

Chapter 14

**Self-Defeating Thoughts and
Behaviors: How to Stop Hitting
Yourself in the Head With A
Hammer**

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*The principles you live by create the world you live in;
if you change the principles you live by,
you will change your world.*

-Blaine Lee

In Chapters 8, Feelings and Sobriety: How to Identify Your Feelings, and Chapter 9, Feelings and Sobriety: How to Safely [Re]claim Your Feelings, I discussed how irrational beliefs create feelings that are dangerous to your long-term sobriety. In those chapters you examined the connection between an Action, a Belief, and a Consequence. In this chapter, we'll build on what you learned in those two chapters by examining the connection between your beliefs and self-defeating behaviors.

Although you've stopped consuming alcohol and other drugs, you may not necessarily have stopped all your self-defeating behaviors. Many negative attitudes and behaviors may have become so ingrained that they operate automatically in your unconscious.

Often times you may use self-defeating behaviors as a means of protecting yourself from people and situations that make you feel uncomfortable. You can think of your negative attitudes and self-defeating behaviors as devices that insulate you from feeling bad and having to take responsibility for your feelings and actions.

Because you no longer have alcohol and other drugs to protect you from having bad feelings and taking responsibility for your actions, your use of self-defeating behaviors may actually escalate once you begin Recovery. These self-defeating responses to stressful situations can be dangerous to you and those affected by these behaviors.

You may view these beliefs and behaviors as so ingrained that there is little you can do to change them. You may even view them as a part of who you are. But the truth is, with a little thought and a lot of hard work you can transform the irrational beliefs from which these self-

defeating behaviors stem. In so doing, you will have strengthened your Recovery and found ways to avoid harming others.

Below is a list of common self-defeating, irrational beliefs that most people struggle with.

Pathfinder's Checklist



Common irrational beliefs.

- 1) I should never be emotionally or physically uncomfortable.
- 2) I should never be inconvenienced.
- 3) Life should always treat me fairly.
- 4) I should always be in control of myself, the people in my life, and the situations I find myself in.
- 5) I should never require the help of others.
- 6) I should never have to follow rules.
- 7) My feelings are created by people, places, and circumstances in my life.
- 8) Good feelings come from people and things external to me.
- 9) Everyone should approve of me.
- 10) I should not be held responsible for my words and actions.

I should never be emotionally or physically uncomfortable. Do you recognize how this belief exists in your life? What does it sound like in your thoughts? How does this

belief manifest in your words and actions? Can you identify the lengths you go to avoid feeling emotionally and physically uncomfortable? What impact do the choices you make to avoid emotional and physical discomfort have on you, the people in your life and your Recovery?

I should never be inconvenienced. Entitlement and self-centeredness are two driving forces in your disease. They do not stop just because you stop drinking and drugging. You need to be mindful of all the ways your sense of entitlement manifests in your beliefs, thoughts, words, and actions. How do you react when you believe you're being inconvenienced? What are the irrational beliefs attached to your reaction? What is a different way to respond when you believe that others are inconveniencing you?

Life should treat always treat me fairly. Here's another belief that stems from entitlement and self-centeredness. Are you a scorekeeper, keeping track of what people say and do to you? What does your reaction to the ups and downs of life reveal about you and your expectations about how life should treat you? How does your insistence that life treat you fairly manifest in your behaviors? What impact does your insistence that life treat you fairly have on you, the people in your life, and your Recovery?

I should always be in control of myself, the people in my life, and the situations I find myself in. This belief is the mother of all self-defeating beliefs. This belief is restrictive of who you are and what others can be. It is manifested from the fears you hold about life and what might happen to you if you don't micromanage every aspect of your life. How does your belief that you should always be in control manifest itself in your thoughts, words, and actions? What impact does your need to be in control have on

you, the people in your life, and your Recovery?

I should never require the help of others. Fierce independence, a refusal to turn to others, the relenting need to go it alone—is this a sign of character, or the misguided belief that others can not be relied on? Do you go it alone? Do you believe that to ask for help is a character flaw or an invitation to be taken advantage of? What prevents you from relying on the wisdom and support of others? What fears do you attach to the act of asking for help? What impact does your refusal to ask for help have on you and your Recovery?

I should never have to follow rules. Here's yet another belief born from the seeds of entitlement and self-centeredness. Rules are meant for everyone but me. This belief is the petri dish for much of your self-defeating behaviors. The laws of our society, rules of our culture, and guidelines for how to live life apply to everyone but me. And so it goes—you dedicate your life to proving how the rules apply to everybody but you. How well has that worked for you? How does this belief manifest itself in your thoughts, words, and actions? What impact does this belief and the choices it spawns have on you, the people in your life, and your Recovery?

My feelings are created by people, places, and circumstances in my life. This is the belief from which all blame that you assign to others is born. The belief that others create your feelings enables you to blame others for your choices, blame circumstances for the current state of affairs of your life, and avoid taking responsibility for your emotional and spiritual well-being. How does this belief manifest in your thoughts, words, and actions? What impact does this belief have on you, the people in your

life, and your Recovery?

Good feelings come from people and things external to me. From this belief flows your choices in which you seek the comfort of food, mood-altering substances, relationships, sexual acting-out, and compulsive behaviors such as gambling, exercising, and shopping. This belief is the motivation for all behaviors that send you looking for the emotional sustenance you can't—or won't—provide for yourself. The only problem is that these never fill the emptiness and inevitably create more problems than they solve. How does this belief manifest in your thoughts, words, and actions? What impact do the choices this belief creates have on you, the people in your life, and your Recovery?

Everyone should approve of me. This belief creates an enormous burden on people in your life to see you for how you want to be seen rather than how they experience you. At the same time, such a belief limits how you act and think. As a result, you stop being your authentic Self and invent a persona that resembles who you believe you should be in order to be accepted by others. How does this belief manifest in your thoughts, words, and actions? What impact do the choices that this belief creates have on you, the people in your life, and your Recovery.

I should not be held responsible for my words and actions. I hope by now you can recognize the entitlement and self-centeredness embedded in this belief. You have most likely lived a large portion of your life avoiding responsibility for your words and actions. Blame. Denial. Rationalization. Those are the tools that shift responsibility—but at what cost? How does this belief manifest in your thoughts, words, and actions? What impact does the

choices that this belief creates have on you, the people in your life, and your Recovery?

Pathfinder's Exercise



- 1) Pick two self-defeating behaviors that you most closely identify with.
- 2) Give an example of how using one behavior harms you, the people in your life, and your Recovery.
- 3) How do you benefit from continuing to participate in this behavior?
- 4) What changes do you need to make in your thinking in order to begin changing your choices?
- 5) What changes do you need to make in your choices in order to let go of the self-defeating behavior?
- 6) Repeat steps 1-5 for the second self-defeating behavior.

Identifying your self-defeating behaviors will be easier than changing them. To change them requires patience and support from other people. Don't set yourself up to fail by creating unrealistic expectations for yourself. Let others help by giving you feedback when they observe the behaviors you've identified that you want to change.