MATTMCWILLIAMS

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How to Destroy Your Limiting Beliefs

When I was in seventh grade, my English teacher, Mrs. Roland, grabbed me by the arm and said, "Come with me."

We marched to the principal's office. The one minute it took to get there seemed like an hour. The whole time I just knew that I was in trouble. After all, I'd spent much of my youth either in detention or being punished in some way for something I'd done in school.

As we walked into the principal's office, something remarkable happened…

Instead of what I expected, Mrs. Roland asked the principal for permission to put me into Honors English.

The principal agreed and I began a new chapter in my life. Literally, everything changed that day.

I began to take school seriously. I began to study more. I began to respect my teachers. I began to believe in myself, my teachers, and believe that the world wasn't as against me as I once thought.

I stopped spending time in detention. The next year, I went to a magnet school. In high school, I took every Honors or Advanced Placement class that there was. I began to think that I was actually smart.

Limiting Beliefs

As I thought back on that day in my life, I realized that prior to that one event, my limiting beliefs were crippling my growth.

I saw myself in a limiting way. I saw others (particularly teachers) in a limiting way. I saw the world in a limiting way.

These thoughts then occurred to me:

How am I still holding on to limiting beliefs today?
How many others are struggling with these beliefs?

These beliefs that held me back all those years only existed in my mind. Mrs. Roland didn't believe what I believed about myself. And yet, I acted as if the beliefs were completely true.

The same is true for you. The limiting beliefs you have only exist in your mind. They aren't true. That's why I want to share with you the four types of limiting beliefs that held me back and might be holding you back too.

4 Types of Limiting Beliefs

1. Beliefs about yourself.

I moved 13 times in 14 years. I grew up in a trailer park. My dad left us when I was two. All of these things meant I wasn't wanted. I wasn't stable. I wasn't good enough. Later in life, these same thoughts were worded differently but meant the same thing. I don't have the right contacts. I don't have enough money to start something. I can't settle down.

None of those are true. They don't define me or dictate what level of success I can have. But that is the story I told myself, over and over again.
Your limiting beliefs about yourself might sound like this:

- "I've always been overweight. It's just who I am."
- "I can't control it. It runs in my family."
- "I'm Irish. What can I do? We have bad tempers."
- "My whole family is poor. At least I'm better off than the rest of them."
- "I was never good at art or music. I'm just not a creative person."

2. Beliefs about other people.

Years ago, a guy worked for me that I thought was lazy. He didn't get excited as I did about important projects and he didn't react the same way I did during an emergency (namely, he didn't go crazy). He was calm, cool, and collected. And it made him appear lazy (to me).

The reality is that he was actually very passionate about his work. He was just calmer and more apt to think through things. He wasn't comfortable expressing emotion in a work setting.

After a few months of getting to know him, I actually grew to like him very much. We became good friends and he became a trusted leader in our company.

If not for overcoming that limiting belief about him, I would not have found that we had so much in common. I would have one less friend today. My limiting belief literally almost cost me a friendship.

Your limiting beliefs about other people might sound like this:

- "My boss never listens. There's no use sharing my idea with him."
- "She'd never go out with me. She is too attractive."
- "Dad is too emotionally detached. There's no use trying to share my feelings."
- "He's just an artist. What would he know about business?"
- "She has four kids. She could never lead the company."

3. Beliefs about groups.

Quite frankly, I'm ashamed of what I am about to share with you, but I believe that it illustrates how beliefs about groups can be dangerous.

Years ago, I hired a female salesperson. She turned out to be the single worst employee I've ever hired. She was unfocused, unorganized, and unable to close the deal. Time after time, deals fell through and it was costing me money.

Here's the lie I told myself as a result: Women don't belong in sales.

For the next four years, I continued to believe that lie. I refused to hire female salespeople.

Only when I stopped playing a direct role in hiring salespeople did my company hire a woman. She turned out to be one of our best salespeople. My belief was busted.

As I wrote above, I'm not proud that I once felt that way. The lesson I learned is that anytime we apply a false belief about a group of people to an individual, we risk missing out on something great. I'm convinced that I missed out on many great saleswomen during those lost years.

Your limiting beliefs about groups might sound like this:

- "Men are always impatient."
- "Wealthy children are always lazy."
- "Women are too emotional to be leaders in this industry."
- "Corporate CEOs are always greedy."
- "He's from the south. He must love sweet tea." (Sorry, I just had to debunk that one…I don't like syrup on pancakes let alone in a cup)

4. Beliefs about the world at large.

I made the mistake of listening to the news recently (I rarely do) and heard a twenty-something say this:

"With unemployment so high, it's just hard for me to find a job. I graduated just as the recession started."

He was basing his own ability to find a job on the national economy. Have you ever allowed the global economy to affect you like this? Or perhaps you hear about a terrible situation overseas and think, "here we go, the world is going to hell in a handbasket." I know that I have.

The reality is, though, that the economy is great for some people. Some business have thrived in the past five years. Personally, the past three years have been the best three years of my life financially. Our beliefs about the world at large must not influence our beliefs about our abilities.

Your limiting beliefs about the world at large might sound like this:

- "The only way to get ahead is to cheat."
- "It's impossible to find good workers here."
- "Our government makes it impossible to succeed."
- "The little man never has a chance."

Beliefs >> Lies >> Excuses

Beliefs as a rule aren't a bad thing. In fact, even the stereotypes you think are always bad can be a good thing. For example, I often get asked: "Why are you always so positive when you write?"

Some ask in a curious way. Some ask in a negative way, as though I am doing something wrong. Some ask in a "how can I be more like that?" way.

