

Working with Core Beliefs of 'Never Good Enough'

One Way a CBT Practitioner Works with Negative Core Beliefs

with Ruth Buczynski, PhD; Christine Padesky, PhD;
and Kelly McGonigal, PhD

National Institute for the Clinical
Application of Behavioral Medicine





Working with Core Beliefs of 'Never Good Enough': Christine Padesky, PhD

One Way a CBT Practitioner Works with Negative Core Beliefs

Dr. Buczynski: How do we work with clients who develop core beliefs that they're no good?

According to Dr. Christine Padesky, these beliefs come in pairs and oftentimes one of them goes missing. Here, Christine shares how to find this missing belief and offers two techniques to help repair it.

Dr. Padesky: From a CBT perspective, the belief that you're never good enough is a core belief.

And we all have three levels of beliefs.

We have **automatics thoughts** – which are the thoughts that pop into our mind moment to moment throughout the day.

We have an intermediate level of belief called **underlying assumptions** which are if/then beliefs. If this, then that.

And these are the beliefs we generally work with anxiety disorders or behavior problems. They're the rules that guide how we navigate the world.

“Core beliefs are absolute beliefs. They are on or off. We really believe that core beliefs come in pairs.”

And then at a deeper level are what we call **core beliefs**. Core beliefs are absolute beliefs. They are on or off. So – *I'm not good enough / I'm good.*

We really believe that core beliefs come in pairs.

So, all of us sometimes have the thought, *I'm not good enough.*

I've never met a therapist who doesn't have this thought – because we work behind closed doors, and we all imagine every other therapist in the world is doing better work behind closed doors than we are.

So, we all have this belief, *I'm never good enough.*

We also usually have a belief, *I'm good enough. Or, I'm good. Or, I'm even excellent.*

Now we have these paired beliefs – and this is important because certain experiences can make the I'm-not-

good-enough belief come out: failures, losses, end of relationships, moods like depression, etc.

And I think in the modern-day world, social media and some of the lack of civility in the world really contributes to a lot more of this.

When I go out and teach, I'm hearing more and more therapists talk to me about the effects of social media on adolescents and adults who spend a lot of time on social media.

This *I'm not good enough* is coming up a lot because, in social media, just reflexively, there's *always* going to be a certain percentage of people who are going to troll the internet and just put people down for whatever — for what they're wearing, for how they look, for a bad expression on their face. And people then pile on.

So, I think those kinds of experiences, of course, set us up to feel not good enough.

Now, the idea that these core beliefs come in pairs is very important because what I would do in helping a client with that depends.

What does it depend on?

It depends on the *context* in which they tell me this belief.

If this person is currently clinically depressed and they say, "I'm not good enough," I'm going to think about this as, *okay, this is a negative thought that's probably part of depression. And if we can lift the depression, then their paired belief, 'I am good enough,' is going to just emerge, and in 12 weeks or so, they're going to not be thinking this way anymore.*

“The idea that these core beliefs come in pairs is very important because what I would do in helping a client, depending on the context in which they tell me this belief.”

And that's most of the time what happens in depression treatment — you don't have to work on core beliefs at all when you're working with depression.

In fact, I recently did some research with Lance Hawley who is a psychologist in Toronto.¹

He and a group of us did some research on working with depression where we found, in the first 14 weeks, if you worked on behavioral activation or you worked on teaching skills to use thought records to test out negative thoughts, depressed people got significantly better with those kinds of skill-practice assignments.

But, if they worked on core beliefs, and if they identified a negative core belief and did assignments toward working on core beliefs, they got worse.

So, I advise therapists – if they're working with depression, don't work on core beliefs at all.

But you can't ignore a thought like, "I'm never good enough," if you're working with client who's depressed.

So, how do we work with it?

Well, the depression, what we do is we say... I turn it into an automatic thought.

Automatic thoughts are thoughts about specific situations.

