

Uncovering Beliefs about Emotions

Many people have implicit beliefs about emotions that operate outside conscious awareness. Such beliefs impact how people cope with their emotions.

- **Acceptability of Emotions:** People vary in the degree to which they believe that experiencing and expressing negative feelings is acceptable. In general, beliefs about the unacceptability of emotions have been found in people with depression, eating disorders, social phobias, post-traumatic stress disorder and borderline personality disorder. Holding such beliefs is more likely to lead to the avoidance of emotions, preventing the development of self-awareness and thus, the ability to either self-regulate or more extremely take care of the self appropriately. Growing up in an environment where the expression of difficulties or negative feelings was met with punishment or a lack of sympathy has been suggested as a potential cause for the development of beliefs about the unacceptability of emotions.
- **Malleability of Emotion:** This is a belief that no matter how hard we try, emotions cannot be changed. This belief, that emotions are outside personal control, results in no or less effort at regulating the emotion. This then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as there is no active effort to regulate emotions, thus no experience that emotions can be regulated, and the belief remains unchallenged. The other aspect is that research has shown that people who believe emotions can't be changed experience fewer positive and more negative emotions, decreased psychological wellbeing, and higher levels of depression. Contrasted with a person who believes that emotions are changeable, the latter will display a more assertive and active pattern of coping which ultimately strengthens that very belief and thus higher levels of emotional regulation and coping.

These workbook pages explore assumptions and beliefs about Emotions.

1. When undertaking this activity with a Mentee, please counsel that s/he should not blame anyone for any beliefs they have about emotions. Those who impacted our own belief system such as parents, grandparents, siblings, teachers etc. likely told the same message.
2. This exercise can be completed with different emotions, as people can hold different beliefs about different emotional states, and the Mentee may benefit from completing the exercise with each of his or her main problematic emotional states, to gain an in-depth understanding of the core beliefs and consequences associated with each emotion.
3. It is also useful for contrast, to complete the exercise with a positive emotion; the insight may show that the Mentee holds adaptive core beliefs about positive emotional states, which then leads to adaptive outcomes.
4. There is an example for reference.
5. The worksheet is designed to be printed out, for use with the Mentee as they work through the exercise

NOTE : As always, we recommend that as the Mentor you undertake your own analysis on your own emotions in order to become familiar with the process.

Uncovering Beliefs about Emotions : Worksheet

Step 1: Choose a Difficult Emotion. Choose 1 difficult emotion or emotional state you are struggling with at the moment; **EG.** Anxiety about an upcoming event, Regret about a recent transgression. Write it down in the centre of the image of the person outlined in the Core Beliefs worksheet that follows.

Step 2: Inquire into Beliefs held about the Emotion. Read through the below list of common beliefs about emotions. Underline those that resonate most and ring true for you. Pay particular attention to those that sound familiar, as these may be thoughts that exist outside your awareness. Then add any personal beliefs that are not listed . Write these down in the thought bubbles outlined in the Core Beliefs worksheet.

- If I lose control of my emotions in front of others, they will think less of me.
- I should be able to control my emotions.
- If I let myself feel this emotion, I will become overwhelmed by it.
- If I tell others how I feel, they will use it against me.
- If I tell others how I feel, they will think I am weak.
- Other people don't feel this way. There must be something wrong with me.
- Only an immature person would get so emotional.
- I should be able to cope with difficulties on my own without turning to others for support.
- To be acceptable to others, I must keep any difficulties or negative feelings to myself.
- This emotional state is not a normal response; I have to get rid of it.
- A happy person would not feel this way.
- That person responded differently than I did, therefore my emotional reaction is wrong.
- If I let myself feel this pain, it will kill me.
- Letting myself feel bad would mean falling to pieces, being a total mess, or wallowing in self-pity.
- If I show signs of weakness then others will reject me.
- Being an adult means not getting carried away by emotion; I'm supposed to be rational!
- Showing my emotions to others makes me look like a "drama queen."
- I'm stupid for feeling this way. I should just suck it up!
- I should not let myself give in to these feelings.
- Other:
- Other:

