

Article that appeared in the *California Therapist*, May, 2001

## **Everyone Knows You Can't Eliminate Fundamental Beliefs Quickly and Permanently Are You Sure?**

Many therapists probably would agree that a lot of our dysfunctional behavior and our negative feelings can be traced to our beliefs. Beliefs such as "I'm not good enough"; "I'm powerless"; " Relationships don't work"; and "Life is difficult."

There are even some therapists who would agree that, over time, these beliefs can be changed, resulting in significant improvements in a client's behavior and feelings. Various cognitive therapies operate successfully out of this premise.

There are probably very few therapists, however, who would agree that it is possible to quickly and permanently eliminate any of our beliefs, especially those fundamental beliefs we formed about ourselves as a child. One prominent psychologist went so far as to tell me flatly: "Anyone who claims to be able to totally eliminate a belief quickly is a fraud."

Nonetheless, an intervention exists that does just that. I developed it sixteen years ago and call it the Decision Maker<sup>®</sup> Process. There is anecdotal evidence that it has been effective with well over 1,000 clients who presented a wide variety of mental health problems. In addition, a controlled research study with incarcerated felons has provided statistical significant evidence regarding its efficacy in improving self-esteem.

Before describing exactly how this intervention works, let's briefly review the relationship between beliefs and behavior. The ability to eliminate fundamental beliefs is useful only if they significantly influence behavior and feelings.

**Beliefs Determine Behavior** What do we mean when we say we believe something? ... That it's true. A belief is nothing more or less than a statement about reality that we think is "*the truth*". Our beliefs, conscious or not, determine how we behave. They influence what we think and feel. They shape what we perceive. It is incredibly difficult to make permanent changes in our lives without first eliminating the beliefs that have caused our lives to be the way they are.

As an illustration of how our beliefs determine our behavior, assume we believed that *If I make a mistake I'll get into trouble*. Although this belief does not necessitate any *specific* behavior, it would limit our behavior at work to *that which is consistent with that belief*, for example,

- not taking any chances at all;
- going "by the book" or doing exactly what we did yesterday;

- usually asking our boss what to do, so if something goes wrong it will be possible to blame her;
- being more concerned with assigning blame for a mistake than in getting to and correcting its source; or
- being very defensive when a mistake is pointed out and not acknowledging it.

Behavior that is inconsistent with that belief—such as, being open to and welcoming correction, taking risks, challenging the prevailing wisdom about anything, expressing your own opinions—would be inhibited and highly unlikely to occur. Much of the time we can deal successfully with life by utilizing the behavior that is consistent with our beliefs. For example, in some workplaces and in many other areas of life it is possible to be relatively successful if we "go by the book" and never take chances. From time to time, however, the behavior that is required to solve a problem or get what we want from life literally is not possible given our beliefs. For example, consider a business executive who believed that making mistakes would be inimical to her success. If she suddenly was facing a period of significant change, where most of what used to be effective wasn't effective anymore, the behavior available to her that was consistent with her belief (namely, tried and true, "what worked yesterday" behavior) might not be sufficient to manage her organization successfully. If she did not recognize that she had a belief that was limiting her, however, she would continue to keep trying harder and harder to find a solution using behavior that was consistent with her beliefs—even though that behavior could not lead to a solution. During a research study with incarcerated felons that tested the efficacy of the Decision Maker<sup>®</sup> Process, the subjects reported a number of "undesirable" behavior patterns, including the following. They clearly show the relationship between beliefs and behavior.

Pattern: I am nervous around people. I have to watch my back. I joined a gang for protection.

Beliefs: People will blackmail you if they can. Most people aren't trustworthy. The world's a dangerous place to be. The way to survive is to do what you got to do, get them before they get you. The way to survive is to join a gang.

Pattern: I disrespect others and I want to stop that. I make fun of people, "rank" on them. I pick on people. I bully people. I push them. I feel negative feelings toward people, critical, and act badly toward them. I don't like that feeling but feel I can't change me.

Beliefs: I'm not good. Whatever I do don't [sic.] matter. There's something wrong with me. I'm not deserving. The way to be okay is to make others look and feel dumb, stupid and dirty.

Pattern: Violence with women and others. Threaten people with a gun and shoot people. When I feel that people disrespect me, make me feel like a fool, like I'm nobody, I get mad. Then I get violent.

Beliefs: I don't matter. People who make you feel bad should be punished. The way

to punish people is to make them feel pain.

