**Identifying Core Beliefs – The Downward Arrow technique**

We’ve discussed becoming aware of, and challenging, our negative thoughts. But what if they are true? For example, you are asked to give a talk at a friend’s wedding. What if you are sure you’ll mess it up? What if you know you’ll get sweaty and stammer and forget what you are going to say? Wouldn’t that be terrible! Doesn’t that thought conjure up some of our terrors, and we know we have done poorly at this sort of thing before, so we KNOW it will be a disaster. With that thought in mind, imagine how enthusiastic you feel about your friends’ wedding. Are you looking forward to the day ... with joyous anticipation ... or with dread? Are you looking for fun things to say ... or somewhere to hide? How are you feeling physically? If you feel like that now, how will you feel on the day?

Do these thoughts help you to achieve your objective?

These thoughts are examples of “fortune-telling”, but of course sometimes they will turn out to be correct, in full or in part.

We can reduce the power of that thought by exploring the beliefs underlying the fear of that outcome.

We do this by repeatedly asking ourselves the question “what would happen if that were true?” or “what would that mean to you if that happened”? We call this process the ***vertical descent***, or the ***downward arrow*** because we are attempting to burrow down to the bottom-most belief.

We do this by writing the problem thought at the top of the page and we draw a downward arrow to the series of thoughts / events that are implied by the thought.

So we repeatedly ask ourselves the question “if my thought is true, why does it bother me? What would it make me think? What would happen next?”

For example, in the above context of being invited to give a talk at a friend’s wedding, I might find myself thinking:

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|  | I’m sure to mess it up, I just want to find a way out  *“if my thought is true, why does it bother me? What would it make me think? What would happen next?”* |
|  | I’ll get hot and flushed and stammer and forget what I’m wanting to say  *“if my thought is true, why does it bother me? What would it make me think? What would happen next?”* |
|  | I’ll look stupid in front of my friends and they’ll be embarrassed  *“if my thought is true, why does it bother me? What would it make me think? What would happen next?”* |
|  | I can’t respect myself if I embarrass myself in front of my friends  *“if my thought is true, why does it bother me? What would it make me think? What would happen next?”* |
|  | My friends will learn of my weaknesses  *“if my thought is true, why does it bother me? What would it make me think? What would happen next?”* |
|  | If they know of my weaknesses, my friends wouldn’t want to know me any more  *“if my thought is true, why does it bother me? What would it make me think? What would happen next?”* |
|  | I’m fundamentally hopeless and incompetent and if people recognize that, they won’t like me  *“if my thought is true, why does it bother me? What would it make me think? What would happen next?”* |
|  | I’m only worthwhile if I’m competent and in control |

Notice how the downward arrow takes us down through a succession of increasingly more fundamental thoughts until we find a core value, belief, or underlying assumption that seems to be governing our thoughts and therefore our behaviour.

Practice this skill for yourself. Select a situation in which you feel emotionally uncomfortable or you find yourself behaving in an ineffective way – avoidance or procrastination for instance.

Describes the situation:

Then write down the thought:

And then follow the vertical arrow down, until you recognize a fundamental belief.

Use questions such as:

Why would that be a problem to you?

What would happen?

Why would that bother you?

Then what?

What would that mean to you?

You will be surprised at how the downward arrow technique can take you down to a fundamental belief, a thought or belief beginning with the words “**I am**”.

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|  | *“if my thought is true, why does it bother me? What would it make me think? What would happen next?”* |
|  | *“if my thought is true, why does it bother me? What would it make me think? What would happen next?”* |
|  | *“if my thought is true, why does it bother me? What would it make me think? What would happen next?”* |
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