

Uncovering Unhelpful Core Beliefs Using the Downward Arrow Technique

Objective

To use the downward arrow technique to uncover unhelpful core beliefs.

What to Know

The downward arrow technique is a tool to help you uncover underlying core beliefs and belief systems that influence your thoughts, behaviors, and moods. Core beliefs are the beliefs you have about yourself, other people, and the world. A belief system is a set of beliefs you have about what's right and wrong and what's true or false. They are often hidden or unclear and uncovering them can make it easier to notice them and not act on them.

Sometimes beliefs and belief systems aren't very helpful and support upsetting thoughts. Maybe they occur at inappropriate times, or they're happening too frequently, and they make you feel worse. Uncovering beliefs using this technique can help you replace them with healthier and more helpful beliefs.

Here are the steps to uncover a core belief using the downward arrow technique. You can use this technique for individual or relationship issues. Below is an example.

1. Write down a thought that has been bothering you.
2. Ask yourself "What does this mean about me?"
3. Keep going until you get to the underlying core belief.

Thought: My friend was inconsiderate when she didn't show up for our lunch date.



What does this mean about me? It means she doesn't care about me.



What does that mean about me? It means she isn't really my friend.



What does that mean about me? It means I don't have friends that respect me.



What does that mean about me? It means there's something wrong with me because people don't respect or care about me.



Core belief: I am not worth caring about or respecting.


Sometimes it will be immediately clear to you that the core belief is illogical, but sometimes it will take some digging to uncover the belief. Your coach or counselor can help you with this process.

Note: You can also add “What if?” to this technique. For example, you might say, “What if this were true? What am I the most afraid of? What’s the worst thing that could happen? What if the worst thing *actually* happens?”

What to Do

In this exercise, you will practice uncovering core beliefs. Answer, “What does this mean about you?” as many times as needed. Use extra paper if necessary. Start by writing down a specific situation when you felt upset:

Identify one negative thought you had while the situation was happening, or immediately after it occurred:



What does this mean about you? _____



What does that mean about you? _____



What does that mean about you? _____



What does that mean about you? _____



What does that mean about you? _____



Core belief: _____

Did you uncover some untrue or incorrect assumptions about yourself during this exercise? Explain.

What does your core belief say about you? What are some ways you can address this? Be specific.

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
