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NEWSLETTER
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AUTHORS' NOTE



Those of you who have worked with me know I've always had a strange effect on electronics (blowing the light bulbs on overhead projectors every time I turned one on comes immediately to mind). The past couple of months my electronic challenge has been email. For whatever reason, mail sent through the website may or may not have been delivered! The problem was discovered by accident, so if anyone sent a message using any of the amlifecoaching.org addresses & didn't get a response, I deeply apologize...please resend your message to lin@amlifecoaching.org. With any luck I'll be less 'charged' from now on & it will all get through!



Until next month.....Lin

As an introduction to one of the self help books to be released later this year, I am including a series of columns over the next few issues that will discuss Belief and Choice. Because the concepts presented here may be new to some, I have placed examples in white boxes to help clarify them. I have also included the main concepts in black boxes. As always, your feedback, questions and input are appreciated as they help me to address information of interest to you. If you have any questions or comments please send them to me at lin@amlifecoaching.org. Thank you!!!

The Formation & Effect of Our Belief Systems

Belief systems are initiated at birth, if not sooner, and continue to form as we mature. Belief systems can be defined as the collection of rules and facts that we accept as being true. We process all the inputs and stimuli we receive in every moment of every day through this set of rules and facts. Our own, personal belief systems act as the filters through which make sense out of everything we hear, smell, see, taste, and touch. When we encounter something new, we form our thoughts and opinions about it based on and within the rules and facts that make up our personal belief system.

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We are born into a family that has an established belief system. Whether the family is a traditional mother and father, adoptive parents or an orphanage, the family we are exposed to has a belief system within which they operate. As babies and young children this first exposure to the rules, facts and boundaries the family believes and uses begins to help us form our own beliefs, even though we are not necessarily conscious of it happening. As a child we almost unquestionably take clues from our parents that influence our belief systems.

When we are very young we rely on our parents for guidance to help us form our own belief system. Their knowledge of the world and how it operates is passed to us. Many of the beliefs they impart operate in the background of our every day lives when we get older; they help us function in a relatively safe environment even though we no longer think about them. A simple example of the formation of a background belief is given in the box to the right (*Example: Forming a Background Belief*), which uses fire and what we accept as true about it to demonstrate a belief that is seldom challenged and pretty much held throughout our lives. It is not a belief we think about needing or wanting to change, so it operates in the background (i.e. we seldom think about it or challenge it) as a truth. When you need to make a choice about using your hand to grab your burger off the grill or use tongs, you don't have to think very long or hard about using the tongs.

The effects of our family's belief system continue to influence our beliefs as we grow up. We learn what behaviors are acceptable at home and in public. We are exposed to everything from etiquette (or the lack thereof) to attitude. We react to our parents' beliefs whether or not they say them out loud. We know what is acceptable to them and what is not. Since

people choose friends with similar belief systems, our parents' friends will have most of the same beliefs as our parents. We will be exposed to others that share the same values and ethics that we witness in our homes, and so those beliefs will be reinforced even more.

Interaction with others gives us opportunities to review the beliefs our families have demonstrated and then decide for ourselves what our own belief will be. For example, if

EXAMPLE: FORMING A BACKGROUND BELIEF

When you are first exposed to a fire or to a hot stove you do not yet have a belief about it. If you tried to touch the fire (or stove), someone probably intervened to stop you and told you, "No. Do not touch. It is hot." You may have accepted this at first, but if you did not accept the fact that fire or a stove could be hot and hurt you, you may have touched it anyway or you may have accidentally come into contact with fire and found out first hand that it is best not to touch it. Your experience with fire or a hot stove showed you that touching fire had its consequences, which became part of your belief system. More than likely you formulated the belief that fire is hot and can cause you harm. For most people this belief is held throughout their lives and they make the choice to keep a safe distance from a fire. As we grow up we do not need to continuously test fire to see if it is hot. It is a background belief we hold as a truth.

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EXAMPLE: CONFLICTING INFLUENCES

If your mother explains you must share and demonstrates sharing by taking a toy from you and giving it to another child, you see the behavior she would like you to have. She gives you a different toy and explains that you should play with it instead. It is her belief you should share. However, when she leaves the room and the other child rips your toy out of your hands and will not share, you clearly know that this child does not believe he/she needs to share. At that point you have a choice. You can decide whose behavior you will emulate. You can decide what you believe to be the correct choice, and form your own belief about sharing.

we are playing with another child and both want the same toy, we will learn about the rules of sharing from both our parents and the other child. In fact we may find that their ideas on sharing don't agree and get our first experience in making a choice and formulating our own belief regarding sharing (see *Example: Conflicting Influences*).

As you go through life you will find your beliefs can change based on your own experiences and choices. In the example above on sharing, you may have decided that you do not want to share and behave accordingly, but after many reprimands from your parents, you begin to believe that sharing is appropriate, change your belief (and thus change your behavior) and share.

