

Improving Self-Esteem

Module 7

Adjusting Rules & Assumptions

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Introduction

In modules 4 and 5, we discussed biased expectations and negative self-evaluations and introduced some strategies for you to work at challenging them. In the previous module, we discussed the importance of accepting yourself and explored strategies for identifying and acknowledging your positive qualities and experiences. We hope that you have found these strategies helpful in improving how you feel about, and see, yourself. Now that you have had some experience in working through these strategies, it is also important that we tackle some of the more difficult issues and work toward addressing negative core beliefs. In this module, we will discuss adjusting and changing the unhelpful rules and assumptions that restrict your behaviour and keep your negative core beliefs alive.

Rules for Living

Here are some things to review and keep in mind, before we begin tackling our unhelpful rules.

Rules are learned. It is not often that unhelpful rules are formally taught. Rather these are developed through trial and error and observations you had made in your earlier life experiences. You may not consciously know that you have developed these rules but they consistently influence how you behave and live your life anyway. These rules often grew out of the conclusions you made about yourself as a result of your earlier life experiences. Therefore, these rules are also unique to you.

Rules can be culture-specific. The rules and assumptions for living that you have developed reflect the norms and culture of the family and the society or community in which you grew up. For example, you might have grown up in a family where boys are favoured over girls and if you are female, you might have concluded that you are a second-class citizen. You might then have learned the rule, “Women must always be subservient to men,” and continue to live according to this rule even if circumstances are different now.

Rules can be stubborn and resist change. Rules for living not only guide your behaviour, they also influence how you perceive, interpret, and absorb information throughout your life. In Module 3, we talked about how there are many things happening, and there is a lot of information available, around us. Often we are not aware of all that is going on because our brains would be bombarded with too much information if we tried to make sense of everything. Therefore, we are equipped with an ability to sift out information and focus on only those things that are important to us. Unfortunately this could also work against us because we tend to only pay attention to, and make sense of, those things that are consistent with our beliefs and rules. So, if you have the negative core belief, “*I am an unattractive person,*” and the rule “*I must always be funny and witty or else no one will like me,*” you might only notice the person who doesn’t laugh at your remarks and not the other three who were laughing heartily. You might also then interpret that as “*People didn’t laugh at my jokes, so they must not like me.*” This is why unhelpful rules for living and negative core beliefs can be resistant to change. However, now that you know this, you can learn to notice other things as well and to challenge any unhelpful interpretations so that you can have a more balanced view of yourself.

Rules for Living: What’s Helpful, What’s Not

Rules and assumptions for living guide our behaviour and enable us to cope with our everyday lives. Rules for living are necessary for us to make sense of the world around us and to help us function on a day-to-day basis. So, having rules, in itself, is not unhelpful. The question is what type of rules do we have? There are many rules for living that *are* helpful. Helpful rules are realistic, flexible, and adaptable, and they enable us to function healthily and safely. For example, “*People should not drive when they have had too much to drink (ie, have a blood alcohol level of more than .05)*” is a helpful rule. These types of rules are realistic, that is, there is evidence to support them. There is evidence that the judgement of people who

have more than a blood alcohol level of .05 can become impaired. They are less able to see clearly and concentrate on what they are doing. So, based on this evidence, keeping this rule can help ensure our survival!

Helpful rules are also those that are flexible and adaptable. This means that they allow you to adapt your behaviour to various situations. No one can be absolutely certain about everything in life nor does one have control over everything. That is why rules that have some 'give' in them are probably more helpful than those that are absolutistic. Consider the rule, *"It would be great if we could all try our best and work as hard as we can for this project"* compared with *"We must always be the best at everything we do, at all costs."* In the first rule, we are asked to work to the best of our abilities, given the circumstances, for a particular project. This means that the rule takes into consideration the times that for some reason, we are not able to match the standards that we reached previously. Perhaps we are ill or are experiencing a problematic situation in our personal lives. The rule is also flexible in that it applies to a particular situation (a project) as there are other times when we may choose not to work so hard at something (eg, gardening, cooking, or cleaning our house). We may decide that we want to work but also to take it a little easier.

