

Experiments to Test and Defy Unhealthy Core Beliefs

Conducting homework experiments can be a powerful strategy to generate evidence that will undermine your belief in your unhealthy old CBs, and strengthen your belief in your healthy new CBs. Here are several strategies:

Straightforward Experiments: When completing an Experiment Worksheet (EW) in preparation for a straightforward homework experiment to work on achieving a therapy goal (eg. making friends, dating, being assertive, public speaking), identify the unhealthy old core belief that is generating your hot thoughts and feared predictions. Write that CB in 2nd (Predictions) column of your worksheet, along with your hot thoughts and feared predictions about that situation. Write CB- just before the unhealthy old core belief. Then, after the experiment, record the evidence you have gathered and what you have learned regarding your core belief in the last two columns of the EW. (See sample EW.)

If you choose to also complete a Cognitive Restructuring Worksheet (CRW) before your experiment, then identify your unhealthy underlying core belief, along with your hot thoughts and predictions, in the 3rd row (Hot Thoughts), and write CB- just before that belief. Then, when writing your Constructive Attitude a few rows further down, include a healthy new core belief to counter the unhealthy old one triggered by this experiment, and write CB- just before that healthy belief. (See sample CRW.)

Paradoxical Experiments: Another approach is to first identify the feared outcomes that your unhealthy old CBs tell you to dread and avoid at all costs, eg.: judgment, criticism, rejection, embarrassment, mistakes, social blunders, calling attention to yourself, or appearing anxious. Then choose a series of experiments in which you paradoxically make it your goal to deliberately seek out the feared outcomes. As in straightforward experiments (above), make sure you write the unhealthy CBs you are testing in an EW (and optionally a CRW) before conducting the experiment. Then, after the experiment, record the evidence you gathered and what you have learned related to your core belief in the remaining columns of the EW. (See sample EW and CRW.)

Rebel Experiments: Write down several of the specific personal rules dictated by your unhealthy old CBs: the ways you *should* behave, and the ways you *should avoid* behaving. Then write down a series of experiments you could do in which you make it your goal to deliberately break one of more of these personal rules repeatedly. This is akin to using nonviolent civil disobedience as a strategy to defy an unjust authority, except that the unjust authority in this case is your unhealthy old CBs.

Before conducting these experiments, complete an EW (and optionally a CRW) in which you identify the unhealthy old CB you are defying, and write CB- just before it. It is ideal to repeat these experiments, as your self-confidence will build over time. Finally, complete the remainder of the EW after your experiment in which you record the evidence you gathered and what you have learned related to your core belief. (See sample EW and CRW.)

Act As If: Plan out in advance a series of repeated experiments in which your goal is to act as if you fully believe your healthy new CBs in a situation that is likely to trigger your unhealthy old CBs. Identify as behavioral goals for your experiments the specific things you would do if you fully believed your healthy new beliefs. Record all this in an EW (and optionally a CRW) you complete before the experiments. Ideally, repeat similar experiments several times until it feels more comfortable and natural, and less like acting. After your experiments, complete the remainder of the EW in which you identify the evidence you gathered and what you have learned related to your CBs. (See sample EW and CRW.)

You can also conduct unplanned, reactive act-as-if experiments when you find yourself confronted by a situation which activates your unhealthy old CBs (ie. when you feel anxious, upset, or tempted to avoid something you otherwise want to do). First, recite your relevant healthy CBs, long or short versions. Then ask yourself: if I truly believed my new core beliefs right now, what would I do? Then act as if you truly believed your new CBs by doing these things, and focusing mindfully while doing so. Complete an EW afterwards in which you record the evidence you gathered and what you have learned about your CBs. (See sample EW.)

Consider conducting daylong experiments, eg.: act as if you have a Teflon coating preventing rejection or embarrassment from sticking; act as if your flaws and deficiencies make you interesting and desirable; act as if you enjoy learning from mistakes and disappointments. Then complete an EW afterwards, and identify the evidence you gathered and what you have learned related to your CBs. (See sample EW.)

For all versions of acting as if, make sure you are basing your experiments on something that you do, in fact, at least *partly* believe and see as personally *beneficial* to believe, or that you actually *do* believe during more confident times in your life. Then push yourself to act as if you *fully* believe it. Although it may feel uncomfortable and phony at first, the results are likely to be positive and self-reinforcing. Conduct such experiments repeatedly until it feels more comfortable and natural, and less like acting.

Imagery of your confident self: After preparing for experiments in any of the above ways, try doing imagery of you conducting these experiments with self-confidence. Start by reading your healthy new CBs, and then create vivid imagery of you doing the experiments acting as if you fully adopt this more constructive mindset. Repeat the imagery multiple times until you feel less anxious and more self-confident doing the experiments. Try doing imagery of different versions of your experiments: with strangers reacting to you in different ways, some of them negative. Practice responding to any fears come true in your imagery with confidence. (See #7 & 8 in the yellow instruction sheet: Cognitive-Behavioral Experiments for Overcoming Social Anxiety.) Then do the experiments in real life!

Other ways to record your evidence: It is helpful to keep all your evidence refuting your unhealthy old CBs and supporting your healthy new CBs in one place so you can periodically review it. Doing so will probably help improve your mood, and increase your self-confidence and self-esteem. Consider using any of the following to consolidate in one place all the evidence your CB experiments generate: a daily CB Evidence Log, a Core Belief Continuum and/or a daily Pride and Gratitude Log. (See instructions sheets: Gathering Evidence; Pride and Gratitude Log.)

EXPERIMENT WORKSHEET

Name _____

<i>Before experiment</i>		<i>After experiment</i>		
SITUATION & DATE:	PREDICTIONS: What exactly do you fear will happen (your verbal hot thoughts and disturbing images)? What are the underlying core beliefs? ⇒ Rate belief: 0-100%	EXPERIMENT: What will you do to test your predictions? Specify your behavioral goals. Include: external mindful focus & drop safety-seeking behaviors.	EVIDENCE: What actually happened? Did your feared predictions come true? If so, how bad was it for you, and how did you cope with it?	WHAT I LEARNED: What do these experiments tell you about yourself, your hot thoughts & core beliefs? How can you build on this? ⇒ Rate belief: 0-100%

EXPERIMENT WORKSHEET

Name _____

Before experiment		After experiment		
SITUATION & DATE:	PREDICTIONS:	EXPERIMENT:	EVIDENCE:	WHAT I LEARNED:
<p>5/11: going to a party where I know few people</p>	<p>What exactly do you fear will happen (your verbal hot thoughts and disturbing images)? What are the underlying core beliefs? ⇒ Rate belief: 0-100%</p> <p>--I won't know what to say, or I might say something stupid. --I'll appear tense & nervous. --People will think poorly of me, and won't enjoy talking to me. --I have an image of people snickering, giving me disapproving looks, and getting out of the conversation quickly. --85% --CB: In order to be accepted and liked by people I admire, I must always fulfill their expectations of me completely. --75%</p>	<p>What will you do to test your predictions? Specify your behavioral goals. Include: external mindful focus & drop safety-seeking behaviors.</p> <p>--attend party & stay 2+ hours --greet 5+ new people --start 2 conversations --focus mindfully on the conversation --try to keep the conversations going for at least 15 minutes --speak more expansively</p>	<p>What actually happened? Did your feared predictions come true? If so, how bad was it for you, and how did you cope with it?</p> <p>--Two people came up to me and started conversations. --No one appeared to react negatively to me, and two people seemed to enjoy talking with me, despite some awkwardness in my conversation. I even said a couple things that I thought were kind of stupid, but the other people had no reaction and just continued the conversation as though nothing bad had happened.</p>	<p>What do these experiments tell you about yourself, your hot thoughts & core beliefs? How can you build on this? ⇒ Rate belief: 0-100%</p> <p>--If I approach people, focus mindfully and speak longer, I'm pretty good at making social conversation, and some people enjoy talking to me. A little awkwardness with a new person is no big deal. --70% --CB: People like and respect me for who I am, flaws and all, just like I like and respect others despite their imperfections. --CB: I don't have to be perfect. --70%</p>

CORE BELIEF ACTION PLAN

Name _____

UNHEALTHY OLD CORE BELIEFS (briefly stated)

HEALTHY NEW CORE BELIEFS (briefly stated)

RULES (dos & don'ts) DICTATED BY YOUR OLD CBs

PERSONAL GOALS you want to make good progress on before ending therapy

EXPERIMENTS you want to do before ending therapy to REBEL against your old CBs or ACT AS IF you fully belief your new CBs (straightforward and paradoxical)

CORE BELIEF ACTION PLAN

Name _____

UNHEALTHY OLD CORE BELIEFS (briefly stated)

I'm fundamentally deficient.

If someone sees any of my deficiencies, s/he will not respect, like or love me.

HEALTHY NEW CORE BELIEFS (briefly stated)

I have strengths and weaknesses, just like everyone else.

People respect, like or love me for who I am and don't expect perfection, just like I value others despite their imperfections.

RULES (dos & don'ts) DICTATED BY YOUR OLD CBs

- Don't go to social activities unless a few good friends will be there.
- Don't initiate conversations with strangers, especially those I'm attracted to.
- Don't join group conversations, or stay quiet when I am in groups.
- Do script to make sure I have things to say.
- Do avert eye contact, speak softly and speak briefly.
- Do monitor my anxiety symptoms to try to hide them.
- Do ask lots of questions to keep the focus on the other person.
- Don't talk about myself, tell stories or assert myself.
- Do end conversations early so I don't embarrass myself.
- Don't speak up at meetings, or keep it very brief if I have to speak.
- Do use fast-acting drugs (alcohol, benzos, beta blockers) to hide my symptoms.

PERSONAL GOALS you want to make good progress on before ending therapy

- Meet new people and invite them out socially.
- Make friends.
- Date people I'm attracted to.
- Give reports and presentations in meetings.

EXPERIMENTS you want to do before ending therapy to REBEL against your old CBs or ACT AS IF you fully believe your new CBs (straightforward and paradoxical)

- Attend a group social activity each week, and initiate conversations with strangers (especially those I'm attracted to), and join group conversations with strangers.
- Invite and go out with people as friends.
- Invite out people I'm attracted to and go out on dates.
- In all above conversations: no drugs/alcohol; focus mindfully on the conversation; reveal more about myself; speak expansively; have balanced conversations; tell stories; make more eye contact; speak louder; extend the conversations longer.
- (Paradoxical) During some conversation, show anxiety symptoms or ask/say something stupid, then use brief HHH assertion, then continue the conversation.
- Speak up more often and longer at staff meetings (without taking meds).
- Give a presentation or speech at work or Toastmasters (without meds).