Underlying Beliefs

Remember the story of the Titanic, the unsinkable ship wrecked 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 sometime 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 fulfillment 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 are 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 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 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 can determine more about it. We can then ask ourselves questions about our behaviours and unlock truths about our beliefs.

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 says they want to save money and they have been trying unsuccessf

ullly for a substantial period of time, then there is likely something they believe is causes the unsuccessful results. A person with this kind of challenge may have an Underlying Belief called, “I don’t deserve to be wealthy;” or “I don’t value money;” or “there’s not enough resources to go around.”

Any one of these Underlying Beliefs could support the behaviors that result in the person not saving money.

When looking to identify an Underlying Belief that eludes us, it can be useful to first look at the emotions that our thoughts cause us to feel. Do your thoughts create emotions that are empowering- feelings of joy, excitement, love and gratitude? Or do your thoughts create emotions that are disempowering – feelings of fear, frustration, sadness or anger?

Your feelings are a barometer of your thoughts and beliefs. When your thoughts and beliefs serve and support you in achieving your goals, they will leave you feeling balanced and empowered. When there are Underlying Beliefs at work that may sabotage your stated goals, you will find yourself feeling bad, frustrated or disempowered.

What To Do Once The Underlying Belief Is Detected

Once the Underlying Belief is detected, you have the power to decide how you will use this new awareness. One of the traps in distinguishing such beliefs is to make a judgement about them. Making an Underlying Belief “bad or wrong” or making ourselves “bad or wrong” for holding a belief is disempowering and will only leave you feeling stuck. The power of identifying an Underlying Belief comes in facing and “owning” it - allowing it to simply be and not judge it.

Identifying an Underlying Belief in this way allows you to see possibilities or opportunities that have not been there before. Taking action on these new opportunities, recognizing that
you have the power to choose a new belief and new actions will really make all the difference.

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 each one as a solution to a problem. Since many of our beliefs were formed before age seven, they were based on being loved, accepted, belonging, or 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 in 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 the World War II. No one could take this from him. This belief has sustained ordinary people in the most challenging moments in their life.

Reflection

1. Why discern your Underlying Beliefs?
2. What are some unwanted behaviors you currently have in your life? Using this process, can you now see what might be behind these outcomes?
3. With this new insight, what would be an empowering action to take?
4. Why is knowledge of an Underlying Beliefs helpful in making constructive choices?
Coaching Application

Supporting Clients to Identify Underlying Beliefs

Underlying Beliefs are unique to an individual. The exact wording that will empower someone in distinguishing their Underlying Belief will be their own. The coach’s role is to empower their clients to name their own Underlying Beliefs.

It is very hard to address something when it is not visible and clear. However, by detecting an Underlying Belief, and facing it head on, it becomes possible for us to change behaviour. The following question may help you, as a coach, to encourage clients to obtain a better understanding of their own Underlying Beliefs:

What belief, opinion, or judgement could you be reinforcing by constantly creating this outcome?

When a client discovers an Underlying Belief they are able to make decisions from a more powerful position because they have the power of choice. Take the example of the client with a stated commitment to save money, which never manages to, because of an Underlying Belief that says “there is not enough resources to go around”. By identifying this Underlying Belief, the client has new knowledge from which to make choices. They may decide that a better way to balance their Underlying Belief with their stated commitment is to make a donation to charity of one dollar out of every twenty that they save.

They may decide to take on some volunteer work as a more constructive response to their Underlying Belief than simply wasting money. By understanding their Underlying Belief, the client has agency to actively choose the behaviors that will allow them to respond to their commitments in a constructive way.

How To Best Use The Underlying Belief Model

As a coach, the first step is to detect your own Underlying Beliefs. By doing so, you will have the practical experience to help others. Your willingness to confront your own Underlying Beliefs and create new opportunities for your life will inspire those around you, including current and future clients because they will be drawn to what you are creating in your life.
By engaging in it honestly yourself, you also will have the compassion it takes to support your clients to facing their own Underlying Beliefs. This compassion will help you when you are dealing with clients who struggle to meet their stated goals.

In the middle of a coaching conversation you might identify a belief a client has. You might ask them if you can share a feeling that just came to you when they were speaking. Share the belief you observed and the behavior they spoke about that reinforced this belief. Ask them if this belief feels aligned with them or not. Possible questions 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 affect)?

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 clients 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.

Using observation, questions and feedback and a coach possess the wisdom to approach a client’s underlying beliefs from a range of different angles, rather than seeing it as something that the client can simply choose to quickly change. By providing this space, and respecting the complexity of the client’s journey, you allow clients 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?