

## Chapter 3.8 Creating an Alternate Past as a Way of Changing Persistent Limiting Beliefs

This chapter discusses how, through the use of fantasy with rich sensory details, an alternate past can be created with much the same emotional impact as the original memory. This is a way of revisiting and changing childhood experiences, which resulted in fixed, limiting beliefs. Resources are added to the individuals in childhood situations, so that their interaction is different, and a new belief, which is more useful, flexible and resourceful, can be created.

About twenty years ago, some psychotherapists believed that childhood sexual abuse was responsible for many problems in adult life. Clients were asked to try to remember any sexual abuse. There is considerable evidence if therapists pushed this hard enough, then clients would search for memories and begin to manufacture sexual abuse events that they believed were real but which never happened. The imagined events produced feelings created by events that never happened. If a person can create an imagined past of negative events that produce symptoms, why not create an imagined or alternate past of positive events which add resources to the person's life?

An imagined past and a real past are not that different, and are processed in the same areas of the brain.

Imagined details do sometimes intrude on our memories of real events. Numerous studies have been conducted on this phenomenon. Psychologist Elisabeth F. Loftus (2005) (see References) and others at the University of Washington discovered that after reading a booklet which described recollections of being lost in a supermarket, many subjects suddenly reported recalling how they, too, had gotten lost as children. Before reading, they reported being unable to recall such scenes. Afterward, they unknowingly smuggled images from the book into their own memory base.

A real event has more sensory details than the imagined event. However, a richness of sensory detail can be added to the imagination. For example, I may ask a client to go back to his childhood and imagine endowing his father with personal resources that would have changed him. To add sensory richness to the fantasy, I ask him to see the changes that this makes in his father's expression, the lines in his face, his posture, the tilt of his head, his gestures, skin tone, and the way he walks. I will also ask him to hear changes in the pitch, rhythm, timbre, speed, volume, and inflections of his father's voice.

Two individuals remembering the same event will often remember it quite differently. The brain is very selective in what is stored in memory, and our memory is affected by our viewpoint and biases. A woman had a delightful time at a party, but toward the end of the evening, someone spilled wine on her dress, and she said, "My whole evening is ruined." She can remember the evening as a

disaster and forgetting the great time she had before the wine was spilled. If she realized that she had control over her memories, she could change that mental image of the ruined dress from being large, bright and up close to being small, far away and dim, and could make the images of the delightful time that she had big, bright and up close. Since our memory of the past is not very accurate anyway, why not create a past that is more useful?

An alternate past is a way to change limiting fixed beliefs that originate at times of stress during childhood. Once formed these beliefs become part of programs that the brain runs automatically. The program, at the time it originated, was probably the best course of action in that situation with the resources the child had at that time. However, as time goes on, the brain does not evaluate whether the program is useful or not. The program and fixed beliefs are connected to emotions that are not controlled by the conscious mind. Logic and reasoning have little, if any, effect.

An analogous example is the Japanese soldiers after WWII. The Japanese had soldiers on many Pacific islands. The Allies invaded Guadalcanal and another island one airplane flight away, thereby skipping several islands. After the war, the Allies played the emperor's surrender speech and told the Japanese on these islands, which had not been invaded, that the war was over. However, some soldiers continued to survive to carry on the fight. The last Japanese soldier came out of hiding forty years after the end of the war. Like the Japanese soldiers, our limiting beliefs are out of date and self-damaging. People have expressions like "Why do I keep shooting myself in the foot?" "Why do I get so close to success and then blow it?" "Why do I fall in love with the same kind of guy?"

Bruce Lipton, Ph. D. wrote in *The Biology of Belief* (Pages 169-170)

The two minds are truly a phenomenal mechanism, but here is how it can go awry. The conscious mind is the "self," the voice of our own thoughts. It can have great visions and plans for a future filled with love, health, happiness, and prosperity. While we focus our consciousness on happy thoughts, who is running the show? The subconscious. How is the subconscious going to manage our affairs? Precisely the way it was programmed. The subconscious mind's behaviors when we are not paying attention may not be of our own creation because most of our fundamental behaviors were downloaded without question from observing other people. Because subconscious-generated behaviors are not generally observed by the conscious mind, many people are stunned to hear that they are "just like their mom or their dad," the people who programmed their subconscious minds.

