

PART I

Security

MOTIVATED TO VALIDATE YOUR PERSONAL REALITY

Commit time and energy to validate your beliefs, values, and expectations and to associate with those who share that reality.

Maturing Your Personal Reality

As you mature, you adjust your personal reality to fit your experience.

Figure 2.

Your personal reality is how you view yourself and how you believe your actions will work for you. It is your map of how to decode your world and manage your life, and how things “should be.” Other people may have similar maps, but none are exact duplicates of your map. You often associate with people who have similar maps. Decoding and managing when close to the real world usually improves your experiences. But your beliefs about how things should be may not always serve you well. For example, you may have beliefs about yourself that limit you. You don’t like the limits, but you prefer them to questioning your map. Any threat to the validity of your map of reality may cause you anxiety.

Motivated to Validate Your Personal Map of Reality

One of the characteristics that separate humans from lower animals is the ability to pass our culture on to future generations. This is a very important difference. Lower animals follow instincts, and they must learn on their own what their parents have discovered but cannot easily teach them, although modeling may occur. The problem for humans arises when we learn dysfunctional habits from our parents. Parents can shape your beliefs in a way that leads you astray instead of rewarding you.

Beliefs and values are as important to your psychological existence as food, air, and water are to your physical survival. For some people, the beliefs that make up their personal reality are rigid and resistant to change. Others have a personal reality that changes with experience. In the worst case, your map is confusing. You don't know who you are, where you are going in life or how to get there. You mature by learning to cope with problems in your various environments. Your beliefs can both aid and hinder your quest for maturity. Once you formulate the beliefs that make up your personal reality, you may defend them in spite of evidence to the contrary. A belief is an opinion to which you are committed. It may be close to or far from reality.

CHAPTER 1

Personal Reality

Goal: You engage in an ongoing development of a personal reality that closely approximates what you experience. Any change in your personal reality must occur slowly over time, so that you can maintain a firm grounding of the beliefs and values that guide you.

Beliefs that Limit You

This story about beliefs stars an elephant. This is an old story that I have heard a few times, but a person that I was training reintroduced me to it. He said that when I told him about beliefs he held that did not serve him well he was confused. He returned with the story of the elephant and said that this information helped him understand my advice.

Workers in India use elephants in the same way that we use heavy equipment in the United States. Young elephants must learn to follow commands and not attempt to escape. When an elephant is small, the trainer securely ties it with a heavy-duty rope. The young elephant attempts to break free, but the rope is too strong. In time, the young elephant gives up the struggle, and its spirit is broken. The elephant believes there is absolutely no chance to free itself and accepts its limitation. For the elephant, this is a defining moment and changes its life. The elephant accepts the new belief as truth. Later, as a large animal, the elephant can be controlled by a small rope that it could easily break.

In this story, the elephant's belief limited it by creating a heavy rope in its mind. Your beliefs can be limiting as well, but the good news is that you can change those beliefs that do not serve you well.

Beliefs that Cause Problems

To the extent that your beliefs are consistent with each

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other, you are comfortable. When your beliefs are in conflict or when what you believe differs from what you observe, you may experience anxiety. This anxiety may motivate you to add a new belief that brings the discordant beliefs into agreement. Imagine an infant learning about the world into which he has been born. An early belief is that parents are god-like—infallible and omniscient. A baby's very life depends on these big people around him. When he cries, he is hoping for a diaper change, a bottle, or a hug. But if his mother does not respond to his cries, his need is denied. In time, he may add a new belief to his understanding of his parents: I am not a priority to my mother; I am unimportant and unloved.

These are not happy thoughts, but his basic beliefs are not yet in conflict. Life progresses, and he learns much about his environment. When he is old enough to visit his friends, he may discover something disturbing. He sees that parents love and care for their children. Among the many facts he is learning, three do not make sense: (1) parents are never wrong, (2) his mother does not love him, (3) parents love their children. Not all of these can be true. If he is completely toilet trained, he may start soiling himself as a symptom of his distress.

This distress is motivational. Children are intuitive, and he is looking for a way to resolve the conflict. Eventually, he will make sense of his discordant beliefs by creating a new reality: I'm a different child who is unlovable. That is why my mother does not love me, even though she is a parent and parents love their children. Nobody will ever love me.

