



Imagine being covered by a large filter so that part of your immediate experience is completely blocked from your awareness while other parts are exaggerated or highlighted by the filter. It may sound a bit like something from a science-fiction novel, but this is precisely how we experience reality every day of our lives.

The negative core beliefs you may have about yourself, such as "I'm unworthy" or "the world is an unsafe place", distort your reality. The more unconscious and intense your negative core beliefs, the more this filter distorts your experience. The more self-aware you are, the better able you are to discern the truth of a situation.

Your negative core beliefs, otherwise thought of as emotional wounds or triggers, act as filters to how you experience and interpret the world on a daily basis. You may ask, "But aren't we aware of these core beliefs about ourselves and the world?" Not necessarily. Negative beliefs or wounds are often partly unconscious, distorting your interpretation of reality without you even knowing it.

How core beliefs form

Your core beliefs, both positive and negative, come from the sum of your past experiences. From birth, we each

try to make sense of our world. We learn that a thing called a "chair" is for sitting on, a thing called a "bus" takes us to school, our mum and dad are people called "parents" and their job is to take care of us. And what about us? What kind of things or people are we? Important? Lovable? Competent? Valuable? We answer these questions through the direct and indirect messages we receive through our experience.

A direct message might be, "Jenny, aren't you clever?" or "Sal, you are so hopeless." An indirect message is just as powerful, sometimes more so, and might come from a parent being too busy to spend time with you. Here, the indirect message you receive could be, "I don't matter", "I'm unimportant" or "I'm unlovable." A highly critical, angry parent might send you the indirect message, "I'm never good enough", "I'm bad" or "I'm incompetent." A physically abusive parent might send the indirect message, "People who love me abuse me or betray me."

How you interpret the way others treat you is unique; it's your individual felt experience that you internalise as a core belief. None of us necessarily walks around thinking "I'm unlovable", but we may have a sense of this inside us. Because we crave unconditional love and acceptance from our parents and caregivers, the messages they send

us are especially important. And it's important to remember that taking on a negative message does not mean there's something wrong with you. It's a normal response to an abnormal situation.

If a parent constantly told you that you were stupid or constantly criticised you, as a child, you didn't have the cognitive capacity to think, "Daddy is projecting his unresolved issues onto me." Instead, in your longing for unconditional love, you interpreted this as, "I am not enough for Daddy to love" or "Clearly, there is something wrong with me." This is a false, distorted view of yourself, which lives on in you and filters your experience as you grow up.

What are your triggers?