### **Beliefs Underlie Emotional Problems**

Beliefs not only cause dysfunctional behavior, they also underlie most undesirable feelings. For example, the beliefs "People can't be trusted" and "People will hurt me" would almost always lead someone to be uncomfortable around people. It would be difficult to permanently alleviate a client's discomfort around people without eliminating these beliefs.

My associates and I have assisted clients to find and eliminate the beliefs that were the source of a wide variety of feelings and emotions, including sadness, anxiety, guilt, anger, and fear.

**Eliminating Beliefs Creates New Possibilities** The elimination of a belief creates new possibilities for action that literally didn't exist prior to the elimination of the belief. The new possibilities that are created by disappearing a belief are not merely different or better ways of doing what was possible before; they literally are possibilities for entirely different behavior that is not possible until the old belief is eliminated.

For example, one woman kept getting into relationships in which she was emotionally and physically abused. She knew better and kept saying she would never do it again. Yet, she kept getting attracted to and involved with such men. Eventually she found and eliminated such beliefs as "I'm powerless"; "I'm worthless"; "I'm not loveable"; "No one could possibly want me"; "I'm nothing"; "I'm bad"; "Other people's needs are more important than my own"; "I'm not important"; and "My feelings don't count." She stopped her involvement with abusive men and then later met and married an extremely kind and gentle man, with whom she has now lived happily for over two years. To summarize what we have seen thus far: Given any specific belief, certain behavior is consistent and almost inevitable; other behavior is inconsistent and virtually impossible to exhibit (or at least to sustain for long) without considerable, unrelenting effort. And eliminating beliefs creates new possibilities.

**Description of the Decision Maker® Process** If our lives are ultimately a reflection of our beliefs, the obvious question is: How can long-held, fundamental beliefs be eliminated? That question leads us to an examination of the Decision Maker® Process, which enables people to do precisely that. The DM Process begins with the client describing an undesirable pattern of behavior or feelings that he has been trying unsuccessfully to change. Feeling patterns could include fear, hostility, shyness, anxiety, depression, or worrying about what people think of us. Behavioral patterns could include phobias, relationships that never seem to work, violence, procrastination, unwillingness to confront people, an inability to express our feelings, sexual dysfunction, or anti-social behavior. One client presented the following undesirable pattern: "I can do enough to get by, but I don't apply myself completely to one thing. I always feel as though I haven't done enough, both at home and at work. Wherever I am, I should be someplace else, doing something else. I never do a good enough job. Sometimes I'm satisfied with what I do, but I never have a sense of a real completion. Never any rest." I responded by pointing out that people frequently explain their behavior by

pointing to a cause other than themselves, such as, their spouse, their boss, the economy, or some other "circumstances." I requested that the client assume that the source of our behavior and feelings is our beliefs, not anything in reality. Many clients already agree that their beliefs have this power, but agreement is not required for the DM Process to be effective. One must, however, be willing accept that idea for the duration of the session. I then asked the client what he believed, at the moment, that logically could account for the current, undesirable pattern that he just had just presented to me. This step is not the same as asking the client "why" he acts as he does. Most people either will say they have no idea why they do what they do, or they will come up with a multitude of reasons. A client's "story," interpretations, and analysis are not at all relevant in the DM Process. This step is designed to elicit one or more beliefs (that he probably was not conscious of before the DM Process began) that logically would manifest as his undesirable pattern. One belief that this client discovered is *I'm not good enough*. This belief at least partially explains why he never had a sense of doing a good job, of really being satisfied with whatever he did. In other words, the pattern is the result of the belief(s), and it would be virtually impossible to permanently change the pattern as long as the belief(s) existed. (There were several other beliefs and all of them had to be eliminated before the pattern disappeared totally.) Once the belief is identified, the client is asked to say the words of the belief out loud to confirm that he actually does hold this belief. Then, the client is asked to look for the earliest circumstances or events that led him to form the belief. Fundamental beliefs about life and about oneself—for example, self-esteem-type beliefs—usually are formed before the age of six. For the most part they are based on interactions with our parents and other primary caretakers, if any. Beliefs in other areas of life, such as, work and society, are formed at the time those areas of life are encountered.

Although the client usually can identify the relevant early events in five or ten minutes, at times he spends as much as half an hour recalling various events from his childhood. At some point he identifies the *pattern of events* that led him to form the belief in question. My experience with over 1,000 clients indicates that beliefs rarely are formed based on only one or two events. Usually a great many similar events are required.

When I asked this particular client the source of his belief, he described a childhood in which his mother was always telling him what to do and what not to do. Nothing he ever did was good enough for her. He never received any praise and was criticized a lot.