This unhappy explanation brings relief by harmonizing his inconsistent beliefs. The problem is that he must validate the unlovable status on a regular basis to avoid the return of the anxiety. For example, when this child—let's call him Don—is six years old, a new boy about his age moves into his neighborhood. The neighbor child is riding his bike down the sidewalk, and he spots Don sitting on his porch steps.

"Hello," greets the newcomer. "My name is Billy. What's yours?"

"Get out of my yard," answers Don, as he picks up a rock.

"I don't like you," Billy retaliates and rides away.

Don has validated his personal reality, but goes in the house crying.

“What’s wrong?” Don’s mother asks him.

“A new boy just moved in down the street, and he doesn’t like me.”

“That’s strange. Why not?”

“Well, I told him to get out of my yard and picked up a rock to show him that I meant business,” Don explains.

“You dummy,” his mother criticizes. “That’s no way to make friends!”

His mother perpetuates the belief that he is unlovable.

Adopting the Beliefs and Values that Become the Core of Your Personal Reality

It is important to understand how you assess reality. There are at least six methods of assessment, and you may favor one over the others or spread the testing of reality over several.

Sensory Experience

Personal experience is a major factor in the development of your beliefs. Consider the apostle Thomas when he hears that Jesus has risen from the dead: “Unless I see the scars of the nails in his hands and put my finger on those scars and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” When we see, hear, touch, taste, or smell something, it must be real. Yet, a magician could fool most people any time.

Emotion

Emotional conditioning is a subconscious influence on your beliefs. This conditioning causes you to react the same way to similar events. Some things feel right, others feel wrong.

Logic

You may arrive at some beliefs through logical reasoning. That is, you can subject your beliefs to a variety of intellectual tests to assess the veracity. Some people believe a certain way

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because it feels right, then develop a logical reason to support the feeling.

Authority

You gain many, maybe most, of your beliefs from trusted authorities in your life. For example, some readers may add a belief or two after reading this book. Your parents are your original authority figures and greatly influence your beliefs. Religious leaders, the Bible, teachers, or a favorite relative may teach you what to believe. The problem is that most of your trusted authorities depend on an earlier authority themselves, and to trace back to the originator is not practical. When unrelated authorities validate the belief, though, you can be more confident.

Invention

You invent some beliefs. Strange as it may sound, some of these inventions turn into useful parts of a person's map of reality. For example, a woman who has grown up in an abusive family can develop into a healthy mature adult with the aid of invented beliefs. Maybe her invention was to adopt herself into "The Andy Griffith Show." She internalized the beliefs and values of Andy and Aunt Bea and turned out well. I have talked with people who falsify their histories to fit an image that they want to present. One person admitted that he had a difficult time remembering what he had made up about his life and what was factual.

Scientific Method

You develop some beliefs through trial and error. You make a prediction based on what you believe, act on the belief, and observe the outcome. When you find a discrepancy, you may rethink the belief.

The earlier example of Don's belief development was hypothetical. A real and personal example of a belief that I learned from my family caused me to have my first serious argument with my wife, Esther. We had added a new member

to our household—a puppy. After supper that night, I collected the table scraps and put them in the puppy's bowl. My wife watched me and said, "Don't give that to the puppy. It's not healthy for him." My family, for at least three generations and with many different animals, has always fed our pets our leftovers. I was instantly furious.

"That's ridiculous. The dog will thrive on it!" I shouted.

"If you like, we can call the vet tomorrow and check," my wife suggested. When she said that, I knew that she was right, but I would not back down. We argued and went to bed angry.

The next morning, I was embarrassed and spent time examining my behavior. Esther was simply giving me information about the health of our dog. What I heard was her telling me that my whole family had wrong ideas about how to raise animals. She threatened the validity of a belief that I had never before voiced or thought much about. This incident should not have been a big issue, but it felt crucial to me and I reacted strongly. Everyone has a need to be right in order to preserve their personal realities. For some it is a desperate belief, while it is merely an irritant to others. For the desperate, being wrong is not an option.

