

The power of belief

A frequent quote from Henry Ford, the founder of Ford cars is “Whether you believe you can do a thing or not, you are right”.

What we do or do not believe about ourselves and others has a powerful effect on our lives. The most common reason that a hoped for change, such as losing weight or stopping smoking, fails to happen, is because there is a fundamental belief getting in the way and preventing the change.

Jane had tried to stop smoking many times and each time had only managed to do so for a short period because she became anxious and upset – far more so than any symptom of nicotine withdrawal would warrant. During discussion it transpired that her mother had briefly taken up smoking at a critical point in her life, when Jane was a young girl. As a result of this Jane had formed the belief that you need a cigarette in order to manage stress (and therefore that you couldn't manage stress without one). Once this belief had been identified and dealt with, Jane was able to stop smoking.

Many people are overweight as adults because of beliefs installed at an early age by parents in the immediate postwar period, when food was short. “You must eat everything on your plate” is a typical one. Often coupled with “Think of all the starving children in the world”, which encourages the belief that you are lucky to be able to have food, so you must eat it all up. Other underlying and often unrecognised beliefs such as “It is not safe to look attractive”, can cause a person to maintain an unattractive weight. Even though as an adult you can challenge the relevance of these statements – the fact that you acquired the belief at an impressionable stage of your life means that it is still doing its work today and controlling your behaviour. Change the belief and you can change the behaviour.

Many beliefs are helpful and empowering. The problem lies with those beliefs that are unhelpful and disempowering.

A salesman can have all the right technical selling skills – but if he thinks he is not a very good salesman he won't be. If you don't believe you are any good at relationships you won't be. If you believe that every time you sit in an airplane you will have a panic attack, you will probably have one.

The good news is that beliefs can be changed. Indeed we are changing our beliefs all the time. A good therapist will help you change your beliefs to ensure that the new behaviours you are seeking are supported by empowering beliefs, not undermined by old outdated ones. Henry Ford was right. “Whether you believe you can do a thing or not, you are right”.