EXAMPLE: INFLUENCE OF PEERS

If you are a straight 'A' student, believe good grades help you to get into college, and hang out with friends who are also good students, then it is unlikely they will ridicule your good student status. However, if your friends are not able to get good grades, they may tease you about your A's. If the teasing is bearable, you may simply ignore them and continue to receive good grades, but if you cannot withstand their scrutiny, then you will have to make a different choice. You may decide to pick different friends or choose to not do as well in school. If you change friends, you keep your belief about needing good grades intact. If you instead decide to not do as well in school, then you have begun to challenge your belief that you need good grades.

As we mature the influence of our peers plays a large role in forming our beliefs. In fact their influence may play a larger role than our parents did. Because of our human need to 'fit in', we watch our friends to see how they behave. When we see them do or say things that differ from our own behaviors, we are faced with the choice to conform or to be different. If our friends are supportive in our choice to be different from them, then our behavior is reinforced and our belief stays in tact. However, if they are unsupportive or openly opposed or even ridicule and embarrass us, then we must make the choice to ignore it, change friends or change our behavior. (See *Example: Influence of Peers*). Because our behaviors are simply an outward reflection of our beliefs, changing our behavior is a step toward changing our belief.

Serious differences between you and your peers can lead to either a stronger conviction to your beliefs or drastic changes in them. A stronger conviction means that you are choosing to hold true to your belief regardless of the reaction of your peers. Changing your beliefs to fit in is how non-drinkers become drinkers, non-smokers become smokers, non-religious youth pick up religion, and so on. The influence of peers can be positive or negative, but either way it is a choice.

Another large factor in forming and altering our beliefs is societal norms. In other words, the beliefs of the culture in which you live greatly influence your choices and beliefs. If you live in a society that stresses the need for a high school education, then you are more likely to conform and complete high school. If society stresses a dislike for nose rings, then few people will have them.

By far, the media is one of the most influential tools in forming or changing the beliefs of a society. Because there are so many forms of communication in today's world, it is relatively easy to reach the masses and affect their beliefs. A good example is the effective use of the media to sway voters in presidential elections or to direct public opinion on things like war. Through the use of television, magazines, newspapers, radio, and the internet, millions of people can be given information – true or false – that alters the course of history. Most people want to conform and avoid confrontation or simply have not been exposed to a variety of ideas and beliefs, so the media is successful in swaying beliefs.

As you go through life all of your experiences will be interpreted through those things you believe to

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be true. When something cannot be explained within your existing belief system, then you will either discount it or, if you are open minded enough, challenge your belief.

When we challenge our beliefs – even if we don't change them – it aids in our growth and evolution because it opens our minds up to possibilities that otherwise may not have been considered. In the example box (*Example: Challenging Our Beliefs*), we could take things a step further. For instance, it is interesting to wonder that if we truly did not believe fire was hot, would it be?

EXAMPLE: CHALLENGING OUR BELIEFS

Let's go back to our example about fire. Let's say our belief is that fire is hot and will burn us close to immediately if we place our arm into a burning flame. Now let's say Tom does not hold the belief that fire will burn him immediately. Tom believes his arm would have to stay in the burning flame for at least twenty seconds in order to produce a burn. We laugh at what seems to be naiveté on Tom's part, but sure enough, he puts his arm in a burning flame for fifteen seconds and pulls it out. He is not burned and our belief system is challenged. We can choose to believe he must be using some trick – perhaps some special coating he places on his arm to protect it – or we can choose to reevaluate our own belief and consider the possibility that fire does not burn the skin immediately.

It can be daunting to accept the tremendous power our belief system has had over our choices, our interpretations of others, our attitude, and our life's direction. Even more concerning is the possible limitations it may have wielded over our life with us naïve to its power. With the awareness of its existence and the knowledge of how significant it is, we can walk away with great hope. We can uncover beliefs we may not even have known we held simply by studying our choices, our predicaments and our behavior. We no longer need to be held under the spell of our belief system if it does not serve us. We can make the choice to be more aware of it, and challenge it when it does not serve us. We can create the life we want.

BEING WILLING TO
CHALLENGE OUR BELIEFS IS
HOW WE EVOLVE

ONE CHOICE CAN CHANGE A LIFE™



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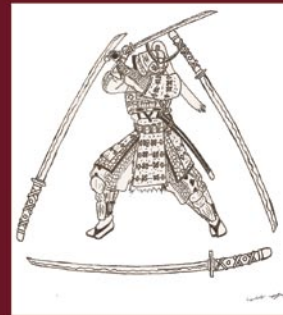


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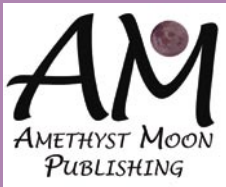


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