# Challenge your Beliefs

Recognising limiting beliefs and reshaping them into empowering ones

ACTING | Optimism

## → What you will need:

- 12-20
- Collectively and in pairs, ideal setup is a U-shape
- 30 mins preparation
- 50 mins execution
- PowerPoint slides, paper, pens

## → Related Tools:

Adapting Response Patterns

Acting in Alignment

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"Help students recognise how their beliefs might limit their use of their strengths. Through guided reflection, they'll transform limiting beliefs into empowering alternatives."

**—Miranda Trippenzee & Hedwig Boer**

## I. Overview

Do you recognise this? Students who limit themselves with beliefs such as "I have no influence anyway" or "It has to be perfect"? These beliefs can have a paralysing effect and hinder the usage of students' full potential.

In this activity, students actively transform limiting beliefs into empowering ones. Students with their peers explore how such beliefs hinder their potential, reflect on how they can better use their strengths, and collaboratively develop powerful alternatives that motivate authentic action.

**Learning outcome**

- ✔ The student is able to become aware of their limiting beliefs, restricting their behaviour and potential, and reframe them into empowering beliefs

## II. Learning Activity

Students learn to recognise and reframe limiting beliefs, which can restrict their behaviour and potential, into more constructive and empowering perspectives.

### 1. Introducing Beliefs and their Limiting Character  ⏱ 10 mins

Before the session, prepare a set of limiting beliefs—students will not generate their own for this part of the activity. Mark a visible line on the floor (or establish an imaginary one) in the classroom.

To introduce the topic of beliefs and guide students in understanding their relevance and impact, begin by setting the context through a relatable example so students can connect the activity to the course theme. For instance, say: "When we discuss *[insert relevant course theme]*, it's clear that success often depends on human behaviour. But what beliefs might hinder us from fully using our abilities and qualities? Today, we'll focus on identifying limiting beliefs and transforming them into more empowering ones."

Explain the goals of today's session: (1) to become aware of your limiting beliefs, and (2) to transform a limiting belief into a more supportive belief that can empower your actions.

Briefly explain that limiting beliefs are thoughts that restrict our ability to use our strengths, and how they can affect students' ability to use their strengths. Share examples that are likely to resonate, such as "I'm not smart enough to succeed in this course", "I always fail when trying something new", or "I'm not creative enough to come up with good ideas".

These beliefs often develop as protective mechanisms to prevent discomfort or failure, but can become obstacles later in life when they hold us back from unleashing our potential. Emphasise that everyone has them, and that becoming aware of them is the first step to tapping into this potential.

> **Tip**: see the Limiting Beliefs handout for examples within the context of personal and professional development. Use the provided PowerPoint slides and theoretical background to support your explanation, showing visual examples or frameworks that illustrate the concepts clearly.

## 2. Identifying Limiting Beliefs  ⏲ 10-15 mins

Ask all students to stand on one side of the line in the classroom.

Explain the Crossing the Line activity: "I will read aloud a series of limiting beliefs. If a belief resonates with you, step silently across the line. Then, return to the starting side before I read the next one." During the activity, observe the students as they participate and maintain a calm, empathetic presence.

Debrief in plenary, using these questions to guide reflection:

- What did you experience during the activity?
- What thoughts, feelings or physical sensations came up?
- How did it feel to cross the line?
- What was it like to see others cross the line?

Select one or two beliefs for group reflection. Discuss how these could be limiting, not the origins of these beliefs, but focus on the experience of the activity.

Finally, invite students to choose one belief that resonated and write it down privately, for personal insight. Sharing is optional.

> **Tip**: ensure a safe and respectful learning environment by emphasising that anything shared during the activity will remain confidential within the classroom and that students can choose what they do or don't want to share. Highlight that anything written is for personal reflection and will not be collected or assessed.

### 3. Investigating Limiting Beliefs  🕐 20 mins

Pair up the class and assign roles: one speaker, one listener. Provide the following guiding questions for their conversation:

- When was this belief originally helpful?
- What would it mean if this belief were 100% true, always and everywhere?
- What strengths are you not fully using because of this limiting belief?
- What advice would you give a friend with this belief?

Explain that each speaker will have time to reflect on their chosen belief while the listener supports with these questions and allows space for thoughtful responses. After ten minutes, they switch roles. During the activity, circulate the room to observe and offer support as needed.