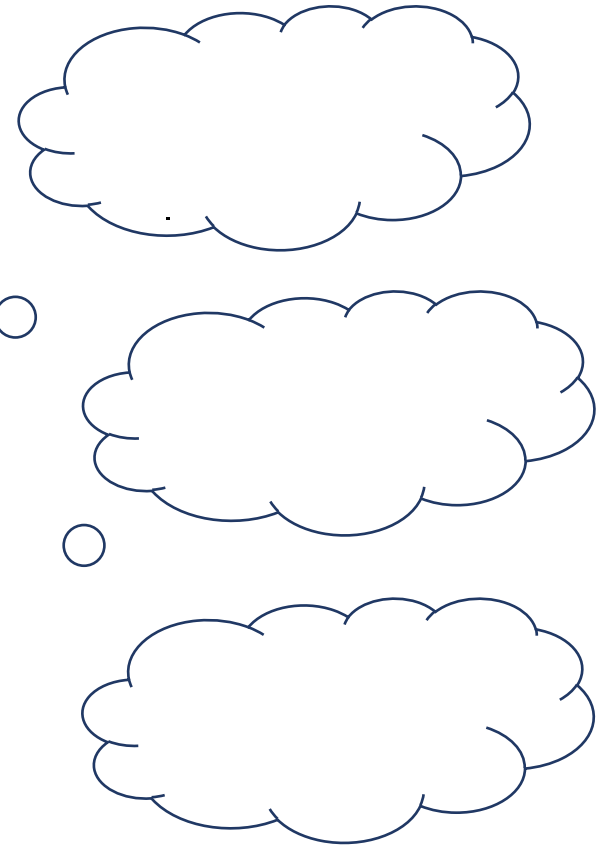
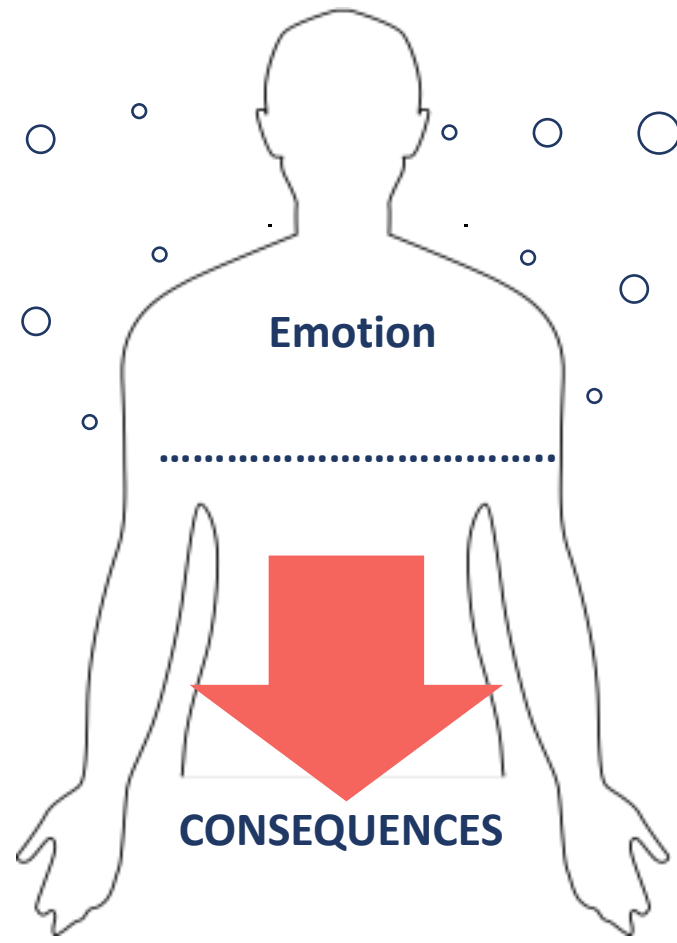
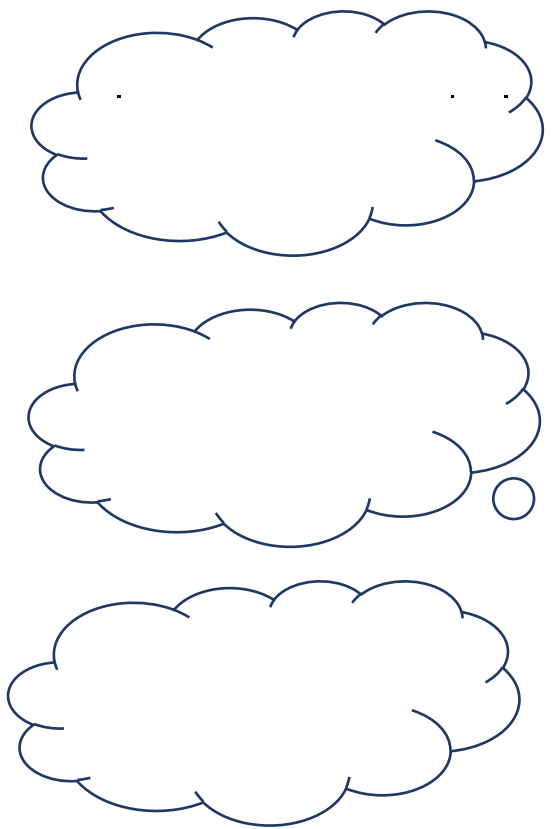
Uncovering Beliefs about Emotions : Worksheet

Step 3: What are the Consequences of holding these Beliefs? What impact do these beliefs have on how you feel, behave, and talk to yourself when faced with this emotion? Write down as many outcomes (positive and negative) as you can think of in the Consequences section of the Core Beliefs worksheet.

