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& COLLEAGUES




Self-belief: how to believe in you!

By Dr Cate Howell

Introduction

Most days of the week I speak with clients at my counselling practice, and a common theme is a 'low self-esteem' with many self-doubts. When I train health professionals about mental health or about teaching, often the same sense of self-doubt comes into play. Have you had the experience of thoughts about not being 'good-enough' coming into the mind and undermining your confidence. Equally for new Mums, or those starting a business, those thoughts can be a huge problem. This e-book is all about dealing with those self-doubts and developing your **self-belief**, so that you can feel more confident and achieve what you want to for yourself.



*What lies behind us
and what lies before
us are tiny matters
compared to what lies
within us.*

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

Definitions

Let's first define some commonly used terms:

- **Self-esteem** refers to how you see and judge yourself, often in comparison to others. It describes your opinion of yourself and sense of **self-worth**.
- Self-esteem affects how you function generally and how you relate to other people. It includes **self-confidence** or how confident you feel about your abilities (Howell, 2010, p 80).
- Underlying beliefs about yourself, when constructive, are referred to as **self-belief**, and these drive your thinking about yourself and how confident you feel.
- A more recent term is **self-compassion**, which means that you are kind and understanding towards yourself when faced by your personal failings, instead of criticising and judging yourself harshly (Neff, 2003, p86).

In this e-book I will mostly utilise the terms self-belief and self-compassion.

What influences self-belief?

From the moment we are born, there are a range of influences on our self-belief, and these include:

1. Your early life experiences.

A child who experiences a lot of criticism growing up, for example, will struggle to develop a strong sense of self-belief. We may take on the belief that we are not 'good enough' or that we don't achieve what is expected of us.

2. The society in which we live.

We are all in some way influenced by the media, culture, government, religion and education, and these influences may be positive or negative. Women, for example, may take on the view that to be worthy, they must be attractive, nurturing, smart, successful and more! Men may take on the idea that they must have certain attributes too such as being strong and successful. These views tend to be unrealistic and can lead to us putting pressure on ourselves through comparison with an unrealistic ideal.

3. Being human.

As humans we tend to compare to others. This is actually a survival mechanism, but in the modern age, the comparisons tend to be with people around us, including people showcased by the media. Remember that what we see of these individuals is just a snap-shot of their lives, and we in fact know very little about them. In addition, we live in a world in which success is often defined by material possessions, and this can be another comparison trap.

4. Ongoing life experiences.

Experiences in families, relationships or in the workplace continue to influence your self-belief. If we come across a bully or an abusive person, their negative and intimidating behaviours can impact on our self-belief. Compare these people to encouraging individuals who boost self-belief.

What influences self-belief? cont.

5. **Our personality and thinking style.**

- *Perfectionism can drive us to high expectations of ourselves, and a sense of not doing well enough if not meeting those expectations. It is hard to have a strong sense of self-belief if those expectations are getting in the way. Equally, a sense of wanting to please and looking for approval from others, can challenge our self-belief.*
- *Are you an optimistic thinker? Optimistic thinking can help us focus on positive events in life and our own positive attributes. Negative thinking about ourselves and what we can achieve can contribute to low self-confidence.*
- *Sometimes negative or perfectionistic thinking can be 'black and white' i.e. 'that went really, really well', or 'it went really, really badly', rather than seeing possibilities in between.*

How does low self-belief influence our health and wellbeing?

Low self-belief can affect our health and wellbeing in many ways, such as:

1. *Contributing to stress, anxiety and low mood.*
2. *In turn these may affect our sleep and eating habits, or ability to exercise, and thus our general health.*
3. *It can be tiring and distracting to focus on our limitations, and low self-belief can affect our coping behaviours e.g. engaging in leisure activities.*
4. *Affecting our confidence with others, and preventing us from going out socially or going to work functions.*
5. *It may affect assertiveness with others, or cause us to not put ourselves forward for tasks at work through fear of failing.*

So positive self-belief is protective for our physical and mental health!

Ways to improve self-belief!

1. Change our thinking.

We have thoughts, feelings and behaviours, and these three are all inter-related. This is the basis of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT). Our thoughts influence how we feel, and vice versa, and our behaviours affect how we think and feel, and vice versa! To feel or act more confidently, sometimes we need to work on our thinking. In addition, our thoughts reflect our underlying unconscious beliefs about ourselves.

