



MODULE FIVE

Coaching with the Client's Self-doubt Stories



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Introduction

Module Five is where we begin to help our clients to embrace new perspectives and new understandings about the stories that keep their Protective Beliefs alive.

In this module we'll:

- Learn an elegant process for helping your client to gently challenge Protective Beliefs that may be disproportionate, out of date or simply unhelpful.
- Understand how meaning-making develops and how our clients can change their perspective and meaning of experiences.
- How to set your client up to feel empowered to experiment with new actions.

Consider:

- What is my experience of working through these approaches on my own? With my Practice Pod?
- How might these ideas be incorporated into my client work?
- What is unclear to me?
- What questions do I have?

Self-belief Coaching tools + approaches

The tools and approaches referred to in this Module are available for you to download as unformatted word docs for you to add your own branding.

REF.	NAME	NOTES
SBCAM5A	Meaning Making Map	Expand the client's awareness about experiences that led to their Protective Beliefs.
SBCAM5B	Belief Buster	Directly challenge the validity of Protective Beliefs the client wants to change.
SBCAM5C	Experiments!	How to gather up-to-date information to see if Protective Beliefs are valid.

Coaching the client's self-doubt stories

KEY MESSAGE: We can't change what happened, but you can change how you think and feel about what happened. Making new meaning from past events changes how the experience impacts you in the here and now.

PURPOSE OF THIS MODULE:

Our Self-doubt stories are how we keep our Protective Beliefs alive. These stories are the thoughts and beliefs, reasons and justifications for *why* we do what we do.

There are three core sources of self-doubt stories:

1. Narratives that stem from the meaning we made at the time of an event (no matter how old we were).
2. Messages given to us by other people about who we are, and the meaning we made from these ideas.
3. The stories we tell other people about who we are, in order to manage their perception of us.

These stories tend to be 'thin' – they don't contain nuance; often they are so familiar to the client that they accept the stories as facts.

As Self-belief coaches, we support our clients by 'thickening' their personal narratives.

We want to help them to discover richer more complex aspects of their stories.

This helps to destabilise the hold these thin stories have, as well as updating old personal narratives.

Coaching the client's self-doubt story is about expanding their meaning-making – we help them explore their stories to see *what else might be true*.

Coaching with the client's self-doubt story is about utilising tools and approaches to revisit events to add new information, new perspectives and as a result, new meanings.

NARRATIVE THERAPY AND MEANING MAKING

This module is rooted in a narrative therapeutic approach; building on the idea that people live their lives according to stories they construct about who they are.

Narrative therapy is sometimes known as ‘re-authoring’ or ‘re-storying’. It was developed in the 1970’s and 80’s by Australian Michael White and New Zealand-born David Epston. David Drake’s book *Narrative Coaching* builds on these approaches within a coaching context.

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES AND MEANING MAKING

At the core of our self-concept are the narratives we weave – arguably, poet Muriel Rukeyser was right when she said: *The Universe is made of stories, not of atoms.*

We continuously make meaning of our lives through the stories we tell ourselves and others about who we are.

Our personality continues to develop from our stories: the way we interpret our experiences feeds into our perception of ourselves, other people, and the way the world works.

Our narratives are also dynamic; they develop and change in their retelling and operate at different levels of abstraction from the events they emerged out of.

Narrative identity researcher McAdams’ proposed that ‘identity is a life story’ (McAdams, 1987). We can then see our ongoing sense of self as rooted to this time in history, in this cultural and technological context. Our ‘self’ coheres around an ongoing collective story that we are part of.

If we consider our developmental stage as the ‘current chapter’ of our lives, we can see that by constructing new meaning from past experiences and by claiming agency as authors of our current stories, we can also construct new possible futures.

Narrative therapy research suggests that there is potential for individuals to learn and grow from the stories they construct out of their life experiences.

The key is in helping our clients to develop ‘interpretative knowledge’. This requires that we help our clients develop the capacity to express the full complexity of their life experiences:

- we help them to recall the memory
- expand their narrative to include new associations with specificity and imagery,
- and encourage the client to extract new meanings about who they are, the role of other people and how the world is constructed.