In marriage counseling, I often hear arguments between spouses over matters of little importance. The real issue is often that their respective parents had taught them opposing views about a matter.

Beliefs that Make Your Life More Difficult

There are some beliefs that are common to many people. An authority, your parents for example, may teach you beliefs. But loving parents sometimes teach beliefs that cause problems. A distortion from your past happens when parents teach you disruptive behaviors. Parents may teach their children to behave in ways that accommodate adult idiosyncrasies—avoiding a threat, flattering the parent, or reinforcing the parent's own perceptions of a situation. Such teachings can cause problems when the child

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becomes an adult. Examples include the following communications from parent to child, with the true meanings in parentheses:¹

- Don't belong. (You or we don't fit in—anywhere.)
- Don't think. (I like to think for you.)
- Don't be who you are. (I don't like it.)
- Don't be important. (Don't take credit; you'll get a big head.)
- Don't succeed. (You won't need me.)
- Don't feel. (Don't make me uncomfortable.)
- Don't get emotionally close. (It makes me uneasy.)
- Don't have fun. (Grow up fast; I need your help.)
- Don't grow up. (Stay childlike and be dependent on me.)
- Don't exist. (This family would be better off without you.)
- Don't be healthy (either physically or psychologically, because I want to take care of you).

An example involves a young girl with a single mom who is alcoholic. When the daughter comes home from school with a problem, her mother does not drink that night. Instead, she teaches, coaches, or comforts her child. This bright child's problems increase in frequency and plague her into her adult years. Eventually, she marries an alcoholic who drinks more when she “messes up.”

Beliefs that Block Problem Solving

Beliefs about yourself that usually come from childhood decisions can interfere with your adult success. When you feel blocked in your day-to-day problem solving, a reason may follow and involves a belief to change:

- I deserve to have this problem.
- It's not safe or good for me to completely get over this problem. I worry that something worse will happen to me or those about whom I care.
- It's impossible for me to get over this problem. I don't know what to do or how to do it.
- I am unwilling to do what's necessary to get over this problem.
- I will feel deprived if I get over this problem. It is a problem,

but I'm getting a payoff that is more important to me than the problem.

- I will lose my identity if I get over this problem. It has become a part of my character.

Ways of Thinking that Distort Your Reality

Another impediment to problem solving involves ways of thinking that lead you away from best dealing with the world. If you identify with any of the following beliefs about how to best cope with your life, you are distorting reality.

Inflexible Thinking

You need to assess your approach to organizing your life to feel safe. If it depends upon placing people and events in neat categories, such as good or bad with little tolerance of a middle ground, you are forcing your thinking into artificial categories that weaken your hold on reality. Most things in life are not as clear-cut to permit such categorization. Life has more grays than blacks and whites.

Pessimistic Thinking

If you have a tendency to magnify negative aspects of your life and minimize the positive, you may experience self-pity, loss of personal power, and hopelessness. Some people believe that if you expect the worst you won't be disappointed. Yet, when the worst doesn't happen, you feel bad unnecessarily. A related problem is to always expect a disaster in life. In this case, you take one small part of the truth—an indication of a possible problem—and worry it into a full catastrophe. You can cause continual worry over things that rarely happen: "What if ..."

Believing that You Have Special Powers

If you believe that you are able to determine what people are thinking and feeling about you without their direct input, you are distorting reality, believing that you have powerful intuition. Most of this intuition tends to be negative. If you believe that most people have a negative

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opinion of you, you should be suspicious of the belief.

A second special power that some people think they possess is being responsible for the pain or happiness of everyone around them. Alternatively, you may believe that your happiness depends on others, so you must be able to change them when they make you unhappy, by either pressure or charm.

Giving Away Your Power

When you feel helpless, victimized, or controlled by others or events, you are also distorting reality. Your lack of power is reinforced by negative thoughts: "I don't know who I am, what I want, what I feel, what I think, or where I'm headed. I don't like myself. I don't have what it takes to meet the demands of the situation. I am sensitive and easily hurt, guarded and suspicious, fearful or cynical, walled off from others, dependent on others, resentful, confused about normalcy, impulsive, indecisive, too much of a worrier, or too easily taken advantage of."