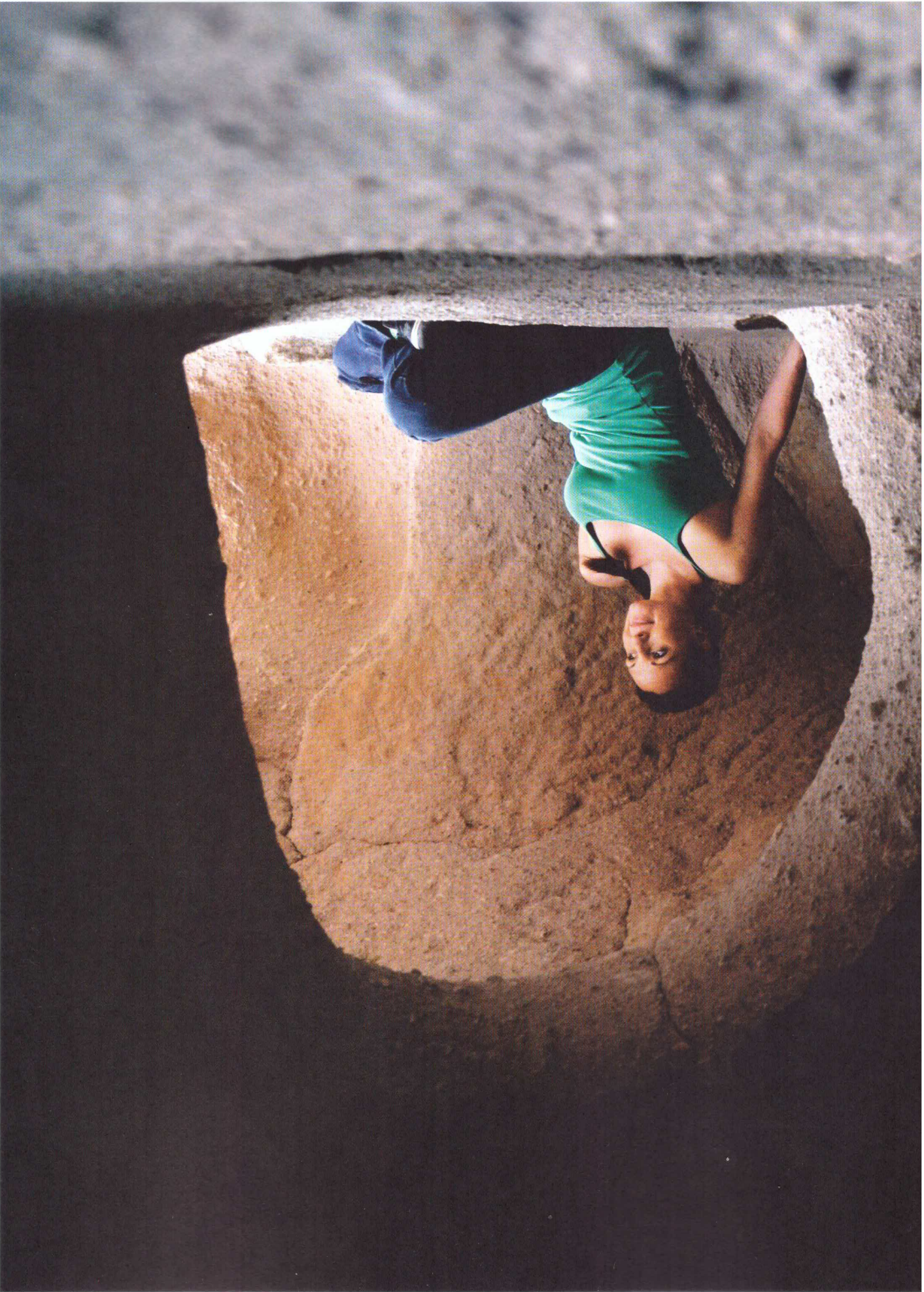
A signal that a negative core belief is triggered is if you overreact to a situation as an adult. For example, if a manager at work respectfully gives some negative feedback about performance, someone with a strong negative core belief — for example, "I'm incompetent" — might feel a failure and just give up, thinking, "I'm useless; I'll never get this right." They would feel shame. On the other hand, someone who believes "I'm competent" would simply take this feedback on board, keep trying and not be emotionally triggered by it. They may even see it as a positive challenge.

Escaping lifetraps

Nearly all of us have groups of negative core beliefs, or "lifetraps", that stem from childhood. Are you ready to do the work to shift them?

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The founder of cognitive therapy, US psychiatrist Aaron Beck, believed that related core beliefs were wired together in the brain in clusters he called "schemas". This way, when a negative core belief is triggered, such as "I'm unlovable", it prompts a related set of beliefs, such as "I'm undesirable" and "I'm unwanted".

American psychologist Jeffrey Young, founder of schema-focused therapy, took this idea one step further. He organised these clusters of negative core beliefs into common themes and referred to them as "lifetraps". Lifetraps exist on a continuum. You may not relate at all to some lifetraps and relate a lot to others. Nearly all of us have lifetraps as virtually no one had a perfect childhood or perfect parents. If you can't identify with any of the belief clusters below, they're likely unconscious.

Various questionnaires can help identify core beliefs and lifetraps. A good starting point, though, is simply to read the summary of lifetraps below. These are sourced from *Reinventing Your Life: How to Break Free From Negative Life Patterns*, a book co-authored by Young and Janet Klosko, PhD.

Identify your lifetraps

Abandonment

Perhaps your caregiver was unstable, absent or unreliable. Here, you feel that

people who love you will leave you and you will end up left alone. As such, you cling to those close to you and in doing this may end up pushing others away, only reinforcing your lifetraps.

Belief: "I'm unlovable."

Mistrust and abuse

You expect people to hurt, abuse or betray you; for instance, to lie, manipulate, harm or humiliate you. You're suspicious and assume the worst about others, even those you love. As such, you form superficial relationships, don't open up, avoid relationships altogether or have friends who treat you poorly and whom you then feel vengeful towards.

Belief: "People who love me betray me" or "People cannot be trusted."

Dependence

You depend on others as a crutch and need constant support. As a child, you were made to feel incompetent when you tried to assert your independence so, as an adult, you seek strong figures to depend on who may rule your life.

Beliefs: "I'm incompetent" or "I'm helpless."

Vulnerability

You are constantly afraid that a disaster — natural, criminal, medical or

financial — will happen. Growing up, you were made to feel the world was a dangerous place and you may have been overprotected as a result.

Belief: "The world is an unsafe place."

Emotional deprivation

Growing up, you may have experienced an absence of warmth and affection, empathy or protection. You feel empty and lonely and that your need for love will not be met. You're attracted to cold people or may have become cold yourself to protect your heart.