The learned behaviors and beliefs acquired from other people, such as parents, peers, and teachers, may not support the goals of our conscious mind. The biggest impediments to realizing the successes of which we dream are the limitations programmed into the subconscious. These limitations not only

influence our behavior, they can also play a major role in determining our physiology and health. As we've seen earlier, the mind plays a powerful role in controlling the biological systems that keep us alive.

(pages 170-171)

While the "thinking-self" nature of the conscious mind evokes images of a "ghost in the machine," there is no similar self-awareness operating in the subconscious mind. The latter mechanism is more akin to a jukebox loaded with behavioral programs, each ready to play as soon as appropriate environmental signals appear and press the selection buttons. If we don't like a particular song in the jukebox, how much yelling at or arguing with the machine will cause it to reprogram its play list? In my college days, I saw many an inebriated student, to no avail, curse and kick jukeboxes that were not responsive to their requests. Similarly, we must realize that no amount of yelling or cajoling by the conscious mind can ever change the behavioral "tapes" programmed into the subconscious mind. Once we realize the ineffectiveness of this tactic, we can quit engaging in a pitched battle with the subconscious mind and take a more clinical approach to reprogramming it. Engaging the subconscious in battle is as pointless as kicking the jukebox in the hope that it will reprogram the play list. The futility of battling with the subconscious is a hard message to get across because one of the programs most of us downloaded when we were young is that "will power is admirable." So we try over and over again to override the subconscious program. Usually such efforts are met with varying degrees of resistance because the cells are obligated to adhere to the subconscious program.

Steven Heller Ph.D. (1987) described the phenomena this way in his book on hypnosis, *Monsters and Magical Sticks*.

Some people are very much like soft, plush, wall-to-wall carpeting: They tend to keep the imprints of those who walked on them in the past. Once this happens, these "imprints" (belief systems) supplement, and in many cases, supplant so-called reality. When an individual's "mosaic of single images" is continually interpreted in a stereotyped way, he becomes stuck, and his range of choices is limited. If his belief systems tell him that no one likes him, or she always fails, s/he may continue to distort or deny reality to support his "world image." If we again examine a traditional version of hypnosis (hypnotic belief systems) which holds that hypnosis is the communication of ideas and attitudes that take a firm hold on an individual's inner belief systems and then lead that individual to respond to the "implanted suggestions," we can see more clearly the relationship between hypnotic phenomena and belief systems. The child who is told never to say no, or that he should not try to be better than elders, may grow up and act on those suggestions as if they were absolute laws—part of the Ten Commandments. That person "knows" that any violation of such commandments will bring great harm and pain. Now, that's not true in reality, but it is true in that person's inner world—based on his belief systems. That person is operating under the hypnotic phenomenon known as "negative hallucination" that leads him to continually deny external information that would prove that his belief systems are not necessarily accurate. Instead, he continues to be sad, miserable and

depressed because his inner belief systems hypnotize him into following the very steps that cause those “suggestions” to bear that sour fruition.

I believe that one of the first and, perhaps, most important tasks at hand, is to discover what keeps that individual from having new choices that would lead to being “unstuck.” To make those discoveries, it is my belief that you must examine their belief systems. Once you begin to understand (better yet, recognize) which belief systems are keeping them stuck, you must then begin to work with the individual you have and not the one you may have hallucinated. Using the individual’s known—and perhaps, painful—belief systems to lead them to new destinations, is a graceful way to bring about change.

Transactional Analysis gave the term “life scripts” to these beliefs. Robert and Mary Goulding, Authors of Redecision Therapy, (1979) describe their method of changing these limiting fixed beliefs. Another method by Virginia Satir to change fixed limiting beliefs was to lead a person through a family reconstruction.

