

On Beliefs and Change

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Change begins with awareness. Awareness begins with learning about how beliefs and emotional reaction are created by choice.

Below is some fundamental information to know about beliefs.

Beliefs:

- * May or may not be based on truth.
- * Can be easily formed out of emotion relating to one or many incidents.
- * May or may not be supported by irrefutable evidence.
- * Usually have an emotional attachment, which strengthens belief.
- * Do not update themselves automatically and therefore are stored at the initial age (emotional state, etc.).
- * Need to be examined on occasion – in a similar way that one cleans out the basement, keeping what's useful and discarding what is no longer relevant or useful.

How do I change a belief?

First become aware of what a belief actually is. A belief is a conviction that something is true. Now, for something to be actually true it has to be based on a fact. A fact relies on accurate information about something that is known and can be proven true. Beliefs are rarely based on fact and more often based on emotion or philosophical interpretation.

We decide for ourselves what is true for us through formation of beliefs. Because we are making that decision, we are choosing to decide whether to accept something as true or not. Just as we can decide to accept something as true, we can also decide to disbelieve information as well.

The reason there is so much dispute over beliefs is because every individual has different criteria for conviction. Even for those who share similar beliefs, you'll find that if you were to examine each belief, it would differ slightly with each individual. At best we can agree on general principles (for example: There is a higher power that can be called "God") and learn tolerance over the specifics (what God actually is). Religion has the disagreements that it does because so little is based on fact and so much is based on interpretation and perception.

Knowledge is power. To know how you form beliefs and why, gives you the power to analyze your beliefs and change them accordingly – if needed. Beliefs have a strong emotional attachment and that is because often beliefs result from an emotional experience, which led us to form a conclusion about something thus creating the belief.

Emotions are neither logical or evidence of truth and yet many of us determine our truths according to emotion. The reason that emotion is not evidence of truth is because it is the chosen response to something – and that chosen response is based on our interpretation of an incident.

Interpretation is based on a) our current knowledge of the situation including the people or circumstances, b) our emotional state at the time and c) personal experience. Once we put meaning to an incident, we then decide what an appropriate emotional response will be.

We determine what an appropriate emotional response will be in accordance with what we need at the time. If a perceived wrong occurs, we may decide to respond with anger, which could be motivated by the current need for protection. We may also choose to feel pain because of a conclusion we have formed relating to motive of the offending party. We may choose to not disclose the pain and therefore cover it up with anger. Often emotions are layered, each layer having a purpose.

All of this happens seemingly automatically – that is because it happens quickly. It happens quickly because it is a learned and conditioned response. For example, X tone of voice means something hurtful is coming (Y), when something hurtful is coming, in the past the way to stop it is to become angry (Z).

"X" could be a tone of voice, body posture or gesture, action or even words. We will define what "X" means each time in accordance with our current perception. It's like if we are driving down the street and a car cuts us off and continues to drive away fast. First our reaction will likely be fear – we perceive an accident that was avoided. Next, we may feel angry because we almost got hurt and we may interpret the driver's actions as inconsiderate or even deliberate. Now, if the car that cut us off was a police car – we still may have the initial fear reaction but our interpretation of the driver's motive will most likely lead to a different conclusion which is not taken as personally as the first driver's actions.

When we have an emotional feeling in response to something, the first action we need to take before we react is to stop and determine if we are responding to a trigger (conditioned response). Next, we need to consider what the desired outcome is – because often the desired outcome and initial emotional response are conflicting. We want comfort and yet respond with anger, the emotion that will not get us comfort. Until you learn how to disable your triggers, you will still feel the feelings but now you can choose what you want to do with them. It's no different than being angry and wanting to hit someone and deciding not to because the outcome would not be in your best interest. We've all decided to walk away or ignore someone or something. We've all been in a good mood where things don't bother us like they would if we were in a different mood. All this is evidence that a reaction is more of a choice than a condition.

Emotional wisdom is a skill worth cultivating. Being in control of your behavior allows you to achieve more positive outcomes for yourself. Just as you have conditioned yourself to open the flood gates or let the missiles fire in emotional moments, you can also condition yourself self to automatically – *stop*- take a deep breath and a moment to think about whether or not the initial response is the best one in the long term. Pay attention to what you are telling yourself about the incident and the motive of the other person – for often it is this, more than the person's initial action - that steams our engine. Know that we often make the fundamental error of taking someone else's behavior personally. We often misunderstand or assume intent. Know that we tend to distort, generalize and delete information. Know that you could be wrong in your reaction – which is why you need to give yourself more time to think it through before you react.

Right or wrong, that person just cut me off and I'm angering[¶] . Until I change my program to not respond that way, what do I do in the mean time?

HOW DO I CHANGE MY EMOTIONS AND RESPONSE?

Use your imagination: If you are alone in your car, tell the person off in a funny voice; sing your curses in opera. If you are in public, imagine antennas springing from their head; imagine them bending over and the seat on their pants rips and underneath are fun-fur underwear.

Change your physiology: Change your body posture, stretch, stand or sit up straight, look up.

[¶] Our emotions are more of a verb than a noun. Emotions are something we do – they are not what we are. Just as silly as it would be to say, "I am run" instead of "I am running" or "I run" – we ought to be saying, "I anger" or "I am angering".

Distract yourself: Focus on something else. Listen to some music. Excuse yourself and go to the washroom and run your hands under cold water. Go get a coffee. Turn up your radio and sing to it.

Tell yourself something positive: Wow, I'm sure glad I'm not that person. Wow, that person must be having a difficult day. Life's too short to let this bug me.

Change your perspective: How else can I look at this situation? Imagine yourself in the other person's position. Look for the person's positive intention – what is it that they are trying to get or get away from by their actions (or words). Focus on the situation, not the emotions. What if the person was mentally disadvantaged – would that change how you want to respond to them? What if they were someone famous or someone you admire – would you cut them a break?

Role Playing - The world is your stage: Imagine you are Deepak Chopra – how would he respond? What tone of voice, choice of words or posture would he use? Imagine you are a diplomat and regardless of what the other person says or does – you have to maintain the peace. Imagine you are God – how would you respond to this human who has obviously made a mistake?

Understanding: People always make the best choices available to them at the time in accordance with their current level of knowledge, experience, level of evolution and emotional state. Understand that you teach others how to treat you through your own behaviors and responses.

By choosing your behavior, you are empowering yourself and also allowing yourself greater control over your experience. Sure, reacting may give you instant gratification of emotional release – but – the consequences usually are far more detrimental than the payoff. It may be difficult at first, as you catch yourself responding in an undesirable manner. The good news is that you are aware of it and the moment you become aware that you could respond differently – take the next step and change it.

Reflection is also useful in programming your future responses. Here's how:

Think of an incident where you reacted undesirably.

Choose a more desirable response and like you would edit a movie, cut out the old response and insert the new response in the appropriate spots.

Play the movie/memory back with the new responses and see if it feels better. Continue to edit parts of the memory until it plays in the most favorable manner, feeling how different things will be when you respond with the new behavior in future.

Imagine it is the future, a few weeks or months in the future and a similar incident occurs. Imagine yourself recognizing that this is an opportunity for practice and choosing to respond in the most desirable way. Imagine the outcome and how proud you feel about your accomplishment of emotional and behavioral control. Imagine as many future potentials as you like, knowing that you are making yourself more and more familiar and skillful in choosing how you want yourself to act in a situation.

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