TRAUMA AND MEANING-MAKING

Whenever we are in the realm of the client's meaning-making – challenging thoughts, beliefs and perspectives – we need to be attuned to the possibility of the client's trauma.

Creating safety for the client is a priority.

This is because the body needs to feel safe *before* our brain can use logic to entertain new thoughts and beliefs. If the client doesn't feel safe, the brain and body become laser-focussed on protection and will naturally resist the possibility of expanding into new meanings.

Some ways to do this:

- **Reassure the client before using any of these tools or approaches.** This is not about changing or minimising their experience. This is in no way about denying or obscuring any feelings you have. This is an opportunity to consider what else could be true about the event.
- **Invite the client to be present to their body.** Feel their feet on the floor, breathe, notice any sensations that are present. Reassure them that we can always pause or stop. Check in during the process.
- **Stay in your Healthy Self.** We are lovingly detached from the client reaching any conclusion OR wanting to change their Protective Beliefs. It can help to work with the concept of 'parts' – this is a belief the client has; it is not the whole of who they are. E.g.: 'We are going to work with the part of you that has a belief that if you stay invisible you will be safe from conflict. We want to get to know this part! This is a safe place where we get to explore what's happening. You can always decide you want to keep this belief.'

SELF-DOUBT & MEANING-MAKING

In exploring the origin stories of our self-doubt, I've found clients find the concept of 'Clean Pain and Dirty Pain' really helpful. This originates in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. Briefly:

- **Clean Pain** is the pain that is a direct result of a life event.
- **Dirty Pain** is the pain that comes from the stories we make up about our life events.

Clean Pain is what we feel when something hurtful - physical or emotional - happens to us. Clean Pain happens when you have an argument with a loved one or you lose your job or when you cut your hand slicing a tomato.

With Clean Pain, we experience a natural stress response to the event and the emotional or physical pain eventually subsides.

Dirty Pain is caused by the thoughts we have about a situation or event.

Dirty Pain sounds like: *I've cut my hand because I am so clumsy and stupid. My manager scheduled my presentation last, because she doesn't think it's very good. Dad left home because I was too naughty and too loud.*

Dirty Pain is unverifiable. It is a story we tell ourselves.

Often the Dirty Pain meanings are made during moments when we weren't in possession of the full story, or when we felt profound emotions (often: hurt, embarrassment, anger or fear).

Our Dirty Pain meanings - especially those that were developed during childhood – can become the 'truth' of what happened to us and of who we are.

We let the Dirty Pain meanings stand and we never question them or look for alternative perspectives.

It can be incredibly liberating for our clients to understand that Dirty Pain meanings can continue to show up in the here and now. These stories are never the whole truth.

Because we have a built-in negative bias, we often interpret events through assumptions and Dirty Pain stories.

By gently expanding the client's perspective, we can help them to 'thicken' the stories that have a lot of unverifiable information woven through them.

By adding in complexity, nuance, extra information, compassion for ourselves (and others), our clients can make peace with experiences that contribute to their self-doubt.

SBCA Coaching Tool: Meaning Making Map

This exercise is an invitation to get curious about the origins of key self-doubt stories. These stories are likely to come from the client's Life Map, their biography and/or narratives related to their Self-doubt Archetypes or Protective Beliefs.

INTENDED OUTCOMES:

To 'thicken' the stories the client has about themselves, other people, or their self-doubt.

EVIDENCE-BASED CONTEXT:

Expanding meaning-making is a feature of many person-centred and humanist therapies including Narrative Therapy.

BENEFITS FOR THE CLIENT:

- Increases the complexity and nuance of 'thin' stories.
- Helps to bring their current, oldest, wisest self to past experiences and offer new perspectives, eg: where they may be simplifying events to preserve relationships (particularly when they take responsibility as a child for circumstances that were never theirs to own).
- Can spark a Subject-Object shift in real time - the story the client has been subject to (eg: I am too needy) is able to be objectified ('I was a child with completely understandable needs, and they weren't tended to in this instance'), which creates new meaning-making in the here and now ('maybe it's safe for me to express my needs?').