Belief: "I am unwanted and unlovable."

Social exclusion

You may have felt "different", isolated and as though you didn't belong growing up. You have a belief you are socially undesirable. You might cope in intimate interactions and be socially skilled but feel insecure and avoidant at work or larger social settings.

Belief: "I'm different, unacceptable, socially undesirable."

Defectiveness

If someone really got to know you, you believe they would reject you because they'd discover you were fundamentally flawed. As such, you are afraid of love and expect rejection.

Belief: "I'm defective, bad, inferior and unwanted."

Failure

As a child, you felt inferior in terms of achievement. As an adult, you continue to feel inadequate regarding achievement, exaggerate your degree of failure or act in ways to ensure continued failure.

Belief: "I'm inadequate, incompetent, stupid, inept or a failure."

Subjugation

Here, you sacrifice your own needs and allow others to control or use you out of guilt or fear you will be punished or abandoned. You likely suppress anger and have relationships with controlling people or needy people who can't give back in return.

Belief: "It is selfish and can hurt others if I put myself first", "Others are more important than I am" or "I have no value."



If you have an abandonment lifetraps, you fear that people who love you will leave and you will end up left alone.



A person with a failure lifetraps may not try hard on a project and thereby sabotage it, while someone with an unlovable lifetraps might select a critical partner.

Unrelenting standards

You place enormous emphasis on status, money, achievement, beauty or recognition to avoid criticism and you do this at the expense of happiness, pleasure, health and a sense of accomplishment. You have rigidly high expectations of yourself and may judge others who don't meet these standards. Growing up, you were expected to be the best; anything else was seen as failure.

Belief: "I'm never good enough" or "I'm only acceptable and lovable if I'm perfect and extremely successful."

Entitlement

You believe you are superior, special and entitled to special rights and privileges. You disregard what is reasonable or feasible, the cost to others and the time and patience required to achieve your desires. You may have been spoiled as a child or not required to show self-control. You feel very angry when you don't get what you want. You may also be competitive or controlling of others, without empathy.

Belief: "I'm special" or "I'm superior."

How do you act out your lifetraps?

It's important to identify how your lifetraps holds you back in life. The first question to ask is, "What do I do to maintain my lifetraps?"

A person with an emotional deprivation lifetraps might choose a partner who is unavailable. A person with a failure lifetraps may not try hard on a project and thereby sabotage it, while someone with an unlovable lifetraps might select a critical partner.

Next ask, "How do I compensate for my lifetraps?" The emotionally deprived person may become extremely demanding to satisfy their neediness, the person who feels a failure will refuse to admit they have committed an error and the person who feels unlovable will demand constant attention and admiration.

The final question is, "How do I avoid my lifetraps?" Here, the emotionally deprived person will avoid intimacy completely, the person who feels a failure will procrastinate or refuse to take on projects and the person who feels unlovable will avoid close relationships.

Once you can see how your lifetraps holds you back, be clear about what you want instead. Using the same examples, the emotionally deprived person would aim for a close relationship with equal give and take, the person who feels as though they're a failure would be able to do projects well and accept constructive advice, and the person who feels unlovable would aim to have close relationships where both partners express strengths and vulnerabilities.

How to heal lifetraps

To remove the negative filters from your life, Young and Klosko write, you first need to clearly identify them and understand where they have come from in your childhood. Recognise that these core beliefs are false assumptions you made through no fault of your own growing up.

Next, try to use evidence to disprove your negative belief or, even better, process the underlying pain associated with the core belief. This often helps to shift it. Therapies that help here include healing the inner child, or eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR). You could also write letters to the parent, sibling or peer who contributed to your lifetraps.

Another approach is "chair work", which involves taking a negative belief and dialoguing with it. For example, the therapist might ask, "Where would 'unlovable Susan' sit in the room?" Speak only from that part that feels unlovable. The therapist might then ask "unlovable Susan" at what age she first arrived in Susan's personality and how she is unhelpful for Susan. This can be intense, but the heightened awareness and understanding it brings often take away the power of the negative core belief.

Understanding and healing your own negative core beliefs is also healing for your relationships. Young talks about "schema chemistry", the idea that people are attracted to other people who trigger their lifetraps. It's as though we unconsciously are drawn to people intimately who will help make our lifetraps conscious and help us resolve them.

It's important to remember that having lifetraps and recognising them in yourself and others doesn't mean you can't see the truth in situations and you mustn't use them as an excuse for negative behaviours. It's only through recognising these wounds in yourself and others, though, that you can find truth, healing and wholeness. 🧡

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