It is worth being aware of some of the underlying beliefs that can rob you of self-belief, and these include:

- *I must keep proving myself through my achievements.*
- *I must do things perfectly.*
- *I must have everyone's approval.*
- *I need to be loved to be worthwhile.*
- *The world must be fair and just (Tanner and Ball, 2001).*

It is helpful to realise that:

- *Our worth is not actually about what we achieve. Achievements give a sense of satisfaction, but not true self-belief, and involve focusing on the future rather than the present.*
- *Perfectionism is sometimes helpful, but not always helpful, and can lead to anxiety and disappointment.*
- *We all seek approval from others, but you have to be careful not to measure your sense of worth based on the expectations or the praise of others. What is really important is what you think about yourself, whether you accept yourself and what you do.*
- *We all feel a deep need to be loved, and in fact most people are loved by others. We also have to watch that we don't base our sense of self-worth on being in a partner relationship.*
- *Unfortunately there is suffering in the world and things are not always fair. We don't always get what we would like, and need to be realistic and flexible.*

Try these strategies:

1. *Identify unhelpful self-critical thoughts, such as, 'I can never do anything right.'*
2. *Identify any traps in your thinking: such as over-generalising, being too 'black and white' (such as 'I can never'), or using critical self-labels (such as hopeless)?*
3. *Challenge your thoughts by asking what is the evidence for the thought or questioning, 'am I being too harsh, or where are the exceptions to this?' Drop critical labels.*
4. *Finally, consider more helpful thoughts, such as, 'Actually, I do a lot of things very well', and 'I work hard and do my best' (Howell, 2010, p 65).*

Ways to improve self-belief! cont.

A technique that has proved useful over many years in clinical practice comes from a book by Hillman (1992) called Recovery of Your Self-Esteem. This technique involves three steps:

1. *Recognise your positive points by making a list of; 'What I like about myself: my positive points'. Reflect on this list and add to it over time; maybe ask others for ideas. Read the list regularly and acknowledge your positive points.*
2. *Recognise the 'inner critic' or the inner negative voice and make a list of; 'Things I do not like about myself: negative points'. Consider whose voice is being critical - has the criticism been internalised from other people?*
3. *Then reassess these negative things and be fairer on yourself. Are the statements too critical? Can they be re-worded so they are less harsh? Try reframing the statements into goals - an example would be 'I tend to be quiet in front of others, but I am working on talking with people more' (Howell, 2010, p 82).*

Exercise: Be aware of self-critical thoughts or labels you apply to yourself, and find more helpful ways to think about yourself.

Exercise: Consider how you are special and unique and make a list!

2. Change our stories (Narrative).

Stories are central in our lives as we are meaning-making beings. We understand the world through stories, and we attempt to understand ourselves by creating stories in our mind. This is why stories feature in a number of different psychotherapies but in particular in narrative therapy. This therapy is based on the idea that stories are made up of events that we link together across a time period in a way that makes sense to us. These stories make the daily events of our lives meaningful.

We have lots of stories about our lives; for example, about ourselves, our abilities, our struggles, our work, our dreams and our relationships. We link them together and give them meaning, such as 'I'm a good mother'. At times, they may be negative stories. We can create a powerful story about ourselves called 'Who I am', but remember that no single story can completely cover all aspects of our life (Morgan, 2000, p10).

Ways to improve self-belief! cont.

If we have some negative stories dominating our lives (such as 'I'm not worthy'), narrative therapy can help us to think differently about ourselves. Remember that you have many strengths and have survived many challenges. Rather than seeing the challenges, incorporate your strengths into your story. In addition, sometimes we focus on a dominant story, such as 'I am not good-enough', rather than the exceptions to this – the times you did do well and achieve something, even in a very small way.

Exercise: Consider which stories about yourself you would like to rewrite today, and name them!

Exercise: Now consider the following questions about one of your own stories:

- ***How has it impacted on your view of yourself?***
- ***Have there been times when in some small way you have been able to stand up to this story and stopped it pushing you around?***
- ***What qualities or abilities did it take for you to resist the story? (Morgan, 2000, p10).***

3. Focus on your values and acceptance.

If you want to live a satisfying and fulfilling life or want to make changes, a good starting point is considering what is important to you in life. What do you truly value? Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) talks about different areas or domains in life, namely:

- *family and friends*
- *romance or intimate relationships*
- *health and your body*
- *education and personal development*
- *work and finance*
- *leisure and creativity*
- *citizenship or community life (from using the local library to volunteering)*
- *environment or nature*
- *spirituality (Harris, 2007, p296).*

What is important to you in each of these areas? Under the heading of work, having a satisfying job might be important to you, and under leisure, you might value playing sport or catching up with friends.