Unhelpful rules are unrealistic, unreasonable, excessive, rigid, and unadaptable. Look at the second rule in the above paragraph. According to that rule, we have to achieve a particular standard ("best at everything") in every situation ("always") and not caring about what we might have to do or give up to achieve it ("at all costs"). If we believed strongly in this rule and made ourselves live up to it everyday, what would happen? We will probably feel strong negative emotions when the rule is broken, which is quite likely. The reality is that we cannot be the best all the time. There are times when others might achieve better results. This rule also ensures that our self-esteem remains low because it is setting us up to fail.

Let's explore further how unhelpful rules keep low self-esteem going.

Unhelpful Rules & Low Self-Esteem

In essence, low self-esteem is viewing yourself and valuing your self-worth in a negative way. This is reflected in the negative core beliefs you might have about yourself, such as, "I am unlovable," or "I am not important." As discussed in Module 2, you might have come to these conclusions as a result of significant negative experiences early in life. To help you get by and manage from day to day, you might have developed rules and assumptions to help protect your self-esteem. Unfortunately, these rules and assumptions are usually unrealistic, unreasonable, rigid, and unadaptable. Let's say, for example, that you have the belief, *"I am incompetent."* You might have developed the rule and assumption *"I must never ask for help, because if I do, people will laugh at me"* or *"I must never take on a task that seems too difficult for me because if I don't do well, people will think I'm a total idiot."* If you are able to stick to, and carry out, these rules and assumptions, you might feel okay about yourself because then no one will know how bad you are at doing things. But what is the effect of having such rules?

Although these rules appear to help protect your self-esteem, they actually keep your negative core beliefs and your low self-esteem in place – they are 'locked in' as it were. Living up to such rules and assumptions means that your behaviour is restricted in such a way that these rules and your negative core beliefs do not have the opportunity to be challenged. Let's continue with the previous example, with the rule and assumption, *"I must never ask for help, because if I do, people will laugh at me."* If you never ask for help, you will not be able to check out what people's responses are if you do. If you occasionally asked for help, you might find that some people were quite happy to lend a helping hand and did not laugh at you. In this way, your assumption that people would laugh at you if you asked for help would have been challenged. However, because of your reluctance in asking for help, you don't get a chance to debunk it. As such, your rule and assumption stays in place and your negative core belief also remains intact.



Not only do such unhelpful rules and assumptions keep low self-esteem in place, they also put a considerable amount of pressure on you. Note that the rule is “*I must never ask for help.*” The words “must” and “never” are an indication of the inflexibility of the rule. The rule demands that you behave in a particular way all the time. It does not allow you to behave differently in, or adapt to, different environments and situations.

Identifying My Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions

Let’s now begin to identify what unhelpful rules and assumptions you might have developed for yourself to live by. You might already have an idea of these now that you have learned to challenge your biased expectations and negative self-evaluations. When identifying your rules and assumptions, ask yourself:

- What do I expect of myself when I am at work or school?
- What standards do I expect myself to meet? What would I accept and not accept?
- What do I expect of myself when I am socialising?
- What do I expect of myself in my various roles – child, friend, partner, parent, staff member/supervisor?
- What do I expect of myself regarding leisure or fun activities, and self-care?

Rules and assumptions for living can be in the form of statements such as:

“I must/should/have to always ... or else ... ,”	eg, “I must always be the best at everything,” “I have to always keep it together and control my emotions.”
“I must/should never ... ,”	eg, “I must never show any sign of weakness or back away from a challenge,” “I should never ask for something that I need.”
“If ... , then ... ,”	eg, “If I let people know the real me, they will think I’m a total loser,” “If I ask someone out, I will look like I’m desperate for a partner.”
“If I don’t, then ... ,”	eg, “If I don’t work as hard as I possibly can, then I will not gain recognition from my boss,” or “If I don’t do whatever it takes to stay slim, I will never have any friends.”

