

Week 4 Video 9 How Beliefs Are Formed

Ever wondered how beliefs are formed? Well, I certainly wonder about that all the time. The truth is, a belief is simply a thought that we have over and over and over and eventually it forms a belief. And I'm talking about a belief about ourselves. For example, my belief growing up and probably still today honestly is that, "I was fat" and this belief formed when I was really young.

My father, when I was 11 years old, I recall him telling me I had to lose some weight and I remember going to summer camp that year and refusing to wear a two-piece bathing suit because I was overweight. When I looked back on those photographs, I was a normal kid. I wasn't overweight, I wasn't underweight. This was a suggestion that my father had and that suggestion in my mind turned into a "Oh, I'm fat" after he said I needed to lose a few pounds.

Well, when I had that thought, the next thing I did is only wore single tank bathing suits, then as I continued to get older and older, my mind started searching for proof that I was heavy and I was fat and it started a long, long trend of dieting, of bulimia, of restrictive calories for, I think, two months. I remember eating 400 calories a day. I limited myself for 400 calories a day, so I could get down to 112 pounds. And I think I was about 116 when I started and that was around 8th grade. And all I ate pretty much every day for two months was masa with mayonnaise on it which sounds really totally disgusting doesn't it? But at that time, nutritional facts weren't available on foods and those were the only two foods that I was able to look at the calories. So remember, we also didn't have the internet either. Kind of a crazy way, we didn't know what we do now about nutrition or at least I certainly didn't as a young teenager.

So over time, that thought became a belief, "I'm fat, I'm fat, I'm fat" and as a result of me saying "I'm fat, I'm fat, I'm fat," my subconscious mind, which doesn't have a judgment, will do exactly what I say, just said, "Okay, you're fat, you're fat, you're fat" and over time I became fat. And it was really a suggestion that I was continuing to give myself even though the truth is, is that it was a belief and I did not want to be fat but that's how I viewed myself.

So beliefs are formed in lots of different ways. Most of the beliefs that we have are formed when we're young and there's always exceptions to this rule and I want to share a story about a friend of mine and this is a true story.

She's 38 years old and she's an attorney. She's also a vet tech, Vassar undergrad, Villanova Law School, smart person. She's really smart. One day, we went out to lunch. It was about a year ago and she had quit her law job because it was so incredibly stressful working with the DA in Philadelphia. We're having lunch, she said, "I have to leave exactly at 1 o'clock. I have to go to Bryn Mawr because I've got to talk to my math tutor." In fact, she said, "Really, I have to get a math tutor and I have to talk to her." And I said, "A math tutor?" I said, "Didn't you just tell me that you just got an A on your chemistry exam for your vet tech certification?" She goes, "Yeah, but I have a math disability." I looked at her, I said, "You have a what?" She said, "I have a math disability." I said, "Gosh I've never heard of that." I said, "What's it about?" She said, "When I was in 4th grade, I was struggling with my math homework, and my mom came over to help me and my mom saw that I was struggling, and she said, you know, I struggled a lot too with math." And as a result, she kept on struggling with math, the young 4th grader. And as she kept on struggling with math, her math grades went down and down and it was really really hard for her.

Well, just hearing her mother say, "Oh I struggled with math" a 4th grader can think, "Oh, well you struggled with math. It must be hard. It must be difficult." Well, within a year, the mom took the daughter and they went to see a school psychologist who tested her and said to the mom she's got a math disability. She needs extra help.

Okay. Now, I don't really think there's anything in the DSM manual about math disability. Maybe the psychologist needed that for billing. I have no idea. What happened was the young girl went for help after school. She had a math tutor. During math test she was permitted by the school to have another half an hour to finish her tests. This went on through middle school and through high school and she continued to believe she had a math disability, and she took advantage, because of her math disability, of that extra time to take the test. So, after lunch she says goodbye, she goes to Bryn Mawr to talk to the math tutor.

I had lunch with her the next week, and I said, "How was it?" And she said, "Well, it's kind of funny." She said, "They gave me an initial test to take. They wanted to know what my skills were." She said, "I looked at the test, she said it looked like it was written in a foreign language. It looked like it was Greek." She said, "I closed my eyes. I calmed myself down and I opened my eyes and looked at it and all the numbers were right. It all made sense." And she said, "I took the exam." About 15 minutes later, the math tutor comes out of the room with a piece of paper in her hand and says to her, "I just graded this. she said you got everything right" and Julia goes, "But that's not possible because I have a math disability."

So in the face of reality, she got everything right, she's gone through undergrad, graduate school, past the chemistry exam, which I don't know about you, but chemistry is math and in the face of reality, she still has a math disability.

