



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.