

7 COMMON SELF-LIMITING BELIEFS

AND HOW TO AVOID THEM



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7 Self-Limiting Beliefs

In life there are so many limitations that sometimes it can be hard to tell the difference between those that are imposed on us by reality and those that we impose on ourselves by our beliefs. We are about to take a look at seven very common self-limiting beliefs that I see people imposing on themselves all the time in my private practice as a mental health therapist, as well as some suggestions for beginning to break free of these limitations.



Managing Your Mental Health On Your Own

This is a regular occurrence in the mental health field. We often feel like we have to manage our mental health on our own. For some reason, if we get a cavity we are OK going to a dentist and if we get an infection we are OK going to a doctor, but if we have any emotional or neurological or relationship issues we feel like we can always handle them on our own. In other words, ***for the simple stuff we are OK going to a professional, but for the complex issues involving important neurological hard-wiring and delicate interactions of critical neurochemicals, we are like, (confident head nod and stoic voice) “No problem. I got this.”***

The truth is that mental health can actually be pretty complicated, and not always easy to manage. Many mental health issues can't be “fixed” just by thinking differently or behaving differently. Many aren't solveable, only manageable with professional help. Some people, through no fault of their own, are born with genes that make them naturally predisposed to certain mental health conditions, like anxiety and depression. It would be unfair to think that these people can feel normal or handle life on their own just as easily as people who weren't born with these conditions.



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Other people grew up in really hostile, non-nurturing environments that the rest of us were fortunate enough to not grow up in. It would be equally unfair to think that these people can function as well and as easily on their own as people who were fortunate enough to be dealt a better hand in life. It would be pretty unfair, and even socially irresponsible, to expect that they should be able to handle their issues without help. Others, still, are born genetically predisposed to become addicted to certain substances or behaviors. They could have the same amount of exposure to them as the majority of other people, but become addicted where other people remain relatively unaffected.

Realistically, there are some things that even sheer grit and determination and willpower alone can't overcome. A lot of people in these circumstances shouldn't try to handle their stuff on their own.

We can accept it a lot of our physical issues are out of our control. If we get a broken femur, we don't try to handle it on our own or walk it off. If we get a cavity, we don't try to pull that tooth (usually) or fill that cavity on our own. Most of the time we are OK with going to get help for issues that we consider purely physical. But if we consider the issue to be mental or emotional, we forget that much of the mental/emotional is rooted in the physical. In addition, sometimes when we go through really hard things in life it literally changes the way our brain is wired. Then it's definitely no longer just mental, and it's much more difficult to feel "normal." People in these circumstances could very much benefit from not trying to manage on their own.



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Another reason that some people feel forced to manage on their own is because they feel they are the only one struggling with their issue. This can serve to isolate them, and make them feel like they have to do it on their own. It can be very normalizing, liberating, and empowering to realize that there are others who deal with the same issue, or that they can get help for their issue even if they can't find somebody else who can relate.

Something else to consider is that we're literally hardwired to need other people. Parts of our nervous system that have been evolving for hundreds of

millions of years are highly attuned to the interactions that we have with other people. Because of this there are mental and emotional benefits that we can get from connections with other trusted people that we simply can't get from any other source. Trying to handle our issues on our own can deprive us from this powerful source of healing.

Making Assumptions

This one goes by a lot of different names. It has been called future gazing, crystal ball gazing, fortune telling, jumping to conclusions, or mind reading. It is predicting the future prematurely, often with incomplete information. Sometimes we hold ourselves back from pursuing a job, a promotion, or a career because we assume that we won't get it. Or we hold ourselves back from pursuing a relationship, thinking we wouldn't be able to make it work anyway. Other times we keep ourselves from working toward a goal that we want to accomplish or an opportunity that we want to have, fearing that we would just fail to achieve it anyway. Often, this can be as simple as avoiding having an important conversation, assuming that it wouldn't go



well anyway. In all these cases we predict that the outcome of our actions wouldn't go in our favor, so we don't even try.

This is like deciding the results of an experiment before actually running the experiment, or already deciding the answer to a question without studying it out. We decide what the results of our actions would be and then hold ourselves back, trying to save ourselves from the imagined

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uncomfortable emotions or other unpleasantness that would result from “failure.” We might even go a step further by assuming that the imagined unpleasantness would be worse than what we are capable of tolerating.