Step 4: What Insights.

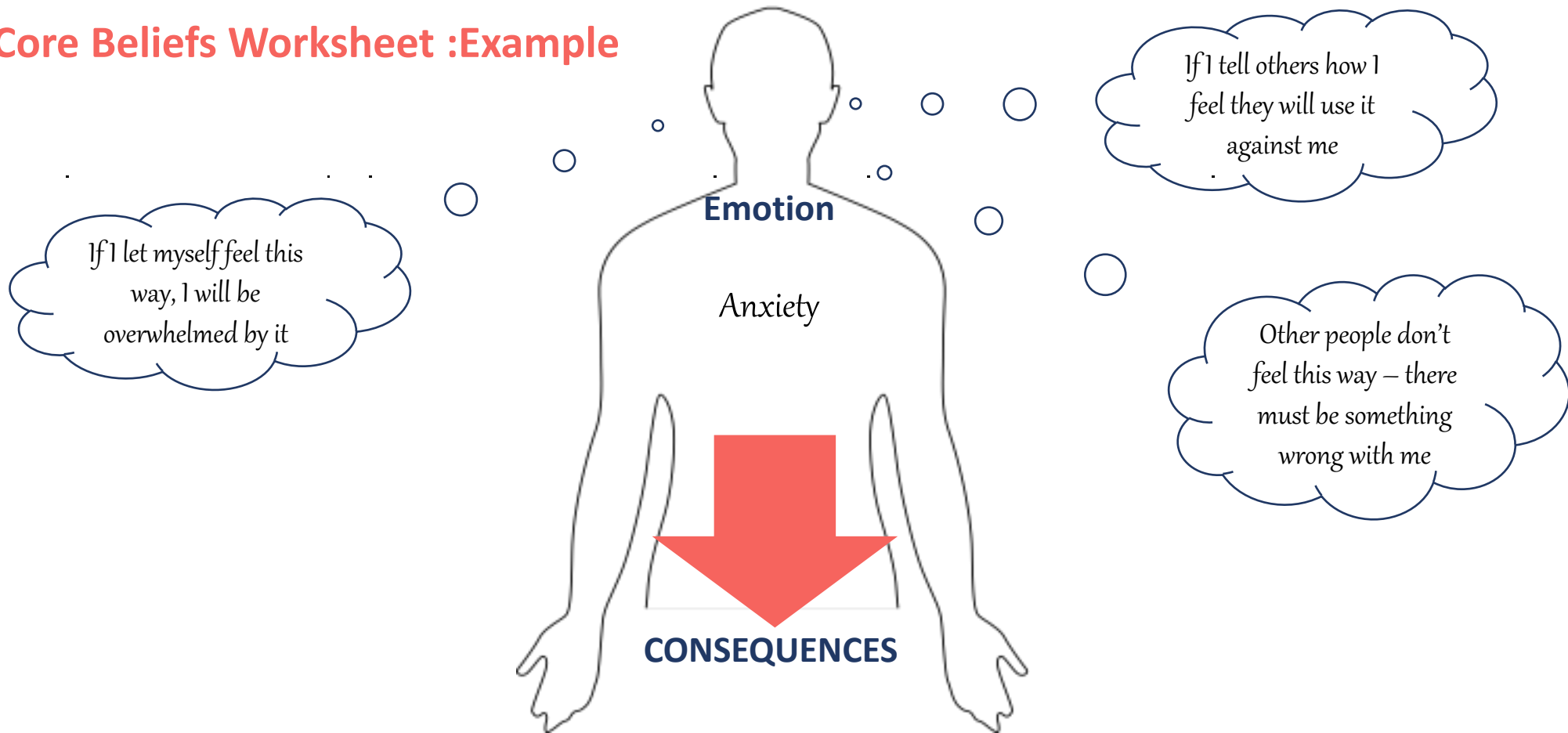
- How was it to do this exercise? What was easy and what was difficult?
- Looking at the consequences part of the exercise, how adaptive or not, is it for you to hold such beliefs about your emotions?
- What insights have you gained about the link between beliefs about emotions?
- What might be a more empowering belief or beliefs that would liberate you to deal more effectively with these emotions?

Core Beliefs Worksheet



Five horizontal dashed red lines are positioned at the bottom of the page, providing space for writing.

Core Beliefs Worksheet :Example



I withdraw and isolate myself in my suffering so that now one knows how I am feeling

How I feel prevents me from reaching out and asking for support

I am harsh and self critical toward myself