If any of these statements apply to you, you will feel less confident and more powerless. These feelings and thoughts usually stem from your past. In problem solving, these self-perceptions locate the source of problems within you.

Unfairness

You may have a special sense of what is unfair. With this unfairness belief, you are not impressed when others, sometimes most people, have a different point of view. Of course, there is unfairness all around you. The more you personalize what is fair, the more likely you are distorting reality.

Feelings Are Golden

Some people are not bound by rules and logic but are guided by what they feel. If they feel a certain way, it must be right. This guidance system results in poor judgments and mistakes. Those people traveling this road are often good at charming their way out of situations and whining when they are faced with consequences.

Being Wrong is Not an Option

When you must compulsively go to great lengths to prove yourself right, you are subject to distorting reality. This activity will cause you unnecessary relationship problems.

Your Personal Map of Reality

The above array of beliefs are widespread in the general population and may include some that are personal to you. The next step is to discover your personal map of reality. This is not likely to occur by listing possible beliefs. You accomplish this best by asking yourself questions. Do not only imagine the answers. Write them down because you will want to refer to them later. Some of the questions below refer to your beliefs about yourself, while others address your beliefs about how the world functions and how best to maneuver it to meet your needs.

Who am I? How do I get my needs met? How do I remain safe and secure? What guidelines do I follow to simplify my life? What do I value?

What would heaven on earth be for me? What do I need to master my environment? How do I discipline myself? What are my goals in life? What are my passions? What do I want to change about me?

On what do I base my decisions? What do I believe about life? About myself? What will I teach my children about life?

If I continue on this path in life, where will it lead? What do I fantasize about? What do I want most of life? How will I know when I am a success? As a child, what did I want to be as an adult? What was my mother's ambition for me? What was my father's ambition for me?

How did my mother compliment me? How did my father compliment me? How did my mother criticize me? How did my father criticize me? What was my mother's main advice? What was my father's main advice? What do I wish my mother had done differently? What do I wish my father had done differently?

What bad feeling have I had most of my life? How do I

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think I might die and at what age? How will my obituary read?

Some of these questions indirectly reveal your beliefs. Bringing your beliefs into your awareness allows you to compare them with what you observe in the world and change those that do not serve you well.

The content of your map of reality comprises two main areas: beliefs about your identity and beliefs about ways to cope successfully in life. To increase the reality of your map, you must identify those beliefs that limit you or fail to bring you the results that you want. Some of the problem beliefs that make your life more difficult come from common ways that many people operate and that limit you in some way. If you have any of these, target them for change. Check those beliefs that are active in your life today. Next, think about acting on each individual belief. Has this belief served you well, producing what you want? Or has it limited you? Tag for change those beliefs that limit you.

Changing a Belief

Now that you have identified beliefs to change, how do you change them? The first requirement is that you must be convinced that continuing to act on the belief will cause you problems. Further, you must make sure that you are totally disgusted with the consequences of the behaviors generated by the belief. These conditions result in an emotional commitment to change.

A second step is to take the old belief into doubt. You do this because moving from an unwanted belief to its opposite is often not a permanent change. That is, you embrace the new desirable belief and enjoy your success, but your new belief will not be permanent. You may find a flaw in the new belief or find validation of the more established old belief and return to its safety.

To move your old belief into doubt seems to allow a more permanent adoption of the new belief when the shift is made in that direction. You bring a belief into doubt by arguing both sides without a conclusion. For example, Lena

wants to change her belief that all men cannot be trusted. Taking the attitude into doubt, she says, “I know that it is ridiculous to adopt an absolute such as ‘all anything.’ Nevertheless, look at my last live-in boyfriend. All of a sudden, he started having early business meetings. But he was really spending nights with me and then, most mornings, meeting up with a nurse who worked nights. Yet, my best friend has been married for years, and her husband treats her like a queen. Well, maybe she has not caught him yet! I have to remind myself that I dated a man who seemed trustworthy, but I left him because he bored me. But even he lied to me about liking my new haircut.” Lena complains about the stress she feels doing this exercise. She has an urge to favor one side over the other or to stop the process altogether. Fortunately, she persists.²