As with any other self-limiting beliefs, the place to start changing this habit is becoming aware of when you are doing it and calling yourself out on it. Start creating this habit: whenever you come to any conclusion or make an assumption, ***ask yourself what hard evidence you have to support the conclusion that you came to, not just how you feel about it, what you think about it***, what your predictions about it are, or even what your past experience alone tells you. When looking at what evidence you have, be open to what feedback the evidence might give you, especially if it disagrees with your original conclusion or assumption. If, after careful consideration, you decide that your original assumption or conclusion was accurate after all, then at least you're making a decision only after having sifted through the evidence, allowing you to make a more informed decision. If, on the other hand, you decide that your first conclusion was wrong, then you just freed yourself from some self-imposed limitation that would have otherwise held you back.

Thinking It's All In Your Head

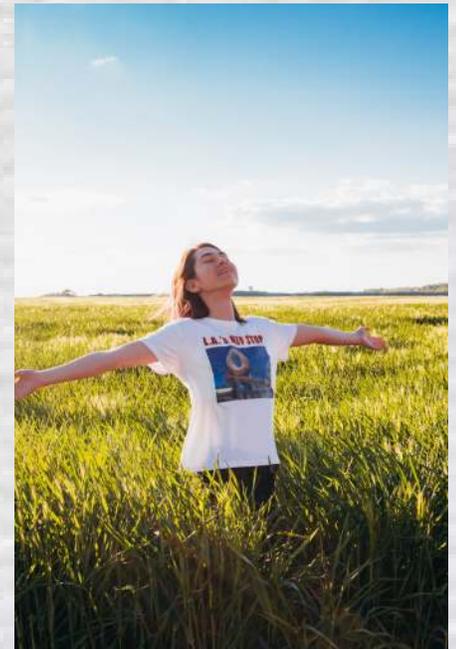
This is such an overlooked area where a lot of us could make huge strides in realizing more of our potential. In so many ways, ***it's not all in your head. If it's a mental thing, it's also a physical thing. If it's an emotional thing, it's also a physical thing.*** There's a lot to be said about this topic, but I will just keep it limited to a few ways in which you can use your body to your mental and emotional advantage. You can use your body in such a way that it becomes more efficient at creating some of the feel-good chemicals that help us feel better, think better, make better decisions, and live more fully. When you take care of your body, it should take care of you back to some degree, and will be in better shape to generate those feel-goods. Trying to do all of these things everyday can feel overwhelming, but trying every day to get just a few of them in doesn't have to be.



Stay hydrated. Keep your blood sugar from spiking too high or dipping too low (don't get hangry. Seriously). Get adequate consecutive, uninterrupted sleep where possible. Move your body regularly when not exercising. Take advantage of how good it feels to stretch, even if it's just for a

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a few seconds. Exercise regularly so your body gets better at creating the feel-goods. Make sure to get regular sunshine and fresh air. Put good foods into your body so that your stomach can turn those good foods into the feel-good chemicals in your brain. Limit your intake of processed foods that are high in chemicals such as food coloring, preservatives, or artificial flavors. Practice moderation with the amount of caffeine and energy drinks that you consume. Practice yoga or tai chi if you can. Regularly engage in stimulating activities or new experiences. Practice some version of breathing or mindfulness. Engage in some form of soothing or comforting touch. Make some of these activities part of your regular routine and you will likely see many benefits.



All-Or-Nothing Thinking

This is one belief that that very much holds people back from living the kind of life that they could otherwise live. This is when we ourselves to having only two options: “all” or “nothing,” and oversimplifies life in ways that limit our potential and opportunities. For example, if you can't finish everything on a particular day, you decide to not even start, so you therefore finish nothing. Or if you missed your workout yesterday you decide that it doesn't really do much damage to miss your workout today. Or if you slip up and do something that you have been trying really hard to not do, the result is that you end up doing that thing not once, but many times. Sort of the “might as well” or “go big or go home” mindset. You take advantage of the minor slip up and do that thing many, many times

starting over your abstinence over again at a more convenient time. Or you might even give up entirely. This mindset could also be holding you back from starting something new until the time is just right, or until the circumstances are perfectly convenient, or until you're completely comfortable or prepared.

Now, there are good reasons for us to do this. It can be helpful to take complex situations or issues and distill them down into only two options. Also, if do we have to make decisions in a hurry then narrowing things down to only two options can speed up an important process at a critical time. If we struggle with anxiety or depression we can be especially prone to thinking in terms of only one of two options, because the fight or flight state that we go into forces us to be



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more narrow minded so that we make decisions quicker. So, there are natural neurological reasons for why we have a strong tendency to do this to ourselves. Again, though, thinking and acting habitually in terms of all or nothing can seriously limit our potential to live the kind of life that we want to live.