**Don't Invalidate a Client's Beliefs** The next step is to have the client realize that his current belief was, in fact, a reasonable interpretation of his childhood circumstances and that most children probably would have reached a similar conclusion, given their experience and knowledge at that time in their life. Our beliefs are almost always a reasonable explanation for the events we observe at the time we observe them. Thus the client is never told that his beliefs are irrational or wrong. The client then is asked to make up some *additional* interpretations of, or meanings for, the same earlier circumstances, that he hadn't thought of at the time. In other words, the client as a child observed his mother doing and saying various things over a long period of time. The meaning he gave to the events was *I'm not good enough*. What the client is asked to do in the session is make up additional meanings or interpretations of his mother's behavior. To continue the illustration we've been using, other reasonable interpretations of his mother's behavior could include:

- My mother thought I wasn't good enough, but she was wrong.
- I wasn't good enough as a child, but I might be when I grow up.
- I wasn't good enough by my mother's standards, but I might be by the standards of others.
- My mother is a very critical person and would act that way with everyone, whether they were good enough or not.
- My mother's behavior with me had nothing to do with whether I was good enough or not; it was a function of my mother's beliefs from her childhood.
- My mother's behavior with me had nothing to do with whether I was good enough or not; it was a function of my mother's parenting style.

Each of these statements is as reasonable a meaning for his mother's behavior as the one he come up with as a child. The point here is not to convince the client that his belief is unreasonable, it's for him to realize that there are many different meanings, each one of which is logically consistent with the events he experienced.

Next the client is asked if, when he formed the belief as a child, it seemed as if he could see in the world that *I'm not good enough*. Because it feels as if we "discovered" or "viewed" our beliefs in the world, the answer is always, yes. It seemed to the client that every time his mother criticized him or failed to praise something he was proud of, he could "see" that he wasn't good enough. He was so certain that his belief was out in the world to be seen that he said to me, "If you were there in my house, you would have seen it too."

The distinction you want the client to get is between the events of his childhood, which have no inherent meaning, and the meaning he attributed to the events. The principles that underlie this distinction are: Events have no inherent meaning. There's no meaning in the world. All meaning is in our minds. All beliefs are merely the meaning we assign to events.

The way to get the client to make that distinction is to then ask: "Is it clear, right now, that you never saw the belief in the world?"

In other words, you want the client to realize that he never did see that *I'm not good enough*. All he really saw was his mother's statements and behaviors. *I'm not good enough* was only one interpretation of the events he actually did see.

After the client realized that he never really did see his belief in the world, I asked: "If you didn't see *I'm not good enough* in the world, where has it been all these years?" He pointed to his head and replied: "In my mind."

**Beliefs Literally Disappear** When we recognize that something we have held as a belief (*the* truth) is, in fact, only one of several alternative meanings of what actually occurred (*a* truth), and when we realize that we never saw the belief in the world—it ceases to exist as a belief. It literally disappears. Remember, a belief is a statement about reality that we think is *the* truth. When it gets transformed into *a* truth, it is no longer a belief and no longer runs our

lives. When the belief disappears, there is usually an observable change in clients' bodies and demeanor. They look (and usually report that they feel) lighter, as if they had been relieved of a heavy burden. When they are asked to repeat the words of the belief, they say that they no longer believe it, that the words of the belief sound empty and meaningless to them. There is a clear difference between the experience of saying the belief at this point compared to when it was first identified.

**Distinguish Between the Creator and the Creation** At this point I ask the client to notice that his life has been consistent with his belief—even though it never really was the truth. He grasps that his life hasn't been consistent with the truth about him; his life has been consistent with his belief, with whatever meaning he "made up" to understand the earlier events. The client comes to realize that if someone had helped him when he was forming the belief to see the additional interpretations he has just named, and he had gone into life with an interpretation other than the one he actually did form, his life would have been consistent with that belief. In other words, the client experiences that he creates his beliefs and his beliefs determine his life—which makes him the creator of his life.