The following are other sources from which you might be able to identify your rules and assumptions for living.

Thought Diaries. What you have recorded in your Thought Diaries are biased expectations and negative self-evaluations, which are also known as unhelpful thoughts. Often, there is another layer behind those unhelpful thoughts. For example, thoughts such as, “*This report really sucks. I didn’t have time to include coloured charts. I should have done better,*” might reflect the rule, “*I have to do everything perfectly.*” Usually, there are rules and assumptions for living that are already present that generate or “drive” the unhelpful thoughts. Can you recognise if there are any rules for living reflected in your unhelpful thoughts?

Themes. Another way of identifying the rules and assumptions that guide your behaviour is to ask yourself if you notice any themes that might be common to the concerns you have or the issues that you are preoccupied with. You could ask yourself questions such as:

- In what types of situations might I experience the most anxiety or self-doubt?
- What aspects of myself am I most hard on?
- What types of negative predictions do I make?
- What behaviours in other people are linked with me feeling less confident about myself?

Negative Evaluations of Self & Others. Ask yourself:

- In what types of situations do I put myself down?
- What aspects of myself do I criticise most? What does this say about what I expect of myself?
- What might happen if I relax my standards? What type of person do I think I might become?
- What don't I allow myself to do?
- What do I criticise in other people? What expectations of them do I have? What standards do I expect them to live up to?

Direct Messages/Family Sayings. Sometimes, your rules and assumptions for living might be direct messages given to you when you were a child or adolescent. Ask yourself:

- What was I told about what I should and should not do?
- What happened when I did not obey those rules? What was I told then?
- For what was I punished, criticised, and ridiculed?
- What was said to me when I was not able to meet expectations?
- How did people who were important to me respond when I was naughty, made mistakes, or didn't do well at school?
- What did I have to do to receive praise, affection, or warmth?

Some of those messages you received when you were much younger could be in the form of particular sayings that some families might have, or some sort of a "motto." For example, adults in families might say, "The only person you can depend on is yourself," "People who are nice to you always want something in return," "Practice makes perfect," "If you can't do something well, you might as well not try," or "If you don't aim high, you will never be successful." Did your family have any sayings or mottos that you remember or use today?

Now that you have read this section on identifying your rules and assumptions for living, have you been able to identify or recognise any that are operating right now in your life? What are some of those rules and assumptions? Take a few minutes to write them down.

Adjusting the Rules

By now, you might have come to recognise some unhelpful rules and assumptions for living that you might have developed when you were younger and have been trying to live according to them. Just as in the previous modules, you can work at challenging your rules and assumptions for living in a step-by-step way using a worksheet. If you have worked through the previous modules, you will probably find that changing the rules is not that difficult. It isn't easy, but it might not be that difficult either, given that you have already had some practice at challenging your biased expectations and negative self-evaluations. On page 9, you will find a worksheet for you to work through. Before doing that, read through the following notes that will provide a guide for you.

1. Identify an unhelpful rule and/or assumption that you would like to challenge. If you have a number of rules and assumptions and are not sure which one to work on first, choose one that is related to an aspect of your life that you really want to change (eg, your social life or your relationship with your colleagues).