What you might do instead is start to recognize what exists in between all and nothing.

There are a lot of shades of gray in between black and white, a lot of numbers in between 0% and 100%, a lot of colors on the spectrum.

If you can't do everything and are therefore tempted to do nothing, instead do SOMETHING. If you fell short of a goal yesterday and there's a decent chance that you will tomorrow as well, you can still work toward

it today. If you can't do something 100% right so you're considering not doing it at all, shoot for something like 40% instead, whatever that might look like.



Comparing

This one easily makes it into the top seven..

This is far too easy to do and not recognize that we are doing it. If you compare yourself to others long enough or hard enough you will absolutely find somebody who is “better” than you in some way. Pretty much guaranteed. This becomes a problem when that comparison makes you feel “less than” in some way, or unworthy in some way, or not good enough in some way. This can be a slippery slope to having mental health issues.



Men tend to compare themselves to how much money other men make, how many toys other men have, how strong other men are, or how charismatic other men are. Women tend to compare themselves to other women in terms of how attractive they are, who is in the best shape, who manages a million things without falling apart, who tends to maintain their household the best. All of these seem to be a losing battle for either gender. ***We forget that no matter what, there's always going to be someone who is better than us in some way.*** There's always going to be someone better looking, in better shape, making more money, and having more fun. If you pay much attention you will find that there are actually a LOT of these people.

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There's not necessarily one end-all, fix-all for unhealthy comparing. For some people, countering it can be easy, while for others it can be really complicated. For some it's as simple as realizing that you're doing it, calling yourself out on it, and making a point to stop yourself. Some good old-fashioned "stoppit therapy." Some people are even really good at taking their feelings of being "less than" and using them as fuel to get better at something. For others, on the other hand, comparing themselves to others can trigger some very deep-seeded negative beliefs about themselves and some hard-hitting insecurities, which is a much harder issue to overcome.

Something you might try is to ask yourself how realistic is the comparison that you are making. Have other people's paths to success, wealth, attractiveness, fitness, or relationships been the same as yours? Could they have had more opportunities or advantages than you? This isn't to avoid taking accountability for our own choices or to unnecessarily place blame outside of ourselves, it's an important exercise in not putting ourselves down unrealistically. Another thing you can try, which is not always a lot of fun, is asking yourself what insecurity or negative self-belief got triggered when you compared yourself to somebody else. If it hurt your sense of self-worth, is it really accurate or fair of you to base your self-worth on that thing? Is this issue in your control or out of your control? Where you go from there depends on what you find out, but at least this exercise can help you pinpoint what is at the root of why this comparison bothered you as much as it did.