The client discovers that he ultimately is not the sum total of his beliefs, along with the behavior and feelings that accompany those beliefs—he is the creator of those beliefs. He is not merely a "creation," he also is the "creator" of the creation. Here is how to facilitate that realization: Assist the client to realize that there had to be an "interpreter" before there could be an "interpretation"; a belief creator before there could be a belief. In other words, who you really are is not your beliefs; you are that which generated the beliefs. You are not your decisions; you are the "decision maker"—which is why I have named the intervention the Decision Maker<sup>®</sup> Process. After the client makes the distinction between himself as a creator and a creation, I ask what his experience is, right now, as the creator of his life. The answer virtually every client gives is some variation of: calm, serene, peaceful, infinite possibilities, no limitations, whole, complete, alive, powerful, and nothing missing. He appears to enter an non-ordinary state of consciousness in which he experiences that anything is possible and that he has no limitations. Although this transformational experience that clients report during DM sessions goes away following the session, clients state that it becomes increasingly real and becomes experienced as a part of their life following a number of DM sessions. They start to view their life as, what the Buddhists call, a "silent witness." They "have" upsets; they are not upset. They "have" pain; they are not in pain. They observe barriers in their lives; they usually are not stopped. In other words, they do not experience themselves as the story of their lives; they experience themselves as the creator of their lives.

**A Brief Summary of the Decision Maker<sup>®</sup> Process** As a result of doing the DM Process we discover that the events and circumstances of our lives, as such, have virtually no effect later in life on our behavior, our attitudes, and our emotions. The *meaning* we assign to what happens, on the other hand, has a profound effect. Therefore, by changing our interpretation of what happened, we can radically change the effect of past events on our present and future life. To sum up what occurs for us when we use the DM Process to change our

behavior and beliefs: We recognize that the belief that is responsible for the current, undesirable behavioral or emotional pattern is nothing more than one arbitrary, but valid, meaning of what actually occurred earlier in life. When it is clear that we never saw the belief in the world, the belief becomes transformed into just one of many arbitrary meanings, at which point it literally disappears as *the* truth.

I want to stress that the essence of the Decision Maker® Process is not merely getting rid of beliefs and changing our behavior and feelings. Equally as important is creating ourselves as the creator of our beliefs and—because our beliefs determine our behavior, emotions, and perceptions of reality—as the creator of our lives.

The DM Process ultimately is more spiritual than psychotherapeutic. By spiritual I mean a sense of ourselves as beyond or distinct from who we normally think we are, namely, our body, our beliefs, and the behavior and feelings that stem from our beliefs. The DM Process appears to be a cognitive gateway to a non-ordinary state of consciousness in which we create and then experience ourselves as alright just the way we are, as whole and complete, as calm and serene, with unlimited possibilities and no restrictions outside of ourselves, and with nothing missing.

**The Difference Between the DM Process and Cognitive Therapies** When therapists are first told about the DM Process, they usually respond by saying: “That sounds like cognitive therapy.” Although there are some similarities, the differences are even greater.

Cognitive therapies, as I understand them, have two major elements: (1) changing beliefs by challenging the validity of the evidence that the client gives to support them and (2) getting the client to agree to act consistently with an alternative belief to test its possible validity. Regarding point one, in the DM Process the current belief is not given up because one comes to see that it's wrong, because it's not true, because it's illogical, because it doesn't make sense, and/or because it's self-defeating. In other words, one does not get “talked out” of the existing belief. The DM Process actually *validates* people for forming the belief earlier in life by assisting them to realize that most people probably would have made a similar interpretation under similar circumstances. It insures that people realize that their belief actually is one valid meaning of their earlier circumstances. Moreover, the “evidence” that people offer for a belief usually is not the real reason they believe it. The evidence offered usually consists of *recent* observations that appear to substantiate the belief. The real source of one's beliefs, however, is interpretations of circumstances earlier in life. After a belief has been formed, however, one acts consistently with it—thereby producing “current evidence” for the already-existing belief. In other words, life becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Because the evidence one presents to validate one's beliefs usually is a *consequence* of the beliefs, not their source, challenging the validity of that evidence is not the most effective way to eliminate them. Regarding the second element of cognitive-behavioral therapy, because the current belief is totally eliminated when you do the DM Process, one has no need to *try to* act differently when one goes back “into life.” One's behavior changes naturally and effortlessly once the belief is gone.

Finally, there is no significant spiritual element in cognitive therapy.

**Where's the Evidence?** Since I created the Decision Maker® Process in 1985, my associates and I at the Decision Maker® Institute have conducted at least five thousand DM sessions with well over a thousand clients. Probably a quarter of these sessions have been held over the telephone with clients throughout the world. We also have used a variation of the DM Process with over ten thousand employees in group sessions at roughly forty organizations to assist the organizations to change their day-to-day operations and the employees to change their job behavior.