TOP TIPS:

- Allow the client to lead. Invite them to choose something they are genuinely interested in exploring.
- Maintain a stance of curiosity, keep the 'reporters' mindset: I wonder what else might have been going on?
- Maintain a respectful, detached, un-blaming approach for the client and any of the characters involved – it sounds like your Mother wasn't present for you in the way you needed?
- Ask questions – allow the client time to reflect: Do you have a theory about what was going on for her at the time?

COACHING WITH A CLIENT'S MEANING MAKING MAP:

- Allow the client to choose a story to explore. Take a moment to recall the memory and bring this to life.
- Invite the client to close their eyes, feel their feet on the floor, remind themselves they are here, now, safe. They can stop at any time. We are wanting to take in what happened.
- Ask them to bring the event to mind – have them imagine they are watching themselves from above. Ask questions to help them visualise: *How old are you? What are the details that you remember? Who else was present? What happened? What was said? How did you respond? What do you remember thinking? What do you remember feeling?*
- Complete the top row of the map as the client shares their memories of what they were thinking and feeling.
- The second row is about coaching the client on their meaning-making and how this is showing up in the here and now. *What did you make this event mean about you?*
- Consider the role that Dirty Pain might have played. List out what they made it mean. They might need to talk about the stories that this created.
- In the last box we want to widen and thicken the possible meaning that can be made from the event. **This is the important part!**
- This is about inviting the client to consider what else could be true? We want to stay with reality (this is not about what they wish had happened):
 - *Think about the other people who were present, what might have been going on for them?*
 - *What did you not know at the time of the event?*
 - *What external events or systems played a role in this situation?*
 - *Who else had responsibility here?*
- Once the map is complete – ask the client to see the difference in the thin story (what they made it mean) and the thickened story (what else could be true?).
- ‘Thick’ stories are more complex, more nuanced, they often suggest more than one thing to be true at the same time, they require more than the client to own their part.
- The idea here is to allow the client to see that there may have a limit to what they could have done.

EXAMPLE OF MEANING MAKING MAP (FROM SAS):

MY MEMORY:

Being bullied at high school. I'm 14 – just returned to my small country school in New Zealand after living with my Grandmother in the UK for three months.

WHAT I REMEMBER THINKING AT THE TIME:

- I'll never fit in.
- Something is clearly wrong with me.
- I am alone.
- No one will stick up for me.
- I can't ask for help – it will make it worse.

WHAT I REMEMBER FEELING AT THE TIME:

- Ashamed
- Humiliated/embarrassed
- Lonely
- Angry
- Confused
- Sad

WHAT I MADE THIS MEAN AT THE TIME:

- I am unpopular.
- I can't trust anyone.
- I don't belong.
- People cannot be trusted.
- Do not speak up.
- I have to be the best – this will make me untouchable.
- Somehow, I brought this on myself.

WHAT OTHER MEANINGS COULD BE TRUE:

- 14-year-old kids who had not left the island could not comprehend me flying around the world – this might have brought up all kinds of feelings for them
- A scapegoat takes the heat of them
- The 80s was a terrible time to be in school!
- Teachers failed to step in and address what was happening
- My parents didn't advocate for me when they found out – they tried to get me to be 'nicer/funnier/fit in'.
- I learned how to take care of myself.

SBCA Coaching Tool: Belief Buster

I know it's a somewhat cheesy name, but I am a fan of alliteration! Also, when I have shared this practice with clients, they often report a sense of 'busting' through a previously impenetrable wall.

INTENDED OUTCOMES:

Help our clients to challenge the validity of their Protective Beliefs.

EVIDENCE-BASED CONTEXT:

I created the Belief Buster during my training in Rational Emotional Behavioural Therapy. REBT was first developed in the 1950s by Albert Ellis and is a precursor to Cognitive Behavioural Therapy.