Neurolinguistic programming (NLP) uses the concept of imprinting. When a duck is born, whatever it sees within the first minutes out of the shell is imprinted as its mother. Usually this is the mother hen. However, if what the duckling first sees is a man’s boot, then the duckling will have that image imprinted in its brain and will behave as if the boot is its mother for the duration of its life. Likewise beliefs formed during childhood at times of crisis are imprinted on the brain and last a lifetime unless effective methods are used to change the fixed limiting belief. Reasoning, logic, will power, or a sincere desire to change do not work. What different effective methods have in common is going back to the emotions involved in the original situation.

So what are fixed limiting beliefs and how does one recognize them? The beliefs are stated in absolute terms; there is no flexibility. These words are commonly used: always, never, don’t ever, have to, must, and can’t. People are either this way or that way with nothing in between. The specific words from parents or other authority figures are often remembered, and a person often refers to herself or himself as you instead of I. Some examples follow: “You’ll never amount to anything.” “You must clean your plate.” “You never waste food.” “If you want a job done right, you have to do it yourself.” “Nice girls don’t use four-letter words.” “You come from bad seed.” “You’ll never amount to anything.” “If anything good happens, something equally bad will follow.” “You can’t refuse anyone.” “As long as you are sitting at the table you have to keep eating.” “Any time you have fun, you will be punished.” “You have to do whatever anyone asks you to do.” “You’re stupid.” “You’re bad.” “You’re not as pretty as your sister.” “You have your father’s temper.” “You can’t control yourself.” “You shouldn’t ask for anything from anybody.” “You shouldn’t upset anyone.” “You can’t trust men. They are all the same.” “You can’t trust women. They are all the same.”

To change the belief, a client needs to go back emotionally to the original situation when the belief was created. Most clients are aware of the emotion

connected with the limiting fixed belief. They are asked to be aware of the emotion and take it back to the earliest time that they remember having that emotion. Usually this is early childhood—elementary school days or earlier. What is the situation and who is involved?

Then an alternate past is created. The client is asked to assume that the primary person or persons involved had a positive intent in their actions, although the result of the actions may have been destructive. Ask the client to change the primary person by giving to him or her personal resources that would have enabled him or her to carry out the positive intent more effectively. Then the client is asked to see and hear the difference that this resource is making in the person. Then the clients are asked to see and hear how the interaction is different. They are then asked to experience in their imagination being that person with that resource. Then the clients are asked to step back and see themselves as a child, and decide what resource or resources they would have needed to have coped with the situation in a more useful way. They are asked to see and hear how the resources would have changed their image of their younger self. Then they are asked to step into the body of the younger self and experience having those resources and thereby reacting differently. While still experiencing being the younger self, they are asked to decide the belief that they have now that replaces the old fixed limiting belief.

The fixed limiting belief is not changed to the opposite; that would also be limiting. “You can’t trust men” is not changed to “You can trust men” but to “You have the ability to decide whom you trust.” “If I have success then something terrible will happen” is replaced with “I am talented and work hard and success will naturally follow.”

People’s lives are structured around these beliefs, and when the belief changes, their strategies and relationships change automatically.

Another important benefit of an alternate past involves the negative images clients have of significant people in their past, particularly their nuclear family. The memory of an abusive parent is contained in a client’s brain cells. That negative image is part of each client and has effects on their feelings and behavior. In an alternate past, a cold and seemingly uncaring mother may be given the resource of having the feeling that she is loveable and loved and has the ability to be warm and gentle. One woman said she realized how much her mother could have accomplished, if she had had the resources that she gave her in the alternate past. Then she said, “But she didn’t have those resources, so how could she have been different? The only way that she knew to make contact with another person was through arguing and fighting.” This softened her view of her mother and since her memory of her mother is part of her, this also softened her.

Many clients have objected to creating an alternate view of a person who has been abusive and violent. The client might say “I need to protect myself against

this individual. If I have an alternate view of him or her, then I become more vulnerable.” I explain that creating a more human view of this “monster” does not change your memory or your judgments. You still have the same information and can keep the decisions to protect yourself. If anything, the softened view will result in your having less of an automatic emotional response. The emotional responses may have made them more vulnerable. When frightened, some people freeze up and others initiate verbal or physical attacks, which, of course, make it more likely that they will be hurt again.