Afterwards, invite students to share any insights or breakthroughs from the exercise. Prompt further reflection with questions such as

- What did you learn about your belief that surprised you?
- Did this activity help you see your belief in a new way? If so, how?

### 4. Reformulating the Belief  🕐 20 mins

Now that the students have explored their limiting beliefs, it's time to identify a more helpful belief that encourages tapping into their potential and engaging in authentic action.

In this step, the students will create an alternative perspective they can rely on whenever the limiting belief arises, helping them to act with more confidence and authenticity. For instance, the limiting belief 'I have no influence' can be reformulated into 'I can make a difference through small, consistent actions.'

Explain the guidelines for crafting a supportive belief:

- Address the same situation
- Encourage action
- Use positive language (avoid 'not')

- Keep it short and impactful
- Use the present tense
- Start with "I" to make it personal

Next, direct the students to write down their limiting belief, then cross it out on their paper — symbolically letting it go. Using the guidelines, they create a new, empowering belief. Move around the room to support and offer examples as needed.

Once the individual work is complete, pair students up to share their new beliefs. Instruct partners to offer constructive feedback on whether the belief feels:

- Authentic and believable
- Actionable and empowering
- Simple enough to recall in challenging moments

**Tip**: see the handout with examples of turning limiting beliefs into helpful ones.

## 5. Reality Check  ⓘ 20 mins

To encourage a reality check and meaningful reflective discussion, have students work in pairs to explore how they can put their new empowering beliefs into practice. Now that the students have reformulated their beliefs, it's time to think about how they can apply them in real life and how they can support their actions effectively.

Together with their partners, the students reflect on situations where their new beliefs can come into play and come up with concrete ways to keep them at the top of mind. Ask each pair to take turns responding to these reflective prompts:

- In which situations will you apply your new belief?
- What part of your potential does this belief help you unlock?
- What will help you remember and apply it in real life? (e.g., a sticky note on your door or laptop as a reminder)
- How confident do you feel acting from this new belief, even in uncertain or challenging situations?
- In what way does this belief help you maintain a hopeful and constructive outlook when things get difficult?

Give students five minutes for this exchange, ensuring that both partners have a turn as the speaker and the listener.

Afterwards, bring the class back together for a final round-up. Form a circle and invite each student to share their new empowering belief with the group. Ask them to briefly explain how it will help them act more authentically and positively in challenging situations.

Encourage students to listen actively and offer each other recognition or encouragement. This closing activity reinforces the mindset shift and inspires students with each other's insights and strategies.

**Tip:** consider inviting students to briefly visualise themselves acting from their new belief: "Imagine yourself in a real situation where this belief applies. What do you do differently now? What might be the outcome if you act from this new perspective?"

## III. Assessment

The final group circle (Step 5) provides an opportunity for both students and the teacher to assess whether each student has identified a limiting belief and formulated a meaningful alternative. In the preceding peer reflection, students evaluate how their new belief supports empowered action. This two-part reflection enables both students and the teacher to assess (1) the student's awareness of their limiting belief and the potential it previously restricted and (2) the extent to which they've developed an alternative belief that supports authentic, empowered action.

### Purpose
Assessment *for* learning (formative assessment) aims to gather evidence and provide feedback on students' learning during the learning process. Assessment *as* learning aims to strengthen the learning process and the development of metacognitive skills. It empowers students to direct their own learning and to become independent, critical self-assessors.

### Roles
Self-assessment & peer assessment
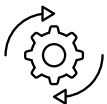
### Characteristics
Self-regulated learning & Authentic

### Materials
Reflective questions

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### Peer reflection

Work in pairs. Take turns asking your partner the following reflective questions about their new belief:

● In which situations will you apply your new belief?

● What part of your potential does this belief help you unlock?

● What will help you remember and apply it in real life? (e.g. a sticky note, a symbol, a daily reminder)

● How confident do you feel acting from this new belief, even in uncertain or challenging situations?

● In what way does this belief help you maintain a hopeful and constructive outlook when things get difficult?

Make sure to switch roles so both partners get the chance to reflect and respond.

## Assessment

**Group reflection**

As a group, share your reflections on the exercise by using the following guiding questions:

- What was your limiting belief? How did it hold you back?

- What is your new, supportive belief?

- How does this belief help you stay hopeful and confident about making a difference in your personal life or the world around you?