When a client says, "I'm not good enough," and they're depressed, I would say, "Give me an example this week of when you were not good enough."

And then we'll look in that specific situation for evidence that supports the idea they weren't good enough and evidence that doesn't support it.

We're usually able to come up with some balanced view that might say they messed up in these ways but they did an adequate job in these other ways. That helps them feel a little bit better.

And I would stick to those situations, specific tests of the idea with depression.

But then we get other clients who, even when they're not depressed, even on a good day, they believe *I'm never good enough*.

And with those clients then, from cognitive theory, I would see that as evidence that they have the negative core belief but they're missing the positive core belief. Or the positive core belief is very weak if it's there, so that under every circumstance, just the one core belief is available to the person.

Now based on that, instead of testing out that idea, which is what a lot of people think you should do in CBT with a belief like *I'm never good enough*, I don't look for evidence to support or not support that.

I see the problem as they're missing the positive core belief.

"The problem of feeling never-good-enough is they're missing the positive core belief."

So, I use therapy methods to help people construct a good-enough core belief. And, I ask them to say in their own words, "How would you like it to be? How would you like to see yourself if you weren't not good enough? How would you like to be?"

Some clients will say, "I'd like to see myself as excellent," or, "I'd like

to see myself as good or worthwhile."

They use whatever word they want.

And then, I use therapy methods to help them build up and strengthen that alternative core belief with the idea that once they have both core beliefs, then they'll be like most people, and some days they'll feel not good enough when they mess up, and other days, they'll feel good enough.

There are two prime techniques we use to do that – one is the use of a **continuum**, because core beliefs say it's all or nothing, and the continuum is where life resides in between.

"I use therapy methods to help them strengthen that alternative core belief with the idea that once they have both core beliefs, they'll feel good enough."

And the other method we use is what we call a **core belief log** where we have people keep track, daily, of evidence that they are good enough or worthwhile or whatever.

Dr. Buczynski: As Christine said, when a client is able to create this equilibrium in the way they judge themselves, it can foster greater healing.

Christine suggested keeping a core belief log to begin to foster that equilibrium.

For some further thoughts on that, here's Dr. Kelly McGonigal.

Dr. McGonigal: I really liked this idea of a core belief log.

And what I wanted to add to it is how important it is to have different emotions, not just different observations.

We know from mindset research that if you want to change someone's core belief, emotional experiences are a really important part of that process. You can't really talk someone into it in a purely intellectual, "Here's the evidence. Here's the evidence. Here's the evidence."

"If you want to change someone's core belief, emotional experiences are a really important part of that process."

And so, I was thinking about this core belief log.

Basically, a person is accumulating evidence.

How could you improve that to make it even more powerful?

I'm thinking about the emotions that might be needed to really

embed that core belief that *I am good enough*.

What are the emotions that help with that?

I'm thinking of emotions of compassion, satisfaction perhaps, since there was a conversation about a good person that does nice things or something like that.

If that's part of your conception of being a good person, maybe you need to experience compassion satisfaction as you are writing down, "This is what I did today that was a kind act." Savor in that warm glow. Maybe it's gratitude to yourself. Maybe you did something worthy today that was moving in the direction of your own goals, and you need to experience that sense of, "Wow. I really did something good for myself today that's going to allow me to grow and to have that sense of gratitude."

And there are probably many other emotions too, depending on how one thinks about being worthy, which Christine had talking about, helping someone define what that is.

So maybe there's a core belief log where you track it. And I feel like Rick Hanson would talk about, *You noticed it now. But noticing it's not enough. You have to feel it.*

You have to breathe with it, maybe replay it in your mind and feel how you felt when you did it.

So, that's how I was thinking about making it even more powerful.

Dr. Buczynski: Kelly's idea of adding emotions to a core belief log can be a powerful way to enhance the impact of this technique.

In the next video, we'll dig into a few ways to help clients reframe their negative self-narrative.

I'll see you then.