REBT is rooted in the idea that our thoughts, emotions, and behaviours create a 'system' of beliefs that we live by. Often our system is unhealthy - it's irrational, it doesn't serve us, or we are unconscious of it.

Therefore, we can feel like life just happens to us and we are in a constant state of responding to circumstances we can't control.

REBT helps us to heal unhealthy beliefs and create new healthy ones. Through this process we come to understand the paradox:

Sovereignty over our lives requires radical self-responsibility, while accepting that we cannot control anything that happens outside of us.

BENEFITS FOR THE CLIENT:

- Learning how to unravel the beliefs that aren't serving our clients can be an incredibly life-affirming process.
- Some clients really love this as a tool they can take away and practice on their own – I have found those with a Formed Self-concept in particular, get a lot from this.
- To focus the BB on a coaching theme (ie: creativity, business, relationships, visibility etc) invite them to spend 5 minutes each day writing down their thoughts and beliefs about the theme.
- To get the most from this process, there is only one rule: TELL YOURSELF THE TRUTH!

- Don't judge what is in your brain, don't sugar coat your thinking – give yourself permission to be unreasonable - rant, judge, criticise, expunge – let it be 'off-brand' and messy.
- Encouraging your clients to notice what is in their minds – and where possible to have a sense of humour about this – helps to normalise beliefs that are unhelpful, irrational, disproportionate.
- The goal isn't to eliminate these beliefs (impossible!) it's to help the client claim some agency over which beliefs they want to put in the driver's seat.

COACHING WITH THE BELIEF BUSTER:

- Notice you do this process twice. The first round is to articulate the Unconscious Belief – this is the Protective Belief or the 'thin story' as it is currently working. We want to understand the consequences of the Protective Belief.
- **The key aspect of this process is to understand two things:**
 - Firstly - the psychological risk the client is protecting themselves from. This helps them to see the reason for this Protective Belief. It is serving a purpose – they aren't getting in their own way; they are trying to keep themselves safe.
 - Secondly – we want to help them see that they are already experiencing the risk! It is highly likely that the risk is present but being internalised. So, if the risk is rejection, how are they rejecting themselves? If the risk is disappointment, how are they feeling disappointed?
- The context does not change. This is factual, neutral reality that we interpret with a Belief. This is important as the client starts to see that nothing and no one must change for them to feel better or to create a different outcome.
- For the Helpful Belief, we are introducing words like desired, possible, likely, helpful, doable – these are designed to be gentle challenge to the Protector! Our clients are likely to experience resistance.

Consider: are there circumstances where it is not appropriate or helpful to challenge a client's belief in this way?

BELIEF BUSTER – PROTECTIVE BELIEF

CONTEXT The factual neutral reality that led to the Belief. <i>I am launching my new coaching offer.</i>	PROTECTIVE BELIEF One sentence describing how you are choosing to interpret context – thin story. <i>Marketing and selling is horrible!</i>	EMOTION How do you feel as a result of your Belief? What is your top emotion? <i>Frustrated.</i>
BEHAVIOURS What do you do or say as a result of your Protective Belief? <i>Withdraw. Numb out. Show up once and hope for the best.</i>	OUTCOMES What tangible outcomes does the Belief create in your life? <i>I am not marketing my programme. No one is buying. This makes me want to withdraw even further.</i>	RISK What risk is the Belief protecting you from? How are you already experiencing this risk? <i>Judgement and Rejection are the main risks. I am judging myself so much! By not sharing my programme, I am rejecting myself and my clients.</i>

By bringing your unconscious or automatic beliefs into consciousness, you are able to see the consequences of Protective Beliefs. How are you already experiencing this risk your Self-doubt is trying to protect you from?

