

Article that appeared in the *California Psychologist*, December, 2001

Behavior Change Doesn't Have to be Difficult

By Morty Lefkoe

Although most therapists would agree that behavior change usually is difficult and does not happen overnight, I disagree with that assessment. About sixteen years ago I developed the first in a series of interventions that literally do produce rapid and permanent change. The primary one, the Decision Maker® Belief Process (DMBP), eliminates the beliefs that cause our behavioral and emotional patterns.

The DMBP and other interventions are based on a single axiom that is grounded in everyday experience: Events have no inherent meaning. There are three corollary distinctions that arise from that axiom: There is no meaning in the world. All meaning is in our minds. All beliefs are merely the meaning we assign to what we observe.

Before I explain how this axiom and its corollaries can be the basis for a process that quickly and permanently eliminates beliefs, let me explain what I mean by “Events have no inherent meaning.”

Please try the following mental exercise: Assume your parents were very critical of you most of the time and rarely acknowledged you for your achievements. No matter what you did, they focused on what you didn't do and how you should have done better. If this was the pattern of their interactions with you, there literally would be thousands of them by the time you were six or seven years old. What would you have concluded about yourself by this time?

If you are typical of most children, you would concluded that *There's something wrong with me* or *I'm not good enough*. You would have experienced these beliefs as “the truth” about you as a child. Today, as an adult, even though you might consciously realize the

beliefs were silly and illogical, on some deep level you still would experience them as the truth about you.

If you were to recall your childhood, it would seem to you that you could “see” that *I'm not good enough*. In other words, when you visualized your parents being critical, it would seem as if you also were visualizing *I'm not good enough*. It's as if your parent's behavior inherently meant *I'm not good enough*. It would be so real to you that you could see your belief in the world that it seems you could say to someone: “If you were there watching my interactions with my parents, you also would see *I'm not good enough*.”

But if you really looked at the events that led to the belief, namely, your parents' behavior, you would realize that their behavior could have a number of different meanings, each one as valid as the one you chose. For example:

- My parents thought that being critical would motivate me to excel.
- My parents had lousy parenting skills.
- My parents may have thought I wasn't good enough, but they were wrong.
- Maybe I wasn't good enough when I was a kid, but that doesn't mean I always wouldn't be good enough.
- Maybe my parents were dissatisfied with my *behavior*, but they didn't think *I* wasn't good enough.

If you now tried to visualize *I'm not good enough* “out there in the world,” you would realize you couldn't, because you really never did see it. All you actually saw was your parents' behavior. And if that behavior could have a number of valid meanings, it has no single inherent meaning. At which point you would be forced to conclude that the only place that meaning has ever existed has been as a belief in your mind.

When you reach this point, the belief has been transformed from “*the* truth” to “*a*

truth” and is no longer a belief. If you were to state the words of the belief, they would sound silly and meaningless.

This axiom and its corollaries explain why it usually is difficult to get rid of beliefs: We think we “saw” the belief inherent in our observations. It is difficult to talk someone out of something they think they “saw.” As soon, however, as we realize that we never saw the belief (i.e., the meaning) *in the events*, that the meaning existed *only in our mind*, the belief disappears.

The first intervention I developed based on the axiom and corollaries was the Decision Maker[®] Belief Process, which is designed to quickly and permanently eliminate long-held beliefs (e.g., I’m not good enough).

Obviously I can’t provide a detailed explanation of each intervention here, but I can give you a sense of how the DMDP works to eliminate beliefs.

Because a belief is nothing more than the meaning we attribute to what we observe, when a client identifies a belief that is responsible for some undesired or dysfunctional pattern of behavior or emotions, the next step is to find the observations that led to the belief.

For example, David complained that whenever his wife pressed him to express his feelings, he felt fear. He generally was very reserved and had a hard time expressing any feelings to anyone. One belief he had formed that contributed to this pattern was *My feelings don’t matter*. When I asked David what happened early in his life that led him to that conclusion, he replied: “Dad was always telling me to stop crying. He’d get annoyed when I got really excited about things. He’d always say, ‘No one cares what you feel.’”

