be mesmerized by the height and view of things from the top. But the top is shaky if the foundation is not strong.

Where Do Underlying Beliefs Come From?

As we said, Underlying Beliefs most likely come from our past experiences. There is agreement among many theorists that experiences that occur when we are very young make the most lasting impression and lead to beliefs that are hard to shake.

The origin of Underlying Beliefs continues to be explored by philosophers, therapists and other practitioners such as Dr Bruce H. Lipton, a former medical school professor and research scientist who wrote *The Biology of Belief* exploring the role of our cells in how we develop beliefs.

We may be able to move forward by simply discerning what the Underlying Belief is, without having to uncover its origin. Sometimes all that is needed is to get clear on what the Underlying Belief is which may be enough to empower and free us from old patterns of behaviour.

Other times we may feel the need to explore the source of an Underlying Belief that has been dominating our life. By identifying both the Underlying Belief and its source, we may then find release from it and be able to move forward. However, be aware, it is not always possible to easily determine the source of an Underlying Belief. Human behavior is complex. It flows from a combination of cognitive, emotional, and spiritual elements. It may never be possible to discern the exact origin of an Underlying Belief.

Discovering Underlying Beliefs

Self-awareness is the first step to understanding what lays below the surface. It is the conscious observation of the way we think and act. Such awareness opens up an opportunity to see what the core beliefs are that drive your actions.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant had an interesting way of describing human behavior and tracing it back to underlying thoughts or beliefs. It goes like this:

- I see a tiger (perception)
- I believe that I am in danger (thought)
- I feel afraid (feeling/emotion)
- I run (behavior)

People often mistakenly believe their behavior is based on reality or truth. For example, “I see a tiger, so I run” seems to be a perfectly logical connection to make but what Kant’s point was our thoughts or beliefs about the tiger that leads to our emotions and then to our behavior.

Imagine you saw the same tiger in a cage at the zoo. Running away would be an illogical reaction, and yet you may still perceive the tiger to be dangerous and you may even feel a little afraid.

This is where awareness comes in. By bringing something from our subconscious into our conscious mind we become aware of it and we can self-reflect on our actions and behaviors. We may find that this unlocks truths about our beliefs that we were not aware of before.

The best place to look for an Underlying Belief is in a current situation that is causing us disharmony or frustrated.

For example, if a person who says they want to lose weight and they have tried everything, there could be an underlying belief that is stopping them from being successful. They may have an Underlying Belief called, “I don’t deserve to be loved;” or “I don’t value myself or my health;” or “I’m a failure so why do I even try?”

Anyone of these Underlying Beliefs would lead a person to fail to loose weight over and over again.

To find Underlying Beliefs that we are unconscious of, we should firstly examine which emotions or thoughts cause us to feel that way. Are you feeling empowered or disempowered? Are your thoughts positive or negative? Are you filled with energy joy and excitement or with sadness, hopelessness, frustration or anger?

Your feelings are a good indication of your beliefs and thoughts. When they serve and support you, you feel in alignment and empowered. When your underlying beliefs are negative, they leave you drained and frustrated.

What To Do Once An Underlying Belief Is Detected

Once you become aware of an Underlying Belief, you are able to decide what to do with this new insight and choose to take a different course of action. Don't let Underlying Beliefs make you feel "bad or wrong" as this is a disempowering perspective. Allow yourself not to self-judge but to "owning" it and consciously choose what to do next. See new possibilities or opportunities, taking action, understand that you have a choice to stay where you are or to create new beliefs and new actions with which you can move forwards.

Self Application

Fear of Letting Go

One of the reasons we hold tight to these old beliefs is, when we formed them, they made sense. They helped us. We saw them as a solution to our problem. It has been theorized that many of our beliefs are formed by the age seven based on our environment, how we were loved and accepted and if we felt like we belonging, feeling safe and secure.

In her book, *Your Life's Calling: Getting unstuck and fulfilling your life lessons*, Nancy Canning gives us this example:

Imagine you're three years old and hear your parents fighting in the middle of the night. You get scared and hide under your covers, staying very still, closing out the sounds of their loud voices. That entire event can be programmed into your subconscious mind and become your blueprint for how to stay safe.

Your truth at that moment is: I'm safe hiding under these covers staying absolutely still and quiet. The terror feels so big within you, and you know there's nothing you can do to make them stop fighting, or to bring peace into the household. The fear can feel overwhelming and you feel powerless as a result.

What terrifies this child is the thought that parents will stop liking each other and one or both of them will leave – and then what will happen to you? Who will take care of you? Ultimately, these thoughts lead to I'm going to die! That feels very real to a child. I'm going to die because there's no one to take care of me!

This experience can make you fearful of moving out from under the covers and into new experiences. Here this is a belief or thought, "If I do this (move, change jobs, begin a new relationship, start a business), I won't survive, I'll fail, I won't have enough money, I'm powerless to make it happen...I'll die."