Some people object because their memory of a person is the truth and they shouldn't change the truth. One woman in response to my request to have an altered view of her brother stated angrily, “He doesn't deserve to be thought of as nice because he wasn't.” I explained that she wasn't changing her brother; she was changing neuronal pathways in her brain.

Billy was not only tormented by the memories of Dahmer's torture and control of him but also by the realization that at times he identified with Dahmer. Particularly when angry, he took on Dahmer's northern accent. In Chapter 2.11. Anger and Rage, I describe how Billy gets a look which frightens people, goes into a rage and sometimes has amnesia for what happened. At those times the part of him that identifies with Dahmer gains control. Fortunately, he has not become physically violent; creating an alternate view of Dahmer lessens the identification with the monster Dahmer.

It is natural to identify with the one who has the power, and the abuser often is viewed as powerful. I have seen a number of women who were physically abused by their mothers and as young girls made the promise, “When I have kids, I will never beat them.” However, one woman had no other model of how to be a mother, and she set no limits with her kids because she didn't know how. The kids drove her up the wall until she hit her child, and then felt terrible that she had violated this promise she had made to herself. When she reached a threshold of frustration, she identified with her abusive mother.

There are three beneficial effects from creation of an alternate past: 1) The client is able to replace limiting fixed beliefs with beneficial flexible beliefs, 2) He or she is able to humanize and soften mental images of people from the past that previously were seen only as negative and harmful, 3) The negative impact of the victim's identification with the abuser is minimized as an alternate image of the abuser is created.

Creation of an alternate past was core to Billy's treatment and for several months almost every session involved some addition to it.

Billy had decided in order to get his life back that he needed to tell everything that Dahmer did to him; this involved dealing with the shame connected with these memories. The shame and guilt were based on the belief that there was something basically bad or wrong with himself. His beliefs went back to childhood

and those feelings were greatly intensified during the experience with Dahmer. I created alternate memories to change his early beliefs connected to guilt. His older sister has a congenital heart condition, and this limited her physical activities as a child. He often carried her to his play activities, but he resented this and sometimes went without her. He remembers pushing her off the couch, even though his mother had told him to take care of her. Billy's father left when he was a toddler. He was one of eight children, and his mother was working two jobs. I had Billy give to his mother the ability to notice just briefly each of her children and give each a moment of special attention. He gave to his sister the ability to empathize with him and to realize and accept that at times he wanted to play with friends without her. He gave to his seven-year-old self the feeling of being loved and appreciated. Reliving the experience enabled him to feel good about himself and to feel loved and appreciated.

When he was ten years old, he had to do something that made him "feel like crap." His mother told him to pick up a concrete block and drop it on a rat trapped in a trash can. He killed flies, but didn't believe in killing anything else. He had the dilemma of two conflicting standards of behavior: to obey his mother and to avoid killing animals. The resource that he gave his ten-year-old self was pride in his belief about not killing anything. He had been strongly influenced by reading about Victor Frankel, who survived the holocaust. Dr. Frankel wrote that the Nazis controlled whether he ate or lived, but they didn't control his mind. He continued to feel love for his fellow human beings.

Billy felt guilt that he had not killed Dahmer. When he had faced the decision of whether to kill Dahmer, he had struggled with conflicting standards. One standard was to protect himself and insure survival. The other was a desire to reconnect with his family. He thought his plan of explaining Dahmer's death by saying that he fell out of bed drunk and hit his head would not work, and that he would spend his life in prison in Germany.

I tried to create an alternate past by having Billy give Dahmer resources. When he visualized Dahmer, he was not able to make any changes in how he saw him. Billy talked about how he thought there must have been traumas in Dahmer's early life that his father, Lionel, had not written about in his book *A Father's Story*. Billy said Jeffrey Dahmer had said, "I don't have a mother and my father was a bastard."