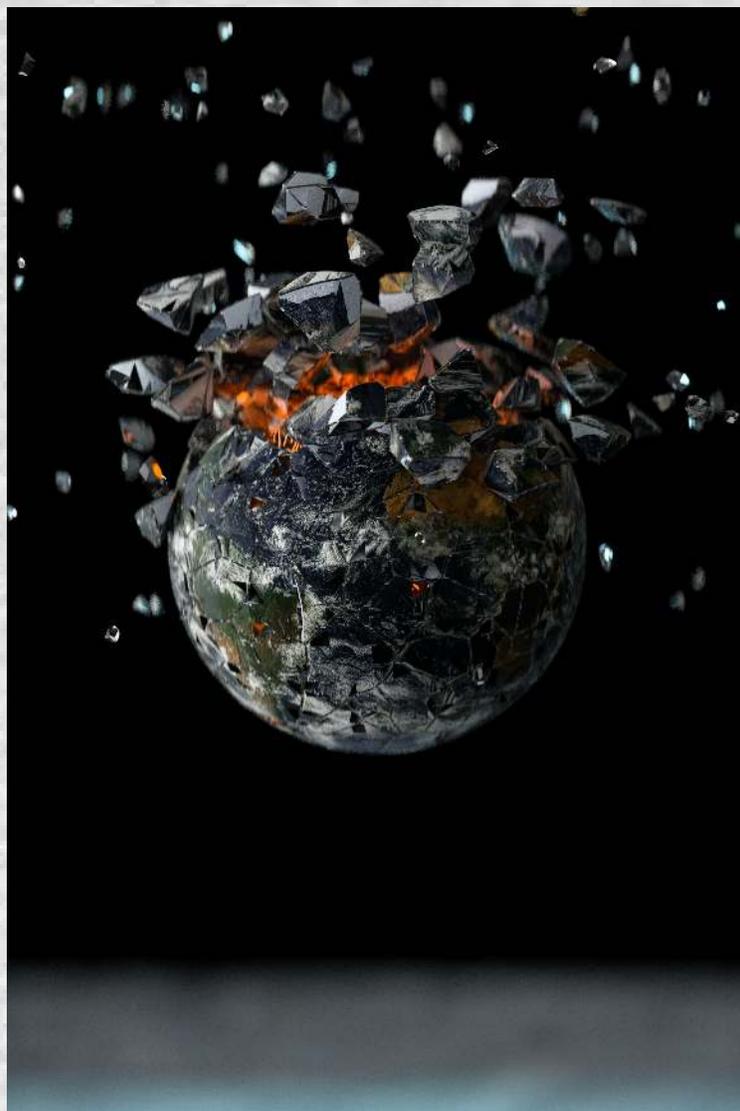
Catrapstrophizing

Most people probably haven't heard of this one, but just about everybody has done it. This refers to when we create worst-case scenarios in our minds. Like making a mountain out of a mole hill. Something negative happens, however big or small, and then we overthink it. We ruminate about it and get in our head about it, and eventually convince ourselves that it is going to turn into a catastrophe. We can do this with just about any subject, but the three most common ones that I see are health, finances, and relationships.

With health, it might be feeling a small tickle in your throat, and then being convinced that you are about to get a cold that is going to last for two or three weeks and seriously disrupt your life. Or you might feel normal aches and pains

and convince yourself that they are surface signs of a much bigger medical condition.

With finances, there's no limit to the torture that we can put ourselves through. Even if nothing is going wrong financially, it's not hard to imagine some financial catastrophe just around the corner. We've gotten to be really good at making them up even when they don't exist. Too many things can go wrong in ways that cost us money that we either don't have or don't want to spend.



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With relationships it's easy to think in terms of worst-case scenarios, especially if you have experienced relationship-based worst-case scenarios in the past. If one of our friends or loved ones starts to seem a little distant, we might start wondering if something has gone wrong in the relationship, if we have done something to offend them, or if that person is over us. It's hard to not worry about the well-being of our loved ones and if something bad might suddenly happen to them. Worrying if we are doing enough for our loved ones might also be a constant nagging companion if we are in a catastrophizing frame of mind.

As bad as our imagination can be in the absence of a trigger, it can be so much worse when we have actual "evidence." If my car breaks down I might suddenly start to imagine a repair bill of thousands of dollars. If I start to feel weird physically, I might start to imagine medical bills in the tens of thousands of dollars. If I feel like I under performed at work on a specific task, I might suddenly start to imagine how hard it will be to pay the bills and support my family after I lose my job because of this underperformance.

One of the particularly insidious problems with catastrophizing is that if we are fortunate enough to happen to have a moment where we aren't imagining any worst-case scenarios, our brain might then conveniently step in and start to imagine them for us. So, even when we are able to relax our brain might start telling us that there is something wrong. This can be especially true if you have been in the habit of imagining of worst-case scenarios for a long time, or if you have actually been through some terrible situations in the past.

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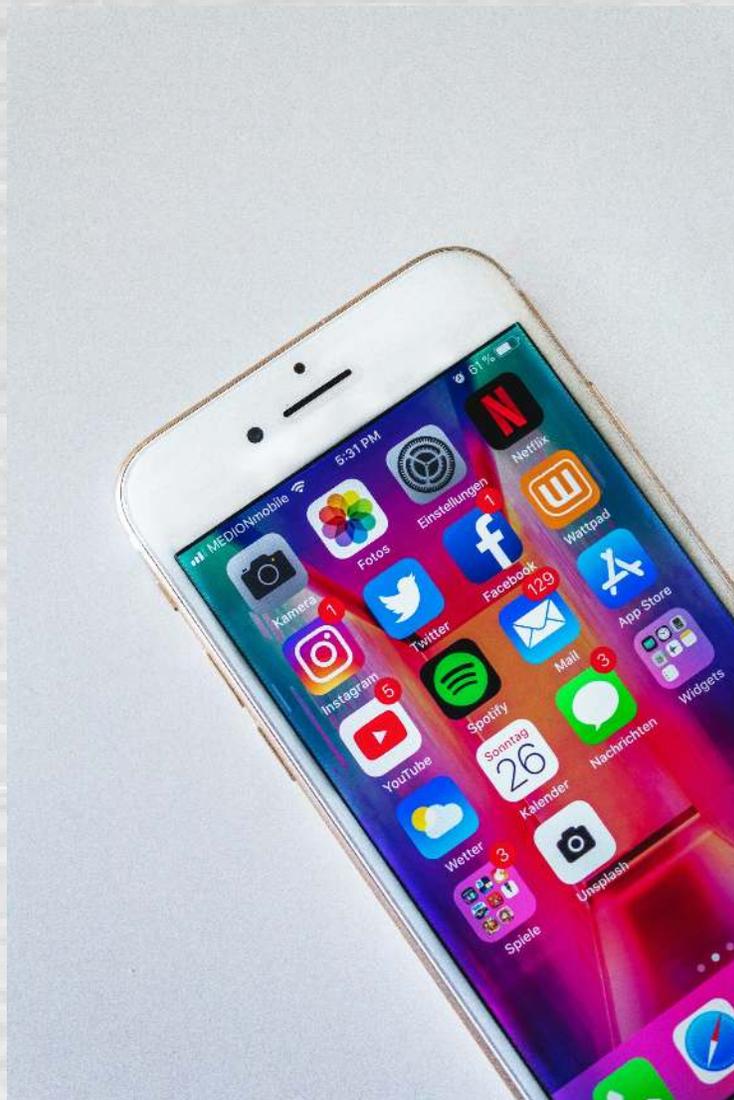
What you might try instead of catastrophizing is beginning of the process of some version of acceptance, or acknowledgement. This might look something like recognizing the catastrophizing thoughts for what they are, acknowledging that you are doing it, accepting this fact without becoming too emotionally reactive to it, and calmly committing to carry on doing whatever it was that you were doing anyway without engaging in the mental catastrophes. Give it a label of your own if you prefer something different. Give it an image if that helps you to visualize it as being outside of yourself, or just something that you are doing versus being a natural part of you or of reality. Kind of like the devil on the shoulder that you see in some cartoons or movies. Have some kind of a phrase that you say to yourself, something like, "I'm doing it again," or "Of course I am catastrophizing again," or "Here I go again, I fully expected that I would do this again at some point." From that point on the key is to not put a lot of energy into it. ***You don't want to put a lot of energy into thinking about it, of course, but neither do you want to put a lot of energy into not thinking about it, because either way will make it worse.*** Either way, your brain will recognize you putting energy into this habit and it will create new neural pathways (brain cell connections) to make it even easier for you to do it, not recognizing that doing it is actually causing you problems. Instead, just acknowledge it, stay calm, and don't freak out (that's a clinical term). Don't get upset at yourself for doing it or get too frustrated about it, just acknowledge it, accept it, and try to calmly carry on doing whatever it was that you were doing anyway. Commit to refocusing regardless of whether the thoughts of worst-case scenarios leave you alone or stick around.

Too Much Social Media

Blessed social media. This one would have found itself in the comparing section, but really, it deserves a section of its own. Or an entire book of its own. Just to be clear, I'm not saying that social media is all bad, I'm saying that TOO MUCH IS BAD. In some ways social media has actually been really, really good at spreading awareness of and access to mental health principles. It has helped people connect over their mental health issues, and realize that they are not the only one dealing with those issues. It has been a beginning point for some in eventually reaching mental health care. This helps some people who could not access mental health care to at least start improving their mental health on their own. For all those things, I'm grateful. What I am saying is that it can become a problem if we spend too much

time on social media, or make the mistake of thinking that it too accurately represents reality.

One of the biggest problems with it is that it leads to comparing. It's pretty well known that we tend to see the best of other people's lives, their best face, their greatest achievements, the funnest things that they are doing. I know that I get really tired of seeing other people on vacation while I'm stuck in my office, or seeing people sitting next to the new pool they just had put in while I am sitting next to... not a pool. This makes it really easy to make the mistake of



thinking our lives are so much worse than theirs when we see the best of their reality but are commonly living out the routine normalcy of our own.

Maybe an important question to ask yourself is whether or not social media picks you up or puts you down, and whether or not it connects you or isolates you. If it picks you up, the benefits can be great. If it helps you feel connected to others in a meaningful and fulfilling way and you are clearly benefiting from it, that's great. But if it makes you feel isolated from other people or less than other people, or just not good overall, that's a problem that is often far too easily underestimated. If it makes you feel isolated emotionally even while you are connected digitally, it can be a very self-limiting medium. I commonly recommend to people that they be very careful with their social media. Even when I don't prompt people to take a break I still hear over and over again from people that they know they need to take a break from social media, or that they are already taking a break and it has helped them feel a lot better in general.

Final Thoughts

Thanks for reading, and I hope you found much of this eBook useful! For more information on mental health issues, feel free to check out my website at justingordontherapy.com or click on any of the following links to find me on social media:



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