After telling David that his belief was, in fact, a valid child’s interpretation of his father’s behavior, I asked him for a few additional interpretations of what his father did and said. His answers included: *My father* isn’t interested in what I feel; his reaction might not

be typical of others. No one is interested in what a child feels, that might not be true of an adult's feelings. In my family my feelings didn't matter, in other places they might. My father might not have literally meant what he said; he just might have had lousy parenting skills.

I then asked David, "If your father's behavior could have had many different meanings, can you see that what you've been living with as *"the truth"* is only *"a truth,"* just one interpretation out of many?" He nodded agreement.

"Didn't it seem as a child when your father was yelling 'No one cares what you think,' that you could see that *My feelings don't matter.*"

"I did see it," he exclaimed.

"Take another look, now. I know you saw your father and heard his words, but did you literally see *My feelings don't matter?*"

"I guess not," David replied.

"What did you see?" I asked.

"I saw my father yell at me and I heard what he said."

"And what is the inherent meaning of that?"

"Nothing. It doesn't mean anything."

"David," I said, "Do you still believe *My feelings don't matter?*"

"No. No I don't believe that any more."

When David realized that his beliefs were only the meaning he *attributed* to his interactions with his father, not meaning he *discovered inherent* in the events, and there were a number of other equally valid meanings, the beliefs were gone.

I realize that the DMP sounds very simplistic and that many therapists will be skeptical of the claim that the beliefs are completely and permanently eliminated in a matter

of minutes. Nonetheless, my associates and I have used the DMBP successfully with well over 1,000 clients. Some of the feeling patterns that clients have presented and gotten rid of after eliminating the underlying beliefs include fear, hostility, shyness, anxiety, depression, and worrying about what people think of them. Behavioral patterns they have eliminated included phobias, relationships that never seem to work, violence, procrastination, unwillingness to confront people, eating disorders, drug and alcohol addiction, and sexual dysfunction.

A research study with incarcerated felons in 1994 used a control group and pre- and post-testing. The results, which were described in an extensive *New York Times* article, provided statistically significant evidence to validate the overwhelming anecdotal evidence. As Dr. Lee Sechrest, Professor of Psychology at the University of Arizona and my collaborator on the study, concluded: "The simplest, and we think fairly compelling conclusion, is that the intervention resulted in generally favorable changes in self-concept in the Experimental group and that without intervention, self-concepts would likely have deteriorated during confinement.... All in all, this little experiment has to be regarded as a fairly remarkable success."

During the past few years several licensed therapists have been trained to use the DM Process. After using it with their clients, here are evaluations from a couple of them.

"Shifts in self-perception and awareness which in the past might have taken several months to achieve are now happening weekly. The Decision Maker® Process is an invaluable tool which melds seamlessly with the psychodynamic model of psychotherapy." Doug Warhit, M.F.C.C., Psychotherapist

"The Decision Maker® Process is able to change the emotional power of the unconscious brain-wired beliefs we form in childhood. The client doesn't realize these beliefs are distorting his perception of reality. When the DMP 'unwires' the beliefs, the distortions are eliminated." Edith Jurka, M.D., Psychiatrist

I don't mean to suggest that the DM Process is a magic bullet that is appropriate for all clients and all problems. It is not meant to replace other effective interventions. It is, however, a very valuable additional tool that can significantly speed up the therapeutic process.

copyright ©2001 Morty Lefkoe

Steps of the Decision Maker® Process copyright © 1985-2001 Morty Lefkoe

Morty Lefkoe, founder of the Decision Maker® Institute (DMI) in Westport, CT, is the author of *Re-create Your Life: Transforming Yourself and Your World*. The book explains what the Decision Maker® Process is, how it works, its spiritual implications, and how its principles can be applied to business and societal change, parenting, and health. It was published by Andrews and McMeel in 1997. More information about the DM Process can be found at www.decisionmaker.com. DMI offers courses in California that teach the Decision Maker® Process and its variations. The courses meet the qualifications for 15 hours of CEU for M.F.C.C.s. and L.C.S.W.s as required by the California Board of Behavioral Sciences.