

## ***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 a Cognitive Restructuring Worksheet (CRW) 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(s) that are generating your hot thoughts. Write that CB in the Hot Thoughts section of your worksheet, along with your other hot thoughts. Write CB- just before the unhealthy old CB. Then, when completing the Constructive Attitude section of that worksheet, in addition to countering the other hot thoughts, include the healthy new CB that counters the unhealthy old CB being tested in this experiment. Write CB- just before that new core belief. Finally, when completing the Post-Experiment Worksheet after conducting your experiment(s), make sure you include the evidence generated in your experiment(s) refuting or supporting the core beliefs, as well as your other hot thoughts. Alternatively, you can identify the CB you are testing in the Predictions column of the Experiment Worksheet (EW) before you do your experiment. Then, after the experiment, highlight what you have learned about your core belief in the last two columns of the EW.

***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 a CRW or EW in which you identify the unhealthy old core belief you are defying, and write CB- just before it. It is ideal to repeat these experiments, as your self-confidence will probably build over time. Finally, complete a PEW or the remainder of the EW after your experiment in which you record the evidence you gathered refuting or supporting your CBs.

***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 being visibly anxious. Then choose a series of experiments in which you paradoxically make it your goal to deliberately seek out the feared outcomes. Follow the steps in the Paradoxical Experiments instruction sheet. As in straightforward experiments (above), make sure you write the unhealthy CBs you are testing in a CRW or EW before conducting the experiment. Then record the evidence you gathered refuting and supporting your CBs in a PEW or EW after the experiment.

***(over)***

**Act As If:** Plan out in advance a series of repeated experiments in which your goal is to act as if you fully believed your healthy new CBs in a situation that is likely to trigger your unhealthy old CBs. Identify as goals the specific things you would do if you fully believed your healthy new beliefs. Record all this in a CRW or EW you complete before the experiments: write “Act As If” and the specific action steps you plan to do in the Behavioral Goals or Experiment section; put the unhealthy old CB in the Hot Thoughts or Predictions section; and write the healthy New CB in the CRW’s Constructive Attitude section. Ideally repeat such experiments several times until it feels more comfortable and natural, and less like acting. After your experiments, complete a PEW or the remainder of the EW in which you identify the evidence you gathered supporting or refuting your CBs.

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 a PEW or EW afterwards in which you record the evidence you gathered supporting or refuting your CBs.

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 a PEW or EW afterwards, and identify the evidence you gathered supporting or refuting your CBs.

For all versions of acting as if, make sure you are basing your experiments on something that you do, in fact, at least *largely* believe, or that you believe at other 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 much less anxious and more self-confident doing the experiments. Try doing different versions of the 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 #8 & 9 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.)