## IV. Key Advice

Working with beliefs can be emotionally intense, as it often touches on the core aspects of a person's identity. Be mindful of this. Focus your questions on the experience of the activity itself and how a particular belief may be limiting, rather than exploring its origins or personal history. **Seven golden guidelines to create a safe learning environment** (Step 1) can be downloaded below.

The **theoretical background** (Step 1), a **list of potentially limiting beliefs** (Steps 1 and 2), and **examples of reformulating limiting beliefs** (Step 4) can be downloaded below.

## Key Advice

**Seven golden guidelines to create a safe learning environment**
Creating a safe and inclusive learning environment is an ongoing process. By implementing these guidelines, you can foster open communication, a sense of belonging and collective learning:

**1. Set clear expectations**
Clearly communicate your expectations and routines from the beginning. Ensure that students understand what behaviour is acceptable and what is not. Encourage them to participate in creating these expectations, promoting a sense of ownership and responsibility.

**2. Build trust**
Establish a trustworthy and secure environment by emphasising that anything shared within the group should remain confidential. Encourage students to make their own decisions about sharing personal experiences and respect their individual levels of comfort.

**3. Foster active listening**
Emphasise the importance of truly listening and understanding. Foster an environment where students feel free to express themselves without fear of judgment or criticism and discourage interruptions. Strengthen active listening skills by teaching non-verbal cues and using prompts.

**4. Encourage empathy**
Encourage students to consider the feelings and experiences of others and to respond with kindness, acceptance and understanding, even when perspectives differ from their own. Foster an inclusive and respectful environment where empathy is valued and embraced as an essential aspect of communication and mutual understanding.

**5. Be a role model**
Lead by example and embody the behaviour you expect from your students. Treat all students with respect, fairness and kindness, and appreciate their diverse backgrounds, individual strengths and contributions. Ensure the safety and well-being of all students by promptly and decisively addressing any form of harassment or discrimination. Reflect on mistakes and offer apologies when necessary.

### 6. Adapt the pace and intensity

Recognise when emotions escalate and become overwhelming, adjusting the pace or intensity of the activity as necessary. For example, implement the "five-minute rule", where each student can express their controversial view in a respectful manner, or offer a short break for students to journal and reflect on their emotions, enabling them to regulate their feelings.

### 7. Follow up and check-in

Encourage students to reflect on the impact of the experience on themselves as well as the group. Provide individual or group follow-up and inquire about the well-being of students. Offer the opportunity for further discussion or support if needed. If you believe that the emotional intensity or well-being of the students exceeds your expertise, do not hesitate to seek advice from a student advisor, mental health professional or the appropriate support services provided by your institution.

## Key Advice

**Theoretical background: Understanding limiting beliefs**

**What are limiting beliefs?**
Limiting beliefs are thoughts or opinions that constrain us in some way. They are often unconscious and can significantly impact how we make decisions, interact with others and approach challenges. These beliefs typically operate as "truths" about ourselves, others or the world that restrict our potential.

**Origins of limiting beliefs**
Every person acquires beliefs about themselves throughout their life. These beliefs often function as self-protection mechanisms. For example, developing the belief "I have no influence anyway" might occur after experiences where teachers or authority figures did not listen to your ideas. Not voicing opinions would then protect you from rejection and disappointment.

**How limiting beliefs operate**
The challenge arises when we encounter new situations in which the conclusions we have drawn and the strategies we developed no longer serve us well. At this point, these 'beliefs' become limiting.
For example:
- Someone who believes "I have no influence" may be hindered from acting upon ideas and personal values, preventing them from enacting positive changes.
- Beliefs that limit collaboration, such as "They won't take me seriously anyway," can have a paralysing effect when someone is asked for their opinion.

**The nature of limiting beliefs**
A limiting belief is an incorrect conclusion about how reality works or what you can expect from a certain situation. It is an opinion that has not been tested against the current reality. By consciously paying attention to your beliefs, you gain insight into how they work and can get a better grip on your limiting beliefs, reducing their control over you. The problem is not that we have limiting beliefs. The problem is that we believe them.

**The protective function of beliefs**
Beliefs or limiting beliefs are not necessarily 'bad.' Everyone has them and they often stem from a positive experience or intention. For example, you may have acquired the belief "I must not make mistakes" from the intention "I would like to do well." You were probably praised for delivering good work. However, the belief "I must not make

mistakes" is not helpful in every situation. It can, for example, hinder learning and development, which naturally involves making mistakes.