Ways to improve self-belief! cont.

You can then develop your goals by looking at areas where there are gaps between what is important to you and what is happening at present; for example, you might value a satisfying job but you might not perceive your current work as being satisfying; or you might value being creative, and want to spend more time drawing or doing craft.

ACT receives its name from one of its central principles, namely taking action. This relates to accepting what is out of our control, and taking action that helps create a rich and meaningful life (Harris, 2009, p 2). ACT suggests that instead you focus on what you can control or what you can do to live a meaningful life. The idea is to become less caught up in the pain in our bodies and heads, and get more involved in doing what we care about and value. This involves changing your relationship with stress and worry, for example.

ACT encourages the acceptance of distressing emotions or events, or a willingness to experience them, without trying to change them. It utilises techniques such as cognitive defusion (including observing thoughts or thanking the mind for a thought, or singing the thought) to assist acceptance. It also encourages us to connect with the present moment (mindfulness).

Exercise: Consider what you value in some of the areas listed above, and whether there is a gap currently between what you value and what is happening.

Exercise: Then make one or two goals for yourself based on these gaps e.g. if fitness is important to you and you are not finding time to exercise, make a goal about exercising, even if for 10 minutes to start with into your week.

4. Practice mindfulness.

Mindfulness is a process of awareness. It involves paying attention to experience in the present moment, as opposed to being caught up in thoughts or feelings. So if we are having a cup of coffee in the sunshine, we pay attention to the taste and smell of the coffee and the warmth of the sun, rather than getting caught up with worries or thoughts. This is more relaxing and enjoyable, and in fact, almost meditative.

In the same way, we can be mindful of our thoughts and feelings, noticing them, rather than getting caught up with them. Through mindfulness we can learn that thoughts and feelings come and go, that we can have more balance and experience more calm and peacefulness. In this way mindfulness can assist us in developing self-acceptance and self-compassion (Harris, 2010).

Ways to improve self-belief! cont.

Exercise: Next time you are eating a meal, or listening to music, do the activity mindfully!

Exercise: Take a few moments to notice your thoughts and allow them to come into the mind and exit (just like watching a bus come into a bus stop and leave again without getting onto it, or imagine you can place a thought on a leaf and let it float down-stream).

5. Focus on positive emotions and accomplishment.

There is a growing interest in the field of positive psychology, pioneered by Martin Seligman. It encourages us to focus on our strengths and to use them more. If you know and use your abilities, you will find that you will be happier and more confident, and confidence in one area tends to spread into other areas!

Equally focussing on positive emotions such as enjoyment and gratitude helps us to feel good too. Engage in activities that you enjoy, such as walking or socialising, and contemplate what you are grateful for regularly. Enhancing relationships, finding meaning in life through our passions and a sense of purpose, and having a sense of accomplishment, can enhance our confidence and wellbeing.

Exercise: Go to www.authentichappines.sas.upenn.edu and complete the strengths survey to discover your strengths.

Exercise: Once a week make a list of 6 things you are grateful for; or imagine a particular positive event in your life never happened (for example, meeting a partner, or buying your house...) and how life would be different (this will also trigger gratitude).

Ways to improve self-belief! cont.

6. Develop self-compassion.

Eleanor Roosevelt wisely said, 'No one can make you feel inferior but yourself'. This is why it is helpful to foster a sense of self-compassion. This means you are kind and understanding towards yourself when faced by your personal failings, instead of criticising and judging yourself harshly (Intuition book p130). There are a number of elements to self-compassion:

- *Having compassion also means that we offer kindness to others when they make mistakes. Self-compassion involves acting the same way towards ourselves when we are having a difficult time.*
- *Self-compassion means we choose to care for ourselves instead of judging and being self-critical, and comparing to others.*
- *Self-compassion also means that we are kind and understanding when confronted with personal failings. We all make mistakes as we are human!*

In other words, apply the Golden Rule to yourself and treat yourself as you do others, with kindness and understanding! It is also important to put things into perspective rather than buying in to comparisons. When you think about it, the things that are really important are health, connecting with others, and having meaningful activities to engage in.