2. Have a think about how this rule and/or assumption for living has impacted your life. Ask yourself: *What aspect of my life has this rule had an impact? Has it affected my relationships, work or studies, how I take care of myself or engage in social or leisure activities? How do I respond when things don't go well? How do I respond to challenging situations or new opportunities? How do I express my emotions? Am I able to ask for my needs to be met?* Evaluating the effect of unhelpful rules and assumptions on your life is important because you not only want to change and adjust these rules, you also want to change how they affect your life.
3. Ask yourself how do you know when this rule is in operation? How do you know when the rule is active in your life? How do you feel? What are the things you do and say (to yourself or others)?
4. Ask yourself, "Where did the rule come from?" The purpose of this question is to provide a context for your rule and assumption. It is to help you understand how this rule developed and what might have kept it going all this while. As we have discussed before, unhelpful rules and assumptions might have made sense at the time when you were experiencing a difficult situation and you adopted them so that you could cope and function from day to day. However, the main issue is whether or not this rule or assumption is still relevant today. Ask yourself, "Is this rule still necessary today? Is it useful?"
5. Next, ask yourself, "In what ways is this rule (and/or assumption) unreasonable?" Remember that we have discussed that unhelpful rules and assumptions are inflexible and rigid. Sometimes when you live according to such rules and assumptions, you don't recognise that the world around us does not behave that way in general. Also, these rules and assumptions were made when you were a child or young person. As an adult now, you don't have to live according to the rules you made as a child.
6. Although unhelpful rules and assumptions are not beneficial in the long term, there might be certain advantages in living according to these rules. It is probably why these rules and assumptions are still intact. Make a list of these advantages. Ask yourself, "What advantages do I gain from living according to this rule and/or assumption? What benefits have I obtained? How have these been helpful? What do they protect me from?"
7. What are the disadvantages of living according to this rule and assumption? You have identified the advantages but it is also important to evaluate whether or not the advantages are really genuine. Then ask yourself about how this rule/assumption might limit your opportunities, prevent you from experiencing fun and pleasure, downplay your achievements and successes, negatively impact on your relationships, or prevent you from achieving your life goals. Write these down on the worksheet and then compare them with the advantages you had written down. Do the disadvantages outweigh the advantages? If it is the other way round, then maybe you need not challenge this particular rule and assumption. If you decide that this rule and assumption is not helpful, then let's move on to the next important point.
8. Now, think carefully about what might be a more balanced rule – what would be more realistic, flexible, and helpful? Try and think about how you could maximise the advantages and minimise the disadvantages of the old rule. Think about the ability to adapt this rule to different situations. Consider using less extreme terms such as "sometimes," "some people," "prefer," "would like," "it would be nice if," compared with "must," "should," "it would be terrible if..." For example, instead of the unhelpful rule, "I must do whatever it takes to stay slim, or else I will never have any friends," consider the alternative "I will try to maintain a healthy lifestyle and it would be nice if I could continue to be slim. However, it is unlikely that my friends only like me because I am slim." Balanced rules and assumptions might end up being longer than old ones. This is because they are more 'sophisticated' – you are making it more realistic, flexible, and adaptable. If you find it difficult to think of an alternative rule and/or assumption that is more balanced, don't worry. Just give it a try and put it in practice for a week or two. You can always revise your rule and adjust it as you become more familiar with the process of challenging and adjusting your unhelpful rules and assumptions.

9. The final step is to consider what you could do to put your new rule and assumption into practice. Why do you think it might be important to do this? Remember that your old rule and assumption had been in operation for some time now so it is important that you not only have a new rule but new behaviours so that the new rule can be 'house-broken' and settle into your balanced belief system.

On the next page is an example of how an "Adjusting the Rules" worksheet can be completed. On the page after that, there is a blank worksheet. After you have had a chance to look at the example, try working through a worksheet yourself.

Adjusting the Rules

(example)

