

## Beliefs to disbelieve

In 1999 there was widespread concern about the Y2K bug. Early in the “childhood” of computer language, programmers had built in a faulty assumption: that every year could be represented by just two digits (for example, “68” for “1968”). The impending arrival of the year 2000, when “00” would follow “99”, threatened to disrupt computer systems worldwide.

What if human beings had a Y2K fault like computers, built into us in our childhood? As it turns out, we do. Our own “bugs” are diverse, difficult to find, and significantly more problematic than the Y2K problem turned out to be.

Each of us learns a huge number of principles or rules about how the world works, and inevitably at least a few of these are incorrect or unhelpful. In the 1950s, psychologist Albert Ellis began exploring some of the underlying beliefs and assumptions that frequently get people into trouble.

Monitoring your thoughts can help you find some of your distorted beliefs. It helps, though, if you have an idea of what some of them might be. You probably have some distortions that are unique to you, or to your family. But you probably share some of the extremely common distortions seen in western culture.

What follows is a list of common distorted beliefs. Albert Ellis identified some of these in his writings; others have been identified by other clinicians or clients.

Read over the description of each one to see whether it seems to fit you. The most important question is not whether you seriously believe the statement. You might not believe it when you see it in print, but it could still affect you. Instead, the questions are: *Do you **act** as though you believed the statement? Do you react emotionally as though you believed it?* If you answer yes to either question, then the assumption may be one of your own hidden beliefs.

Beside each statement is a space. Place a check mark in the space if you think the distortion fits your behavior or your emotional reactions.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Everything I do must be absolutely perfect; otherwise I am a failure.**

This is the core belief of perfectionism. No one is perfect, and most things people do are imperfect in some respect. If you need to be perfect to feel good about yourself, you will rarely feel satisfied with your efforts. In addition, you may be reluctant to try new things, like skiing, writing, or using computers, because while you were learning you would make many mistakes.

\_\_\_\_\_ **I must always be at peak efficiency and performance.**

If you have established a personal best of some kind (fastest run, highest mark, most done in a day, best performance evaluation), then from that time on you must perform at the same level or better. There can be no slow days, no bad weeks, no low marks. If you don't do your best you think it is a disaster, and that you will continue to slide forever.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Life is fair.**

If you hold this belief you will feel guilty when bad things happen to you. After all, you must have done something terrible to deserve what happened. Work at accepting that the world is not always fair so that it isn't a shock when unfair things happen.

\_\_\_\_\_ **If others disagree with me, then I must be wrong.**

Do you usually wait for others to express their view before you express yours? If their views differ from yours do you feel embarrassed or change your opinion? Do you feel that you have a *right* to have an opinion? Having a healthy respect for your own attitudes will allow you to think about and weigh what others say rather than automatically assuming they are correct.

\_\_\_\_\_ **I am only worthwhile as long as I am doing something for someone else.**

Do you feel guilty and/or anxious whenever you treat yourself or take time for yourself? Remind yourself that you are a full human being with the full range of human needs – and rights. It is important to spend some time caring for yourself. Try turning around a well-known adage: Love yourself as you would your neighbor.

\_\_\_\_\_ **The way to be accepted and appreciated by others is to give and give.**

Are you always the one who gives more in your relationships? Why? Could it be to buy love and acceptance, to make up for a belief that you are secretly unlovable? What do you expect the other person to do in return? In reality, excessive unwanted giving (of time, favors, gifts, or always letting the other person make the decisions) often causes others to be resentful and lose respect for you. The solution is, again, to respect yourself as much as you respect others.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Anger is bad.**

Many of us grow up either suppressing our anger or letting it explode outward uncontrollably. Anger is a standard element of the human range of emotions. It helps us recognize when other people are crossing our boundaries, and can give us the strength to defend them (by saying “no,” standing up for ourselves, and so on). Anger pushes us to take action. Although we need to be careful not to violate the rights of others when acting on anger, it is important not to violate our own rights by ignoring it every time it comes up.

\_\_\_\_\_ **I have to do everything I am asked to do.**

If you believe this, you have to rely on other people not to ask you to do anything unreasonable. You won’t feel you have the right to defend yourself or say “no.” Because of this, control over your own actions is always in the other person’s hands. People with this belief feel angry and resentful when others make unreasonable requests, but they go along with those requests anyway. They often feel “used” by others.

\_\_\_\_\_ **I have the power to change people.**

In other words, if you care for someone the right way, they will become the person you think they could or should be. The belief is that by providing a secure, or loving, or educational environment, or by the pure force of your personality, the other person will change (give up drinking, get a career, go back to school, learn to control their temper...). Unfortunately, this seldom works. Instead, you wind up feeling resentful because you’ve spent all this energy and the other person hasn’t changed at all.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Good relationships have no problems.**

This belief comes from the “and they lived happily ever after” myth. The idea is that if you have found the right partner the relationship will never require work and effort. The reality, of course, is that every long-term relationship requires work and effort, and difficulties are not a sign that the relationship was wrong from the beginning.

\_\_\_\_\_ **It is unbearable when life is not the way I would like it to be.**

Do you find yourself saying “*When this job problem, and that family illness, and this other thing are all resolved, I’ll be able to relax and be happy*”? Of course, by the time all those things are over there are three *new* problems to deal with. This belief states that everything has to be going well in order for you to be happy. But think back over the past few years – how often has everything come together in this way? The trick is to *allow and expect* a certain amount of upheaval in our lives, rather than defining what it will take for us to be happy.

\_\_\_\_\_ **It is easier to avoid life's problems than to face them.**

Check your actions to judge whether you use this assumption. Think back over any problems you may have put off over the past year. How many of them went away or got resolved? Some problems do vanish when you ignore them. But most just get bigger.

\_\_\_\_\_ **I need someone stronger or more powerful than myself to rely on.**

This belief makes you helpless, because you have to have someone else around to take responsibility for you. In a relationship, this means you cannot take charge or assert yourself because the other person might then leave. How many things in your life are you genuinely and completely incapable of handling? For many people the proof that this idea is untrue is that they have *already* managed without such a person at some point.



The last few pages provide only a partial list of common irrational beliefs. After reviewing these, can you think of any other negative beliefs that might play a central role in your own life? Take a moment and write them down.

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

If you are like most people, you probably have certain faulty assumptions that recur again and again, affecting how you feel each time. It is important to become aware of these beliefs because they can have a profound effect on your mood.

If you had to pick your number one distorted belief from the last few pages, which would it be? Which one seems to have the biggest impact on your life? Write it out in your own words.

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How does this belief affect your life, exactly? When does it occur, and what are the effects?

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It is not enough just to know the beliefs you are using, though this helps. You need to challenge the belief when it is influencing you. For example, you might counter the need to be perfect with “*Relax – no one is ever perfect.*” You might counter a belief that you need constant support and guidance with “*I am a capable human being and I can rely on myself.*” When your most important distorted belief begins to affect you, what could you say to yourself in response? (Work hard on this one: it's important.)

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If you want to weaken the grip the negative belief has over you, you will have to repeat the revised belief above over and over to yourself, especially in situations in which the negative belief has a big influence on you.