You can see how things get formed. Now, her sister, who is fine in math may never have struggled, may have never heard mom say, "Oh it's really I struggled just like you." One of the questions that I frequently get from my clients is how did that happen and why did I get this problem and my sibling didn't? Well, I have no idea. There is nobody who has a real answer to this, and if you have an answer, that would be great. But I do know that when we're younger is when we begin to form these beliefs about ourselves. And when we're younger, we don't have the adult tools and mechanisms to say, "Oh well, maybe I'm just struggling, maybe my mom struggled, maybe I'm not so bad as I think I am. Let me see how things go." No. We listen to the adults in our life. We listen to clergy, people on television, friends, and hearing what they say about us helps us form our beliefs.

Here's another example that I want to share with you and this has to do with fears and of course, a fear is a belief, simply a thought that we've had over and over and over again, for example, the fear of driving over bridges.

Young Mary, when she was little, she would sit in the kitchen do her homework and she'd listen to her mom with half an ear, but not too often because she's only a little kid. But her mom had a major fear, a major phobia of driving over bridges. It terrified her and as a result, her mom couldn't drive different places, and she could drive from the Philadelphia area but she couldn't go to New Jersey because you had to cross the river, the Delaware River, and she had to go over a bridge and she could not do that. It was not possible. Whenever they went to the shore, her dad always drove and the mom kind of clenched her fists close to her eyes, so this little girl from an early age knew that her mom was frightened of driving over bridges. She would hear her mother on the phone and say, "Sorry we can't go to that birthday party because I don't drive over bridges. Sorry we can't do that. Bridges are scary to me" and she'd be on the phone, bridges are scary and here's this little girl and she's beginning to hear at a subconscious level, okay, because kids are kind of in their imagination all the time and things get into that subconscious when we're younger. That gate, remember that gate from that image that I drew way back in one of the earlier lessons. The gates open, things get into our mind and she began to form this belief that "Well, if my momma says bridges are scary" there must be something frightening about this, so I need to avoid bridges too." And that's why a little kid thinks and that's the way our subconscious mind at that time thinks because this part is kind of in a time warp of like 5- or 8-year-old and she grows up and nothing really ever happens.

She gets her driver's license and she drives over a bridge about six months after she gets her driver's license and halfway through, her heart starts pounding, her knees start knocking, her hands start sweating and she finally gets herself over the bridge and she is almost hyperventilating in terror. She has no idea, no idea why because bridges have been fine. All those old memories back when she was a little kid wasn't really connecting with her in any way. And so, for the next three or four years, she drives over bridges and she's terrified and it's really a struggle and then finally she says, "I can't do this anymore. It is too painful." A couple of years after that, somebody says, you know, why don't you go get some help from a hypnotherapist.

It's okay to be afraid of something terrifying like a lion running at you in the African jungle but fear of bridges is simply a fear that you can overcome and she comes to see me, and her big question was, "Why do I have this? Why do I have this?" And during the intake when I'm asking her lots of questions, one of the things I always remember to ask is when somebody has a fear is, "Do other people in your family also have this fear?" and she said oh yeah my mother and even her sister, they all this fear. And so what happened is the fear and that thought in her mind when she was little was kind of like a little seed that got planted back here in her subconscious mind. It had no reason to ever show up except when she went over the bridge when she was driving on her own something triggered that little fear, and boom, pops out of the ground affects every muscle, fiber, and bone in her body and she becomes terrified.

Most of the fears that people have, have their origin when they were young and frequently, many of them have the origin of family. I even had one woman who came to me early on and Valerie was a beautiful singer and she sang in one of the local church choirs and they asked her to do a solo during Christmas. She could sing but the thought of standing in front of the whole church doing a solo panicked her. When she came in and we talked about it, she indicated that she's really a good singer. She can sing with one or two friends when she sings in front of a group. And I actually asked her, I said, any idea where this came from? She said I have no idea. And it wasn't until the next session she came back, she said, "You know, I told you I had no idea but I remembered my parents also sang in their church choir and I remember a time where my mother and father were chatting and my mother said, 'No, I'm not going to sing a solo in front of the choir, in front of the whole church. There is no way I'm going to do it, that's scary to me.'" She said, "That was all? I said, "You may have heard other things that may have ended up causing you to believe that this was a really scary terrifying experience but you're only a little kid. You didn't have the adult tools to say, 'Well mom, you can have that fear. I'm going to choose to feel calm, relaxed, and comfortable every time I sing in front of a group.'"

Well, she actually did get over that and she has been singing ever since and she does solos and she gets hired by other churches. Imagine if she had to live with that fear, she wouldn't have grown and blossomed into that beautiful singer she is today.

Good questions to always ask when we're doing the intake and asking questions for our clients, "Anybody else in your family? Ask clients if they knew where it came from. Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't.

So, that is how most beliefs are formed. There you go.

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