I realized for Billy to be able to create an altered image of Jeffrey Dahmer that his parents would have to be different, and for them to have been different, their parents (Jeffrey's grandparents) would have to have been different.

Joyce (Jeffrey's mother) had some history of mood instability and in the alternate past, she was given different genes so that her moods were stable. Lionel (Jeffrey's father) was born without the genes that led to his being obsessed with fire. I directed Billy in imagining a very different childhood for Jeffrey. He was fed when he was hungry and changed when he was wet. He was cuddled when he

was afraid. Like most children at a beach, he gradually became more adventuresome. He would leave his mother, stick one toe in the water come back to Joyce to check, and then venture forth a little further before returning. He was able to be adventuresome and still feel safe, and when he had a nightmare, he could go to his mother and be comforted.

We continued to create an alternate past in which young Jeffrey learned to trust. When his father threw him up briefly in the air, he was careful to gauge the amount of the throw, so it was enough to be thrilling but not enough to be scary. When he was pushed on the swing, it was hard enough to be exciting but not too frightening. He learned the trust game of standing stiff with arms out and falling backwards into his father's arms. He was tickled but only so long as it was funny and desired. The family had dogs, and Jeffrey was able to watch the mother keep order in her litter of puppies. He noticed that the puppies learned from each other how hard to bite. The puppies loved to play, and when one pup bit too hard the others wouldn't play with him. The dogs would indicate when it was a play fight. The dog would play bow. With the hind end up, the dog would extend the legs outward and bow down. This means "We are playing." Jeff learned, as a child with his playmates, that you could play box and play wrestle and no one would really get hurt. When he saw monsters in his dreams, his father might say, "What would you need to have in your dreams in order to face that monster and control it?"

His parents set limits, and there were consequences that were adhered to. So Jeffrey learned that when his parents said something, they meant it. He learned to believe what they said. Therefore, when his mother and father said, "I love you," he believed them.

Billy has a vivid imagination, and when I asked him to create this alternate past, he was intensely involved and appeared to be in a trance. I waited silently for him to nod before I added the next step.

I asked him to imagine what his life in Germany would have been like with Dahmer, as created in his alternate past. I suggested that they might have taken up dueling with protective clothing so that no one was hurt. They have had enjoyable times together, and he would have had other friends instead of being socially isolated.

Billy was asked to give the alternate past a representation in his mind: a glow, a light, or a color. He chose the color of the ocean off an island, that beautiful shade of blue. Seeing this "blue" has been very important for him. He even has delightful dreams in which he sees this color. Billy has learned rapidly to use whatever tools are given him. When he feels slighted, ignored or made fun of and he becomes angry and starts to blackout, he will direct himself to see "blue", and will prevent the black out.

As part of the creation of the alternate past, I had Billy imagine being Jeffrey



Dahmer and having the childhood experiences that were created for Jeffrey. Since Billy's father left when he was two years old, and he didn't see him again until he was sixteen, these were experiences that he had not had with his father.

Billy did have a father figure, his uncle, whom he called "Pops". Pops was a veteran of WWII. Billy and his mother took care of Pops when he was ill with cancer. Pops had told Billy that he loved him shortly before he died. I had Billy imagine that Pops had the resource to be able to listen to him tell his story of what happened in Germany. Pops would have responded, saying that Billy had done what he needed to do to survive, just as Pops had had to continue in the relative safety of a foxhole even though that meant letting his feet freeze. This helped Billy to feel less guilt and shame.

As mentioned in the chapter on resentment, much of Billy's resentment was directed at the Army personnel, who could have helped him get out of the situation with Dahmer but who did not listen to him and even mocked him.