BELIEF BUSTER – HELPFUL BELIEF

CONTEXT Unchanged from the Protective Belief – this is factual neutral reality. <i>I am launching my new coaching offer.</i>	DESIRED EMOTIONS How do you want to feel about this Context? What can you access right now? <i>Curious. Brave. Nervous.</i>	POSSIBLE BEHAVIOUR What is possible for you to do or say if you were feeling the Desired Emotions? <i>I'll imagine the people I hope to enrol – what are they looking for from my work?</i>
LIKELY OUTCOME If you were feeling the Desired Emotions and engaging in Possible Behaviour, what is the likely outcome? <i>I would be experimenting with marketing and finding out more about what I enjoy – how I like to show up and what seems to resonate with my people.</i>	HELPFUL BELIEF What is a more Helpful Belief for how to interpret the Context? MUST be something you believe is true. <i>I am learning how to market and sell my coaching offer.</i>	FIRST DOABLE STEP Chose the easiest action that supports your helpful belief. <i>I'll write some notes about the value of my programme with my clients in mind.</i>

Protective Beliefs are healed through practice: bring unconscious beliefs into the open. Take imperfect action. Be willing to feel the experience of taking action. Notice how the risk changes: is it distorted, inherited, out of date, able to be managed?

SBCA Coaching Tool: Experiments!

Making new meanings

Everything up until now has been about preparing the client to take new action. Now that the client has a deeper understanding of what their self-doubt is trying to do, and why their self-doubt is showing up in the way it is – it's time for taking new action!

INTENDED OUTCOMES:

Test the validity of their Protective Beliefs by creating new evidence in order to confirm, revise or let go of the beliefs.

EVIDENCE-BASED CONTEXT:

This approach is adapted from Kegan and Lahey's (2009) Immunity to Change model.

BENEFITS FOR THE CLIENT:

- The fastest way to rewrite Protective Beliefs is to update the evidence that supports them.
- For clients who want to 'get on with it' this will be something they are really keen to start doing!
- Taking action is also likely to bring any resistance the client feels into focus – this is so helpful to support the client to take action even with self-doubt.

TOP TIPS:

- During the experiments, we want the client to turn their doubt onto the protective belief – what if this wasn't true in all circumstances?
- We are experimenting to see what happens – not to try and control the outcome! The purpose of a test is to be curious about the outcomes when you intentionally alter your usual behaviour.
- What they find out will help them see whether they should continue to hold onto this belief in the same form or if it needs to be updated.
- The purpose here is to update the accuracy and validity of the client's protective beliefs. It's about adding context and specificity to generalised protective beliefs.

- The more action the client takes, the more data they have – come up with small actions the client can incorporate into their lives and repeat a few times – they may only need a few things to try.

COACHING A CLIENT THROUGH AN EXPERIMENT:

- Plan: Devise experiments with the client in session, to test the validity of the beliefs that underpin their Self-doubt.
- Do: Between sessions, the client should conduct the experiments - try new approaches, take new action, show up differently in order to gather up to date data from their real life. The more action they take, the more they will shift their belief!
- Review: In the next session review the client's experiences – *What happened? How were they surprised? What beliefs are shifting? What meaning making is expanding? What happened if the risks came true? What internal resources did they call on? What do they make of this?*

EXAMPLE OF AN EXPERIMENT (FROM SAS):

For most of my life I believed the reason I was bullied as a teenager, was because I did not fit in. Underlying this was the belief: it is not safe to be me.

It makes sense I that I faithfully strived to fit in, because I believe that the safety of my relationships is predicated on fitting in.

To test this belief, I might set out a couple of experiments that feel safe and small:

MY PROTECTIVE BELIEF SAYS:	I WILL CHANGE MY ACTIONS TO:	AND COLLECT THE FOLLOWING DATA:	IN ORDER TO FIND OUT IF:
I have to put everyone else's needs before my own.	Take opportunities to say 'no' if I don't agree or don't want to do something.	How does it feel before, during and after saying no?	Is it true that I cannot put my needs first?
Positive feedback only comes when I work harder than other people.	Ask for help at work, practice saying 'I don't know', decline extra projects.	How do I feel when I allow myself a break?	Is it true that I have to work so hard?
I can never allow anyone to see my 'difficult emotions'.	Share something difficult with a trusted person	What does it feel like to say what's true for me?	Is it true that my big emotions are not acceptable?

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