Rule and/or Assumption I would like to Adjust	
<i>I must do whatever it takes to stay slim, or else I will never have any friends</i>	
What impact has this rule (and/or assumption) had on my life?	
<i>I put myself under a lot of pressure to stay slim. I use extreme measures to get rid of the food I eat and to burn the fat away I'm always thinking and worrying about my weight and body. Sometimes I get so sick of it.</i>	
How do I know this rule is in operation?	
<i>Whenever I eat, I feel guilty I think, "I should not eat this. It will make me fat!" If I happen to have eaten a big meal, I will use laxatives to get rid of the food.</i>	
Where did this rule (and/or assumption) come from?	
<i>My mother always said I was a fat kid and had to lose weight. Kids at school used to call me "fat-face" and "whale." My mother made me go on all sorts of diets.</i>	
In what ways is this rule (and/or assumption) unreasonable?	
<i>When I say to myself, "I must do whatever it takes..." I am being inflexible and unreasonable. It drives me to use extreme measures that might not be healthy. I don't think a lot of people go to such extreme measures to lose weight or stay slim. Nowadays people talk more about eating a balanced diet and staying healthy. I look around and I see a lot of overweight people who have friends.</i>	
Advantages of this Rule	Disadvantages of this Rule
<i>It makes me conscious of my weight and my appearance. A lot of people say that I look very good and have a nice body.</i>	<i>It puts a lot of pressure on me. I am always conscious of my weight and my food intake. I can't be like some of my friends who don't seem to care what they eat. Sometimes it seems like I'm so superficial that I only care about my weight and appearance.</i>
What is an alternative rule (and/or assumption) that is more balanced and flexible?	
<i>I enjoy being slim and wearing nice clothes. However, it is more helpful if I think about trying to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Also, it is unlikely that my friends only like me because I am slim</i>	
What can I do to put this rule (and/or assumption) into practice on a daily basis?	
<i>Check out what healthy portions are and eat that without using laxatives after. Exercise regularly rather than extremely vigorously. Ask my closest friends what it is that they like about me.</i>	

Adjusting the Rules

Rule and/or assumption I would like to adjust	
What impact has this rule (and/or assumption) had on my life?	
How do I know this rule is in operation?	
Where did this rule (and/or assumption) come from?	
In what ways is this rule (and/or assumption) unreasonable?	
Advantages of this Rule	Disadvantages of this Rule
What is an alternative rule (and/or assumption) that is more balanced and flexible?	
What can I do to put this rule (and/or assumption) into practice on a daily basis?	

Following Through

Now that you have worked through the worksheet, it might be a good idea to write down your new rule on a card that you can carry around with you and review every now and again. You could also write down the things you will aim to do to put this rule in practice.

Importantly, put the new rule into practice by carrying out those actions that you have planned. Although it might seem difficult to you now, it will get easier as you keep doing them. These behaviours are new to you so it's normal that they don't seem to be done naturally. With practice, will come progress!

Sometimes, the old rule might be activated again, so be prepared. This is because the old rule has been with you for awhile and you have become quite used to it. But remember, circumstances have changed and the old rule is outdated. This is when challenging the old rule is important, as well as reviewing your flashcard, and practising the new behaviours.

Module Summary

- Rules are learned, can be culture-specific, and can be stubborn and resistant to change
- Helpful rules are realistic, flexible, and adaptable, and they enable us to function healthily and safely
- The rules and assumptions that we develop to help protect low self-esteem are unhelpful, because they are usually unrealistic, unreasonable, excessive, rigid, and unadaptable
- Although the rules appear to help protect self-esteem, they actually keep negative core beliefs and low self-esteem in place. Living up to such rules and assumptions restricts behaviour in such a way that these rules and negative core beliefs do not have the opportunity to be challenged
- The first step to changing your rules and assumptions is to identify them. To do this examine:
 - What you expect of yourself in various situations
 - What you expect from others
 - The contents of your Thought Diaries for biased expectations and negative self-evaluations
 - Themes you have noticed in things you have problems with
 - Direct messages or family sayings you were exposed to as a child
- To adjust the rules and assumptions you will need to do the following:
 - Question their impact and helpfulness
 - Identify their advantages and disadvantages
 - Develop new balanced rules and assumptions
 - Think of new ways of behaving that would put the new rule into practice.



Coming up next ...

In the next module, you will learn how to challenge negative core beliefs and develop balanced beliefs about yourself.

About This Module

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BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in the modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (CBT). CBT is a type of psychotherapy that is based on the theory that unhelpful negative emotions and behaviours are strongly influenced by problematic cognitions (thoughts). This can be found in the following:

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Clark, D. M. (1986). A cognitive approach to panic. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 24, 461-470.

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