Anytime fear feels bigger than you or overwhelming, you are replaying a childhood fear. It's not a current fear. It's not the truth. Just because your fear feels real doesn't mean it is the truth.

Typically, we make up a story about what might happen (bad things) and then we believe that story (we make it feel real and true) and take actions based on what we made up (don't do anything, stay stuck). We make our story "real," and then act upon it.

Fear is a natural part of our growth. Fear lets us know that we are at the edge of our comfort zone. It will show up as we continue to push our boundaries into new areas of experimentation, success, and achievement.

The moment in time when you choose to keep a belief that doesn't work for you, you fundamentally deceive yourself and deny yourself the right to a great life. You decide that the

best is not for you, it is too hard to attain or you may even go to that place of convincing yourself that a great life is not really possible.

The person who works to change a limiting belief like that they are not worthy and works on building their sense of self-worth begins to achieve, feel stronger and be happier. People are attracted to them. They appear to have good fortune or a great life.

This way of seeing life, having hope and belief, has been the way extraordinary people have survived even in the most difficult situations. In the movie *A Beautiful Life*, a man decides to believe in hope and to see the beauty around him even in a concentration camp during World War II. No one could take this from him. This belief has sustained ordinary people in the most challenging moments in their life.¹

1. Your Life's Calling: getting unstuck and fulfilling your life lessons by Nancy Canning

Reflection

1. Why is it important to discover your Underlying Beliefs?
2. Find unwanted behaviors in your own life, and write down what you think the issue is. Eg I can't X because or because of Y. Y will give you a clue to your limiting belief.
3. This about someone who may have a similar unwanted behavior. What do you think is limiting them? Reflect to see if those underlying beliefs might apply to you too.
4. If you could turn your underlying belief around, what would that look like? Imagine you have no constraints, what would an empowering action be?
5. Notice the shift in your feelings and energy when you allow yourself change your underlying belief. Really feel it so that you can recognize it in your clients.

Coaching Application

Supporting Clients to Identify Underlying Beliefs

Underlying Beliefs are unique to each person. The exact words that resonate with someone will also be unique to them and using the coaching technique of mirroring and repeating the client's words will allow the clients to name their own Underlying Beliefs.

It is very hard to address something when it is not named but by bringing the belief out into the open and facing it head on, it becomes possible to change our behaviour.

Ask you client what belief, opinion, or judgement are they reinforcing when repeating the same outcome?

When an Underlying Belief is uncovered the client is able to stand back and make meaningful decisions from a position of awareness and choice. For example the client who wants to stop drinking but is unable to because of an Underlying Belief that says "no one will like me sober". By identifying this Underlying Belief, the client has new knowledge from which to make changes. They may decide they need to stop drinking entirely or they may be able to identify specific times and triggers that make them drink and avoid those or they may need to do some work around self-love and self-destructive behavior before they can move forward.

How To Best Use The Underlying Belief Model

As a coach, the first step is to uncover your own Underlying Beliefs. This will allow you to help your client's uncover theirs. By changing your own behaviors and developing new opportunities and creating your ideal life, you will inspire those around you, including potential future client.

You may choose to coach in around areas you have experience in so that you have compassion with your clients. Some questions to ask might include:

- What about _____ is really important to you?

- That's interesting because the evidence suggests (mention whatever they're NOT doing) you're not that interested/committed to _____. What else do you think could be getting in the way?
- What hidden rules (or idea, thought, opinion, beliefs) do you think you have that could be stopping you from making the progress you desire?
- What do you think was the original purpose behind the rule?
- What would it be like to honour the intention behind _____ (the fear/belief) AND still move forwards?
- What rule(s) would be broken if you did _____ (the goal/action)?
- What about the rule applies now?
- (If the rule doesn't apply any more): what are you going to do with this new information?
- (If the rule still applies): What can you do to update the rule so it's more flexible and you can still achieve the _____ you want?
- What would you like instead of _____ (negative effect)?

Removing or changing a belief can leave a person in a place of great uncertainty. This is where the role of the coach is critical. At this moment in time, the coach can reiterate the client's vision and where they want to go and enthuse them into seeing it. A coach can also identify any changes they notice about a client in a conversation.

By listening, observing and using powerful questions and feedback, a coach possess the wisdom to approach a client's underlying beliefs with a variety of perspectives the coach should avoid take their time to uncover and dealing with the underlying beliefs. Give your clients the space to process their thoughts, go deeper, explore the complexity of the client's journey. Allow your client to make real breakthroughs and achieve sustainable change.

Reflection

1. What is the role of Underlying Beliefs in the coaching process?
2. What role do your Underlying Beliefs play in your coaching?
3. What are some additional questions you could ask your client when they are feeling unable to visualise their success?