Now formulate a new belief. For her new belief, Lena chooses: “I will begin with trust in a new relationship until I have observable evidence of betrayal. I will not react to rumor unless there is strong evidence. I won’t seriously consider distortions that do no harm, such as compliments on my appearance that may not be totally honest.” Using one or more of the six ways that you develop beliefs and values—sensory awareness, emotion, logic, invention, authority, and scientific method—look for flaws or truths in the new belief and in the ways that you formulated the discarded belief. Then work toward disbelieving the old belief and reinforcing the new one. Finally, move that doubt into the new, desirable belief. Once you adopt the new belief and prove it an advantage over the old, look for ways to validate it.

Another method involves decisions that you made as a child. Through redecision you can modify these problem beliefs. I have adapted the published method to suit my style:

1. Identify irrational behavior—those actions with negative results.
2. Create a belief that would make sense of the irrational behavior.

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3. Go back in time to the earliest memory of the behavior or the belief. Imagine filming that scene. Describe what is happening in detail. How does this scene lead to the created belief?
4. Return to the present and, from an adult perspective, develop a new interpretation of the scene and a new belief that would generate successful behaviors.³

For example, Sam behaves compulsively toward women in ways that assure him temporary relationships at best. In his own words at our first meeting, he outlines his problem. "I'm turning forty in a few weeks, and I fear that I will never marry and have children. At a point when a relationship is going so well that marriage is the only thing that makes sense, I get agitated. I start losing sleep and get knots in my stomach. I have this nagging, crazy thought that if I get married I will kill myself. I do things to run the woman off. If she does not bolt, I do."

A few weeks later, Sam announces that he is stopping therapy because change is hopeless. I ask him to develop a belief that makes sense of his behavior toward women. He thinks for a moment and says, "If my own mother didn't love me enough to stay, no woman will." I ask him to tell me more about how he considers the belief. Sam says, "I remember when I was five or six, watching TV with my dad. He was getting drunk and started crying. He told me that my mother did not love us enough to stay around. I knew he was right. She abandoned our family when I was about two years old. I decided then that if my mother didn't love me, nobody else would."

"From your adult perspective, does that belief still hold true?" I ask.

"What makes sense now is I know that my mother was crazy," Sam replies. "She was a paranoid schizophrenic and was in the state mental hospital until her death."

"What would be a more logical belief today?"

Sam says, "How women react to me is all about me and has nothing to do with my mother leaving me."

Sam still has work to do before changing the old belief to the new one. Changing a belief is not a one-time event. You must be committed to persistence over a long period.

Cognitive Behavior Therapy

Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) is one of the fastest-growing mental-health techniques. It is based on the idea that an event has some impact on how you feel, but the event is altered by the way that you evaluate it through your thoughts and beliefs.⁴ That is why several people exposed to the same event can experience it differently. The sequence is like this: An event occurs, your thoughts about the event follow, and that causes a feeling, which in turn, results in a behavior. When you control your irrational thoughts, you master your unnecessary bad feelings. CBT has evolved into a favored treatment of anxiety and depression. In comparison studies, the technique is about equal to medications for these conditions. CBT challenges the assumption that events cause feelings. This is good news because you have little control over events.

Your thoughts don't spring out of thin air. They are by-products of your belief system. CBT teaches changing the beliefs that underlie the thoughts in order to challenge the validity of the thoughts.

Dr. Albert Ellis, the originator of this technique, wrote of irrational ideas or beliefs. You must challenge these beliefs. For example, one belief suggested by Ellis is that it is an absolute necessity to have love and approval from others almost all the time. What if a friend fails to invite you to a party? You might feel abandoned or rejected, maybe unlovable. Ellis advises you to challenge this irrational belief: "There is no proof that I must be approved by everyone. It is unlikely that I will get everyone's approval." Ellis bases this technique on three basic ideas:

1. You are a fallible human being who sometimes makes mistakes.
2. You are a person who sometimes acts badly, not a bad person.



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3. You are responsible for your feelings and behavior, as well as the consequences of that behavior.⁵

You are responsible for your beliefs and for changing those that cause you trouble.