Exercise: Record three times you practice kindness to yourself.

Exercise: Try the following 'Loving-kindness meditation'. Make yourself comfortable and let your eyes close. Focus your attention on the breath and relax a little more with each breath out. Relax your body from the top of your head, down to the tips of your toes. Then focus on the region of your heart. Get in touch with your heart, and reflect on a person for whom you feel warm tender and compassionate feelings. This could be a child, partner or a pet. Visualise or imagine yourself being with this loved one and notice how you feel. Extend loving-kindness to them by saying; "may you be well, may you be at ease, may you be happy and at peace." Hold onto the warm and compassionate feelings. And now extend the warm feeling to yourself. Extend kindness to yourself as you do others, and allow your heart to radiate with love. When you are ready come back to the room, opening your eyes (Howell, 2013, p132).

Ways to improve self-belief! cont.

7. Other tips for self-belief.

- We can develop our self-awareness through noticing our internal state, mood and thoughts, by reading books, watching films or documentaries, talking with others, journalling, meditation, reflection or prayer, travelling, personal development courses, further study, creative activities, being in touch with nature (for example, gardening or walking in a park or at the beach), or undertaking psychotherapy.
- Act like the person you want to be: A colleague once said that when she feels low and lacking self-esteem, she focuses on what it is like to be feeling better and more confident. This gets her back to feeling more positive. Sometimes she pretends that she is feeling confident, and this helps lift her too.
- Accept compliments, just say thankyou!
- Stand tall and smile!
- Visualise positive changes in your life.
- Celebrate your success!

Exercise: Use affirmations – positive statements in the present tense, “I am feeling more confident each day”.

Exercise: Imagine a circle a bit like a hula hoop on the ground in front of you. This is your circle of self-belief! Get in touch with a time you felt a strong sense of confidence, and then step into the circle – the circle will intensify the feeling tenfold (Tad James, NLP Practitioner Training, 2011). Repeat whenever you want to.

8. Trust yourself and use your intuition.

Intuition is knowing without knowing how we know! We have rational or logical knowing, and gut-feeling or intuition. We all have it, and it can help us to feel more confident about ourselves and our decision-making. We often move between rational and intuitive thinking when making decisions, and in our work. We receive intuitive information through our senses and bodily feelings, or we may have intuitive thoughts or hunches. We can enhance our intuitive skills through awareness and practice. In my book, *Intuition Unlock the power*, I take the reader through seven steps to heighten their intuition, namely:

1. *Making space for intuition in our lives; for example, through decluttering our schedules, our minds and old thinking patterns, and practising self-care.*

Ways to improve self-belief! cont.

2. *Connecting with yourself and others; through being aware of what you value in life, connecting with your body, mind and spirit, focussing on balance, enjoying social connections and utilizing empathy.*
3. *Practising meditation and mindfulness; as inner stillness is important to connecting with your intuition.*
4. *Enhancing your creativity; as creativity and intuition enhance each other. Examples of creative activities are telling stories, dancing, reading and writing or playing music.*
5. *Accessing you unconscious mind; intuition is related to the unconscious mind and we can access it through meditation, as well as understanding signs and symbols and our dreams.*
6. *Tapping into positivity; we know that positive emotions open us up to intuition, and we can cultivate these through kindness, gratitude and positive thinking.*

7. *Applying intuition in your everyday and working life; for example, through listening to your body, practicing more self-awareness, using meditation and applying intuition in decision-making.*

Importantly, at the centre of these steps is trusting your heart-felt knowledge (Howell, 2013). Remember that you are the expert on yourself, that you have strengths, knowledge and intuition, so BELIEVE IN YOU!

Suggested books & websites:

Howell, C., Murphy, M. (2011). Release Your Worries A guide to letting go of stress and anxiety'. Exisle, NSW.

Howell, C. (2013). Intuition Unlock the power. Exisle, NSW.

www.drcatehowell.com.au

www.self-compassion.org/what-is-self-compassion/definition-of-self-compassion.html

www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu

www.authentichappines.sas.upenn.edu

www.mbct.com

www.actmindfully.com.au



Dr Cate is a medical practitioner and therapist, researcher, lecturer and author. She has over 30 years of training and experience in the health area, and is passionate about the well-being of her clients and in particular, individuals dealing with any mental health issues or life stresses or crises.

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