From these sessions we have accumulated a massive amount of anecdotal evidence that the DM Process has been effective in resolving a wide variety of serious psychological issues, including anxiety, drug and alcohol addiction, ADD, bulimia, phobias, the inability to leave abusive relationships, anger and hostility, and guilt. It also has successful with such everyday issues as worrying about what people think of you, workaholism, the feeling that nothing you do is ever good enough, procrastination, and the inability to express feelings. A research study with incarcerated felons in 1994 used a control group and pre- and post-testing. The results provided statistically significant evidence to validate the anecdotal evidence. As Dr. Lee Sechrest, Professor of Psychology at the University of Arizona and my collaborator on the study, concluded after examining the statistical results of the tests: "The simplest, and we think fairly compelling conclusion, is that the intervention resulted in generally favorable changes in self-concept in the Experimental group and that without intervention, self-concepts would likely have deteriorated during confinement....

"All in all, this little experiment has to be regarded as a fairly remarkable success. Certainly it justifies efforts to carry out further testing to determine whether the changes observed can be dependably produced. If they can, the DM Process could have definite promise in helping young male offenders mend their ways."

Sheila Pakula, C.S.W., A.C.S.W., who conducted post-study interviews with each member of the experimental group, had this to say: "The Decision Maker® Process released past beliefs and opened new doors for me [personally] . Most exciting was my experience interviewing a group of incarcerated felons, both teens and adults. ... The results were mind boggling. All of them expressed profound changes in both attitudes and beliefs."

I don't mean to suggest that the DM Process is a magic bullet that is appropriate for all clients and all problems. It is not meant to replace other effective interventions. It is, however, a very valuable additional tool that can significantly speed up the therapeutic process. During the past few years several licensed therapists have been trained to use the DM Process. After using it with their clients, here are evaluations from a few of them.

"The profound changes that have occurred in clients with whom I've used the Decision Maker® Process have awed them and me. I've seen phenomenal inter- and intra-psychoic change in them. What's most encouraging about the change is that it seems to be

immediately integrated into their lives. Moreover, it appears to be permanent.” Sara Stahle, M.F.C.C., Psychotherapist

“Learning how to use the Decision Maker® Process was much more valuable than graduate school.” Doug Warhit, M.F.C.C.

“The Decision Maker® Process has helped me personally become more assertive and a lot more confident. As a therapist, I used to sometimes get discouraged and wonder if I really knew what I was doing, when nothing I tried seemed to work. Now I use the DMP and see my clients make profound changes on a weekly basis. It really does quickly and permanently eliminate the beliefs that cause most of the problems my clients bring in.” Hilary Shaw, L.M.S.W.-A.C.P.

**Conclusion** Most people to whom I've spoken about the DM Process, whether they be psychologists or nonprofessionals, who have tried to change their beliefs in therapy or on their own, have said it is impossible to permanently eliminate beliefs, much less in a short time. As I stated earlier, one noted psychologist called me “a fraud,” when I tried to tell him about the DM Process.

Given the experience of most therapists and others who have tried to disappear beliefs and failed, that is a reasonable conclusion. But let's look at a few other possibilities. Couldn't those countless experiences where beliefs didn't change at all or the behavior change didn't last have several other meanings? For example,

People have been confusing behavior and beliefs; for the most part, people have tried to change behavior, not beliefs.

Or, attempts to change behavior don't work unless the relevant beliefs have been changed first.

Or, the interventions that had been used to change beliefs didn't work, but that doesn't mean that there are no interventions that can possibly work.

Or, the people who have tried in the past did not succeed, but that doesn't mean that no one will ever be able to do it.

Or, it might be impossible to eliminate beliefs as long as people still think they “saw” their belief in the world, but that doesn't mean beliefs can't be permanently eliminated if people realize they didn't see their belief in the world.

Has anyone actually "seen" in the world that beliefs can't be quickly and permanently eliminated? Or is that belief merely one valid interpretation of the events that people have seen?

copyright ©2001 Morty Lefkoe

Steps of the Decision Maker® Process copyright © 1985-2001 Morty Lefkoe

Morty Lefkoe, founder of the Decision Maker® Institute (DMI) in Westport, CT, is the author of *Re-create Your Life: Transforming Yourself and Your World*. The book explains what the

Decision Maker<sup>®</sup> Process is, how it works, its spiritual implications, and how its principles can be applied to business and societal change, parenting, and health. It was published by Andrews and McMeel in 1997. More information about the DM Process can be found at [www.decisionmaker.com](http://www.decisionmaker.com). DMI offers courses in California that teach the basic Decision Maker<sup>®</sup> Process and its variations. The courses meet the qualifications for 15 hours of CEU for M.F.C.C.s. and L.C.S.W.s as required by the California Board of Behavioral Sciences.