The reason I stay positive with my tribe is simple: I'm fostering a stereotype of myself and you. The research tells me to.

Let me be clear about something. My natural inclination, for whatever reason, is towards the negative.

That shocks a lot of people not named my wife, my mom, my best friend, my mentor, or anyone who has never worked for me. Most people see me as a generally positive and upbeat person. But the reality is that, most of the time there is a war raging inside of me. One voice screams at me reminding of everything going wrong in my life and the world. The positive voice whispers softly. I tend to hear the louder voice too easily.

Quieting the negative voice

But what I've noticed is that every time I write, that negative voices quiets. Just a little bit. Every time. Little by little, it softens. Little by little, it loses its power.

There is enough negativity in the world from others already. You don't need it from me. You certainly don't need it from yourself.

So I stay positive. I perpetuate a stereotype that you believe and I slowly come to believe.

That doesn't mean that I want you to ignore opportunities for growth (a better term for what others might call "weaknesses"). But don't dwell on them. Acknowledge them. Work on them in a defined period of time. Then, turn your focus back to your positive strengths.

The science of stereotypes

Thirty-plus years of psychological research backs me up on staying positive.

I am creating a stereotype for myself and everyone in my tribe, including you. To those who suggest it's all psychobabble mumbo jumbo, I say:

Nana nana boo boo. I'm right, you're wrong. The research proves it.

OK, I only think that. I don't actually say it…at least not out loud. But, apparently, I will write it.

S. Alexander Haslam, Jessica Salvatore, Thomas Kessler and Stephen D. Reicher wrote about the power of stereotypes in their essay, *How stereotyping yourself contributes to your success (or failure)*. You can download the entire essay for free here.

They wrote:

…stereotypes can promote failure but that they can also lift a person's or group's performance and be tools that promote social progress.

Positive stereotypes

We often view stereotypes as bad. We rightly discourage group stereotypes based on race, gender, religion, or social standing.

But we also forget that stereotypes can be used in a positive light. Especially individual stereotypes.

When I was in college, my dad labeled me a “mudder” in golf. That means that, after only a few such rounds, he observed that I performed well in bad conditions. This stereotype only perpetuated itself as I continued to excel in bad conditions. My attitude was. “Bring on the cold. Bring on the wind. Bring on the rain.” I knew I had 95% of the field beat when the weather was at its worst.

I stereotyped myself in a positive way and the results spoke for themselves. Of the five tournaments I played as an amateur in the worst conditions, I finished 1st, 1st, 2nd, 6th, and 1st.

So I write to you and to myself to change your stereotypes.

I stay positive to change the labels you use to identify yourself.

I write to resist the negative voices of ourselves and others that say we can’t change the world.

Haslam and the others write:

Resistance, of course, is not always successful. Yet it is rarely entirely futile either. Indeed, history teaches us that change is as much a part of social reality as is stability. And when they are in our own hands, stereotypes can be essential to mobilizing the group for success as much as, when in the hands of others, they can be used as forces of restraint and failure.

Thus, the literature on stereotype threat delivers two fundamental lessons. The first is to beware of equating performance and ability, especially when dealing with differences between groups, and to understand the power that the expectations of others has over what we do. The second is to realize that we are not doomed to be victims of oppressive stereotypes but can learn to use stereotypes as tools of our own liberation. In short, who we think we are determines both how we perform and what we are able to become.
The choice is yours.

Allow negative stereotypes to rule your life. Or…create new ones.

Beliefs only become a problem when they become lies which become excuses. Excuses to get in trouble at school, excuses to not exercise, excuses to not hire women, excuses not to talk to your boss, excuses not to look for a job.

The good news is that you get to choose. Which beliefs are you going to keep and which ones are you going to get rid of?

That's what this workbook is all about. Go through each exercise carefully and you can overcome your limiting beliefs once and for all.

Overcoming beliefs you have about yourself

Exercise 1

Think about a situation in which you failed recently. Write about it here:

What beliefs did you (or do you) have that limited your ability to succeed?

Are those beliefs really true? Why or why not?

What beliefs can I choose to replace those with?

Exercise 2

Think about a situation in which you quit (gave up on something) recently. Write about it here:

What beliefs did you (or do you) have that limited your ability to keep going?

Are those beliefs really true? Why or why not?

What beliefs can I choose to replace those with?

Exercise 3

What are you not doing that you wish you could be doing? What dreams are you not fulfilling? What goals are you not achieving? Write about them here:

What beliefs did you (or do you) have that are holding your back?

Are those beliefs really true? Why or why not?

What beliefs can I choose to replace those with?

Action Item:

You may notice that limiting beliefs often contain the word "Because." I can't do this *because*. I didn't do that *because*.

As soon as you say the word "because" your mind believes it. It says "See, I have a reason not to do this." And you stop trying. Eliminate those phrases from your vocabulary.

Overcoming beliefs you have about others and groups

What is something you believe about someone else or a group that is holding you back?

What specifically has it held you back from?

What will continuing this belief keep you from in the future?

Why do you believe that? What event(s) in your life led to that belief?

Is that belief true? Why or why not?

What belief can you replace your limiting belief with?

Overcoming beliefs you have about the world

What is something you believe about the world, your city, your country or otherwise that is limiting you?

Where does that belief come from?

What lies are you telling yourself about this belief?

What excuses are you making as a result of the lies?

What has this belief held you back from? What are you missing out on as a result of it?

Does it scare you to let go of this belief? Why or why not?

When you share this belief with others, do they support it or pushback? Who specifically supports it? Who pushes back?

Action Item:

Consider what must become of the relationships with those who agree with it. Talk to those who pushback and ask for their help in overcoming your beliefs. Write about your decisions here: