



# Peer Support Team Newsletter

Jack A. Digliani, PhD, EdD  
Police Psychologist  
www.jackdigliani.com

Peer Support Teams are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Serve – Protect – Support - Surpass

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## Beliefs, Thoughts, Emotion, Behavior, and Self-Exploration

Psychologists often think about beliefs, thoughts, emotion, and behavior. While full examination of these topics is well beyond the present scope, suffice it to say that most psychologists view them as independent but related concepts. Simply stated, *beliefs* are internalized ideas (thoughts) about what is “true.” Some beliefs are easily identified, like those that comprise the various religions. Beliefs are very powerful. Humans will kill and die in the name of their beliefs - seen as often today as in the past. Strongly held beliefs resist change. It does not matter whether there is no evidence for them or if there is significant evidence to the contrary. Some beliefs characterize *delusion*. Differentiating a delusion from a belief is not always easy. As specified in the DSM-5-TR, “The distinction between a delusion and a strongly held idea is sometimes difficult to determine and depends in part on the degree of conviction with which the belief is held despite clear or reasonable contradictory evidence regarding its veracity” (101). (Would you say that “flat earthers” and “2020 election-result deniers” are delusional?)

*Thoughts* comprise beliefs, but within beliefs, emotion is also involved. Thoughts can exist outside of belief systems. Some thoughts are fleeting, some are long held. Some are easily changed (I think it’s raining, I went outside, it was clear, I no longer think it’s raining), others not (I *think* it’s a dog-eat-dog world). Understanding the difference between beliefs and thoughts can be difficult. This is because the words “thought” and “belief” often seem interchangeable (I *believe* it’s a dog-eat-dog world).

*Emotion* is feeling. Thoughts can cause or at least influence the experience of emotion (and vice versa). In fact, one of the theoretical cornerstones of the cognitive therapies, often used to treat depression and other mental disorders, is the idea that negative thoughts (I’m nothing, I don’t deserve to live) drive negative emotions (feelings of worthlessness, self-loathing, etc). In cognitive theory, negative thoughts and the resulting disparaging self-talk (thoughts) combine to produce the emotions associated with depression. If unabated, negative thoughts and associated emotion can lead to thoughts of suicide and suicidal behavior - suicidal behavior is sometimes referred to as suicidal “acting out.”

*Behavior*. While suicidal behavior is often the result of negative thinking and associated emotion, it has been claimed that positive thoughts improve mood and increase positive behaviors - an idea advanced in many self-help books. There is some evidence for this. Of course, what is considered “positive behavior” seems to depend upon one’s internalized values - sometimes referred to as a cognitive structure, moral code, or belief system. So it seems that *belief* and *behavior* have come full circle.

### Self-exploration

Have you given much thought to how your beliefs impact your life? Are you living in accordance with them? Do some need to be re-assessed? Do you find it difficult to remain positive? Do you sometimes wonder if you are a negative thinker or negative self-talker? Asking yourself these questions is a great way to begin self-exploration. And self-exploration is a great way to improve your mental wellness. Starting self-exploration is easy. You can begin by identifying negative thinking and self-talk..JAD

## Identifying Negative Thinking

Not sure if your self-talk is positive or negative? Some common forms of negative self-talk include:

- **Filtering.** You magnify the negative aspects of a situation and filter out all the positive ones. For example, you had a great day at work. You completed your tasks ahead of time and were complimented for doing a speedy and thorough job. That evening, you focus only on your plan to do even more tasks and forget about the compliments you received.
- **Personalizing.** When something bad occurs, you automatically blame yourself. For example, you hear that an evening out with friends is canceled, and you assume that the change in plans is because no one wanted to be around you.
- **Catastrophizing.** You automatically anticipate the worst without facts that the worse will happen. The drive-through coffee shop gets your order wrong, and then you think that the rest of your day will be a disaster.
- **Blaming.** You try to say someone else is responsible for what happened to you instead of yourself. You avoid being responsible for your thoughts and feelings.
- **Saying you "should" do something.** You think of all the things you think you should do and blame yourself for not doing them.
- **Magnifying.** You make a big deal out of minor problems.
- **Perfectionism.** Keeping impossible standards and trying to be more perfect sets yourself up for failure.
- **Polarizing.** You see things only as either good or bad. There is no middle ground.

## Focusing on Positive Thinking

You can learn to turn negative thinking into positive thinking. The process is simple, but it does take time and practice — you're creating a new habit, after all. Following are some ways to think and behave in a more positive and optimistic way:

- **Identify areas to change.** If you want to become more optimistic and engage in more positive thinking, first identify areas of your life that you usually think negatively about, whether it's work, your daily commute, life changes or a relationship. You can start small by focusing on one area to approach in a more positive way. Think of a positive thought to manage your stress instead of a negative one.
- **Check yourself.** Periodically during the day, stop and evaluate what you're thinking. If you find that your thoughts are mainly negative, try to find a way to put a positive spin on them.
- **Be open to humor.** Give yourself permission to smile or laugh, especially during difficult times. Seek humor in everyday happenings. When you can laugh at life, you feel less stressed.
- **Follow a healthy lifestyle.** Aim to exercise for about 30 minutes on most days of the week. You can also break it up into 5- or 10-minute chunks of time during the day. Exercise can positively affect mood and reduce stress. Follow a healthy diet to fuel your mind and body. Get enough sleep. And learn techniques to manage stress.
- **Surround yourself with positive people.** Make sure those in your life are positive, supportive people you can depend on to give helpful advice and feedback. Negative people may increase your stress level and make you doubt your ability to manage stress in healthy ways.
- **Practice positive self-talk.** Start by following one simple rule: Don't say anything to yourself that you wouldn't say to anyone else. Be gentle and encouraging with yourself. If a negative thought enters your mind, evaluate it rationally and respond with affirmations of what is good about you. Think about things you're thankful for in your life.