I helped Billy create an alternate past of one of the army personnel in his barracks who could have helped him but instead mocked him. He gave several resources to this person: 1) patience to listen to him, 2) discipline to do his job, 3) confidence in himself so that he wouldn't be taken in by Dahmer. In this alternate past he believed Billy, went to the commanding officer, and Dahmer was court-martialed. He was asked to imagine the seventeen-year-old Billy having maturity. In this fantasy, the first time Dahmer put that bone-crushing grasp on him, he would have fought him. He probably would have been court-martialed for what he did to Dahmer, but he would have been out of there. In this fantasy, he became aware of how much he had wanted his mother, and a tear came to his eyes, but he did not cry. I asked him, "What happened?" When he started to cry, he got a weak feeling, similar to when Dahmer beat him more when he cried. I asked him to substitute the image of Dahmer beating him because he was crying with the image of Bobby Kennedy on national television crying at his brother's funeral. Copious tears began running down his cheeks and he said, "This is the first time I have cried like this in over twenty years."

Through creating an alternate past and other therapeutic procedure, Billy was able to change several limiting beliefs. As mentioned above, he was able to change the belief that there was something wrong with him because of what Dahmer had done to him. He no longer believes the following: 1) I can never be free of Dahmer, 2) I must be on guard all the time, 3) I can't feel emotions like a normal person, 4) I can't cry, and 5) I can't go into a crowded store.

He made the following comments, "There have been a lot of changes. I am going to blues and purples. I have a black truck, and that is kind of depressing now. I feel good waking up in the morning even on a crappy, crappy day. I know there is always a way to fix something. I never give up. Depression is when you feel there is no reason to wake up, no other option. I now have ten different ways of doing things. I just feel a lot better physically. I don't have as many complaints. I still

have an anxiety attack occasionally. I have nightmares but they are blander. In one nightmare Jeff (Dahmer) dressed up as a clown. It was hilarious in the dream. He was so out of character. He was using somebody else's identity, and it was not working. The walls in the dream were blue and purple. I remember his having this big red nose like clowns have. I felt like squeezing it. It was kind of okay in the dream. \_Thank God he is dead. For a long time I felt he might come back. I thought any minute that that sucker was going to knock on the door."

### ***Emotional Management Suggestions***

You do not have to be a victim of your memories. Phobia Cure provides some tools to change the mental images and internal conversations to minimize or eliminate the negative impact. Creating an alternate past is an additional step after using those procedures. If you have lost contact with a person or he or she is deceased, and you feel that it would have been beneficial for a certain interaction to have taken place, you can create an alternate past. You may have had a cut-off or feel there are unresolved issues, or just wish that you had been able to be emotionally closer to that person. Give to the other person the personal resources that would have enabled him or her to have the desired interchange. See and hear how having those resources would have changed him or her. The more sensory details you can imagine, the more impact will this have. Then give to yourself the resources you will need to have this interaction. First see and hear yourself having the interaction. Then step into your body and experience what it feels like as you have the interaction.

If you feel stymied because you repeat the same self-defeating pattern over and over again, despite decisions to change the pattern, then look inside for a fixed limiting belief going back to childhood. The belief can usually be stated quite simply in absolute terms. I think it would be very difficult to change a limiting belief without professional help. The procedure listed below is given to provide some guidelines for yourself or whoever is helping you with it.

To change the belief, you need to go back emotionally to the original situation when the belief was created. You will probably be aware of the emotion connected with the limiting fixed belief. Be aware of the emotion and take it back to the earliest time that you remember having that emotion. Usually this is early childhood—elementary school days or earlier. What is the situation and who is involved?

Then create an alternate past. Assume that the primary person or persons involved had a positive intent in their actions, although the result of their actions may have been destructive. Change the primary person by giving him or her personal resources which enable him or her to carry out the primary intent more effectively. First, see and hear the difference that these resources are making in the person. Second, see and hear how the interaction is different. Third, experience in your imagination actually being that person with those resources. Forth, step back and see yourself as a child, and decide what resource or

resources you would have needed to cope with the situation in a more useful way. Then see and hear how the resources would have changed the younger you. Then step into the body of the younger you, and experience having those resources and reacting differently. While still imaging being your younger self, decide the belief that you now have which replaces the old limiting belief. Imagine how having had that new belief would have changed past situations. Then imagine how having that new belief will be changing your future.