

# Finding Positives and Removing Negatives

By DIETER STANKO

Most undesirable behavior and emotions, like procrastination, phobias, anxiety and chronic depression, are caused by underlying beliefs, usually involving negative self-esteem, that people hold about themselves and life.

Once these conscious or unconscious beliefs are identified and eliminated, the associated behavior vanishes too.

This is the foundation of a program developed 10 years ago by Morty Lefkoe, a former management consultant who now runs a company called Decision Maker out of his Westport residence. At Decision Maker, Mr. Lefkoe helps clients determine the events in their childhood that led them to form their problematic beliefs, then eliminate the beliefs.

Mr. Lefkoe has recently described his program and personal improvement philosophy in a manuscript titled "Recreating Your Life: Yesterday's Thinking Won't Solve Today's Problems."

Hoping to validate his process in a scientific manner, Mr. Lefkoe last year completed a pilot research study of the decision maker's effectiveness on criminal behavior. The 13-week study involved 16 criminal offenders at two Connecticut institutions, the Long Lanes School for delinquents in Middletown and Maple Street House, a Bridgeport half-way house.

The pilot study's results show that helping the criminal offenders eliminate negative beliefs, typically involving self-esteem and self-worth, allowed them to also rid themselves of angry emotions, violent behavior, and possibly, future criminal tendencies said Mr. Lefkoe.

In a recent interview, he discussed his findings and his program. Following are excerpts from that conversation.

**Q. How do people's beliefs lead to unwanted behavior?**

A. All of our behavior and emotions seem to be the result of the things we believe. You can always find a belief underlying any behavior pattern and when the belief goes way, the behavior changes. As an example, if you believe that relationships don't work, then you will expect them not to work, or you stay out of relationships altogether. Or you begin one, and it does not work, and you do not try to make it better.

So you act and view things consistently with that belief. It determines how you perceive things, how you feel, how you act, and ultimately becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. If the belief is responsible for the behavior, and you eliminate the belief then obviously the behavior will change too.

**Q. How do people come to live according to their beliefs?**A. Most of us are not aware of the beliefs that we have. There have been many cases where people have become aware of their



Morty Lefkoe of Westport works with clients to show how people's beliefs can lead to unwanted behavior.

beliefs, said to themselves they were nonsense, but they still had the beliefs anyway. So the beliefs run your life whether you're aware of them or not, and sometimes even when you disagree with them.

**Q. Why are negative self-images so prevalent?**

A. They are primarily the result of parenting. Everyone who becomes a parent thinks good parenting is automatic. Few people get instruction in parenting. And given the way beliefs are formed by children, given what children see from parents who have no parenting experience to insure that negative beliefs do not get formed, almost everybody forms some negative beliefs.

In the last 10 years, there has been more parenting instruction. I suspect 20 years from now there may be a lot more people who do not have these beliefs.

Thirty or 40 years ago there were no parenting courses. Very few parents understood that their behavior and their statements could lead to negative decisions on the part of their child. Parents don't think about the beliefs that are being formed by their children; they are thinking about what their child is learning and how he or she is behaving. A lot of the ways we get children to

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## Self-esteem, lost in childhood, is the usual problem

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stay off the furniture or finish their food leads them to negative self-images. They can think something is wrong with them.

**Q. What can people do to get rid of unwanted behavior?**

A. I don't know if there is anything people can do themselves. The decision-maker process makes it possible for most people to identify the specific beliefs that are responsible for a dysfunctional emotional or behavioral pattern and eliminate the belief and pattern. But this is not a self help process.

**Q. How did you get the idea for the research project?**

A. I had worked with over 600 clients, of whom virtually all reported changing their life in various ways, from eliminating just one behavior to altering their whole lives. But even with these 600 anecdotes, most scientists did not take it seriously. I wanted something that would validate these anecdotes.

After some research, I realized that crime and violence was the biggest issue in the country and that one of the underlying causes of crime is low self-esteem. Virtually everyone I worked with experienced significant improvement in self-esteem. I thought that if I could demonstrate that criminals and other violent persons can improve their self-esteem and eliminate criminal, violent behavior it would show that you could do it with virtually anyone.

**Q. How was the test conducted?**

A. We had 16 volunteer subjects, half teen-agers and half adults, two institutions. They were split randomly into a control and an experimental group. All 16 were first tested to determine their levels of self esteem, antisocial attitudes, hostility and other dispositions that are as associated with criminal behavior. I then worked with members of the experimental group in private, weekly sessions for 13 weeks. At the end of 13 weeks, all subjects were tested again.

Dr. Lee Sechrest, a psychology professor at the University of Arizona who is an expert in the field research methodology, then evaluated the results. His conclusion is that there was a statistically significant self-concept improvement in the experimental group, while there was virtually no change in the control group.

**Q. Did you see any immediate changes in the experimental group**

A. Yes, absolutely. Some of the group began with a pattern where they would start fighting as soon they felt disrespected or angry. By week two or three, once they discovered the underlying beliefs, they stopped fighting or worrying what people thought of them. At about mid-experiment, many were telling me that they had major changes in their behavior and emotions.

During exit interviews, some subjects reported that they no longer felt violent and that they had learned to handle their temper.

**Q. What do you want to do with the results?**

A. In the short term, I want to do a more extensive study. Dr. Sechrest was initially very skeptical about this project. He told me to begin with that the small number of people in the study would make it virtually impossible to show statistical significance.

Now, he believes that if these results can be duplicated on a larger scale, it will be clear that I have a method which can significantly reduce criminal and violent behavior.

Ultimately, I want people to realize that the decision-maker process can make a change in virtually every problem, from eating disorders to depression, to alcoholism, to crime and violence. Then I want to make it available to anyone who wants it.