

Identifying Hidden Beliefs

Many of us have hidden belief systems that drive our life. These beliefs systems are hard to see because they are unconscious and influence us our behaviors and our thought process without us realizing it.

However, these hidden beliefs have a powerful impact on the way we see ourselves and the world. For example, there was a famous experiment conducted by Jane Elliot in her classroom, in which she told her students that their intelligence level and behaviors were dependent on their eye color. Surprisingly, just the simple act of telling them that their eye color impacted them significantly influence their behavior and test score. (A short documentary, called A Class Divided, about the experiment is available on PBS Frontline.)

The good news is that these hidden beliefs can be changed. The first step is to become aware of them. Just knowing you have them minimizes the power they have to effect your life. The second step is to exposure yourself to contradicting evidence, that proves your hidden beliefs wrong. If you can see that there is a different way of viewing the situation, you can shift it.

For example, studies at Stanford and the University of Virginia have demonstrated that simple, subtle story "prompting" can help disadvantaged students at risk of dropping out create success by turning their mindset around. The students shared a belief that they were "not smart enough", they were "too different", and that they were "not able to catch up academically". A portion of the students in the study were shown a video that presented evidence that many first year students had similar belief systems, yet after a few moths they adjust well and were successful. The students that watched the video experienced significant improvements in grades, graduation rates, and confidence, while the students who did not watch the video did not show these same improvements.

There are three areas that you can look at to help identify hidden belief systems:

1) Self-Talk

Self-talk is how you talk to yourself in your own mind. Observing your self-talk can help you identify both your story and your belief systems.

"I am" statements: Often, your self-talk starts with "I am". For instance: I am not organized, I am a procrastinator, and I am bad at money management. When we say "I am" we are identifying with a behavior, as if it was part of our identity. It's hard to change a behavior if you believe it is WHO YOU ARE, however if you acknowledge that these behaviors are simply something you have done, not who you are, you can chose to do them differently.

What "I am" statements do you use regularly? Which ones do not serve you?

What “I am” statement could you use instead?

“What if” statements: Another common phrase you may hear yourself saying is “what if?” For example: what if I fail? What if the person reacts in a negative way? What if I lose everything? Our “if’s” may be negative, but we can flip them to a positive “if”. For example: what if I create a new life? What if I succeed beyond my wildest dreams? What if I can create the relationship I want?

Ask yourself, what negative “what if’s” do you often say or think about?

How can you replace them with positive “what if’s” that will serve you?

2) Disproportionate Reactions

If you have disproportionate reactions to a situation, it may be a signal of a hidden story. For example, if you are extremely upset because your partner failed to do the dishes, you are attaching some bigger meaning to the small disappointment. It is a signal that an hidden story is being triggered. Your story may be “my partner doesn’t care about me” or even deeper, “no one will ever really love me; I don’t deserve to be loved”. In this case, even a tiny infraction would be a signal to you that your stories are true, which would lead to the inappropriate reaction. Your reaction do not have to just be your behaviors. Your reaction can also take place only in your thoughts and emotions, that get triggered in certain situations.

Are there experiences, situations, or statements that trigger you to react more “extremely” than the actual situation would warrant?

What drives these reactions? (The hidden belief or story.)

3) Repeating Patterns

We are creatures of habit, and sometimes our patterns show us our hidden beliefs. Remember, that *our external circumstances reflect our inner stories*. If we notice that situations keep popping up, it's a signal that a belief or story is causing it to repeat. Do you tend to play the same "role" in all of your relationships/friendships (such as "helper" or "victim" or "responsible" or "doormat")? Do you tend to end up in the same situations repeatedly, in your intimate relationships, your jobs, your friendships, public places, etc.? Do you repeatedly get hurt or abandoned? Get injured? Have money struggles? Have conflicts with coworkers?

Thinking about these examples, can you identify any patterns that tend to repeat in your life?

What are these patterns telling you about your belief systems? What must you believe for them to continue happening?

Do they fit into your new story?

What belief systems may you have to change to be able to change those patterns?