### In the context of societal challenges

When addressing major societal challenges such as climate change, inequality and the energy transition, the key to success often lies in human behaviour. There is frequent resistance to behaviour change in these contexts, and limiting beliefs play a significant role in this resistance.

In situations that require socially responsible or environmentally friendly actions, specific limiting beliefs often emerge, such as:

- "I don't have any influence on my own"
- "Big companies are responsible, not individuals"
- "The problem is too big for my contribution to matter"

These thoughts that surface are beliefs we hold that become particularly limiting in contexts of social responsibility. They can paralyse us, making us feel like we cannot take action.

The goal of identifying and addressing these beliefs is to transform them into more "helpful beliefs" that are more likely to lead to behavioural activation. Ideally, these new empowering beliefs will become the automatic thoughts that emerge when facing similar situations in the future.

### From limiting to helpful beliefs

Limiting beliefs have a paralysing effect—they create inaction, hesitation and (self)doubt. By contrast, helpful beliefs energise and motivate action. The process of transforming limiting beliefs into helping ones involves:

1. Recognition of the limiting belief
2. Understanding its origins and function
3. Testing its validity in the current context
4. Reformulating it into an empowering alternative
5. Reinforcing the new belief through action

### Theoretical foundations

This approach to understanding and working with limiting beliefs draws from several established psychological frameworks:

1. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT): Focuses on identifying and challenging distorted thought patterns that influence behaviour and emotions.

2.  Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP): Examines the connection between neurological processes, language, and behavioural patterns, offering techniques to reframe limiting beliefs.
3.  Growth Mindset Theory (Carol Dweck): Distinguishes between fixed mindset (believing abilities are static) and growth mindset (believing abilities can be developed).
4.  Self-Efficacy Theory (Albert Bandura): Explores how one's belief in their ability to succeed influences how they approach challenges.

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List of potential limiting beliefs in the context of professional development:

- It has to be perfect
- I want to be liked
- Never mind, no one will listen to me anyway
- I'm not going to succeed
- I'm not good enough
- I don't know how to handle it
- I have to prove myself
- I am responsible for everything
- I have to go faster
- I have no influence
- I should avoid criticism
- I need to stay in control
- I must not make mistakes
- If I work hard enough, I will succeed
- ……

## Key Advice

**Examples of turning limiting beliefs into helpful ones**

| Limiting belief | Helpful belief |
|---|---|
| It has to be perfect | I'm fine just as I am<br><br>Good is good enough |
| I won't be able to do it | I have confidence in myself<br><br>I can do this<br><br>I trust my abilities |
| I have to be friendly/I want to be liked | I value myself<br><br>I can be myself<br><br>You and I are both okay, even if we don't agree |
| Never mind, no one will listen to me anyway | I take myself seriously<br><br>My input is valuable<br><br>I matter<br><br>I have confidence in myself |
| I'm not good enough | I'm good the way I am<br><br>I matter<br><br>I have confidence in myself |
| I don't know how to handle it | I have confidence in myself<br><br>I can do this<br><br>I trust my abilities<br><br>I trust my intuition |
| I have to prove myself | I'm fine just as I am |
| I am responsible for everything | I can let go<br><br>I trust others |

| | |
|---|---|
| I have to be faster | I do what I can<br><br>Every step counts |
| I have no influence | I have influence<br><br>I matter and can make a difference<br><br>I can persuade people<br><br>I shape my own life |
| I should avoid criticism | I can be myself<br><br>I am open to feedback and learn from it<br><br>I stand by my opinion<br><br>I am eager to learn |
| I need to stay in control | I can let go<br><br>I have confidence<br><br>I give myself space to discover<br><br>I open up<br><br>I trust the right thing will happen |
| I must not make mistakes | I'm allowed to make mistakes<br><br>I'm fine just as I am<br><br>I'm doing my best, and that's enough<br><br>Mistakes are a valuable opportunity to learn |
| I work hard enough, I will succeed | I can relax<br><br>I trust my instincts<br><br>I do what I can, and that's enough<br><br>I have succeeded |

## V. References

This tool was developed in co-creation with Margreet Smit.
https://www.linkedin.com/in/margreet-smit-64181a109/

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