



SELF-HELP EXERCISE: CORE BELIEFS ABOUT OURSELVES AND THE WORLD

INTRODUCTION

You have been changed by your military experiences. Many of these experiences may have helped you grow both as a warrior and as a person. Some of your experiences, however, may be hard to accept or deal with. In addition, various deployment experiences may have a strong negative impact on your core beliefs about yourself, other people, and the world around you.

What are core beliefs?

- ★ Core beliefs deal with things like trust, safety, control, self-esteem, and intimacy.
- ★ Changes in core beliefs can sometimes make it hard for people to view things in a balanced or accurate way.

Questions to ask yourself:

- ★ Have deployment experiences changed some of your core beliefs?
- ★ Are your beliefs helpful to you as you move forward in life?

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Here are some examples of core beliefs that can change after a stressful deployment. As you read these, think about your experiences in Iraq or Afghanistan and how your experiences may have changed your own core beliefs.



Trust

Various deployment experiences can change the assumption that you can trust others to help you in times of need or that others will have your back and do the right thing. Here are some examples of changed trust beliefs:

- ★ **THE BELIEF THAT YOU CAN'T RELY ON YOUR REACTIONS, PERCEPTIONS, OR JUDGMENTS ABOUT OTHERS:** "I expect that people will take advantage of me."
- ★ **THE BELIEF THAT YOU MUST NOT BE VULNERABLE TO THE ACTIONS, WORDS, OR PROMISES OF OTHER PEOPLE:** "I can't rely on people; they'll always let me down in the long run."

How has your deployment(s) affected your beliefs about trust?



Safety

Before the military, you probably assumed that you and the people you care about were generally safe. Your beliefs about safety might be the opposite now. Examples of changed beliefs about safety:

- ★ **THE BELIEF THAT YOU CANNOT PROTECT YOURSELF FROM HARM OR YOU HAVE NO CONTROL OVER THINGS:** "I'm not safe anywhere, anytime," or "Something bad is going to happen and there is nothing I can do about it."



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- ★ **THE BELIEF THAT OTHER PEOPLE ARE DANGEROUS AND INTEND TO CAUSE HARM, INJURY, OR LOSS:** “If I spend time with other people, they will eventually hurt me,” or “The other driver cut me off on purpose,” or “I need to check my doors frequently at night because otherwise, someone will break in.”

How has your deployment(s) affected your beliefs about safety?



Control

When you were deployed, you may have been exposed to all sorts of intense and unpredictable combat situations. These experiences can change your beliefs about how much control you have to manage your life and prevent bad things from happening. Although much of what happens in theatre may be out of your control (or the control of your squad, etc.), the same is rarely true post-deployment and in civilian life. Examples of changed beliefs about control:

- ★ **THE BELIEF THAT YOU NEED TO BE ON GUARD ALL THE TIME, MONITORING EVERYTHING AROUND YOU TO ENSURE THAT THERE WILL BE NO SURPRISES:** “I must be in total control at all times or else something bad will happen and I won’t be prepared,” or “I need to make things happen a certain way (or make a person act in a certain way) or I’ll be out of control.”
- ★ **THE BELIEF THAT TERRIBLE THINGS CAN HAPPEN SUDDENLY OR WITHOUT NOTICE:** “Terrible things can happen anytime, anywhere, so I better be prepared for it.”

How has your deployment(s) affected your beliefs about control?



Self-Esteem

Before suffering trauma or losses in war, you may have felt that you were generally competent and capable and you had value because of your professional and personal roles. Various deployment experiences can change, and often decrease, your regard for yourself and others. Examples of changes in beliefs about self-esteem:

- ★ **BELIEFS THAT YOU HAVE LITTLE SELF-WORTH OR YOU WILL NOT BE RESPECTED OR TAKEN SERIOUSLY BY OTHERS:**
“I am worthless and don’t deserve anything good in life.”
- ★ **THE BELIEF THAT PEOPLE LACK BASIC GOODNESS AND THUS AREN’T WORTHY OF RESPECT:** “I don’t bother with most people because they are just out for themselves.”

How has your deployment(s) affected your beliefs about self-esteem?



Intimacy/closeness

Everyone has a barrier or wall they sometimes put between themselves and others, including the people they love. When it feels right, we lower this barrier so we can have fulfilling and pleasurable relationships. Deployment experiences may have made it hard for you to connect with others and feel comfortable getting close.



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Examples of changes in beliefs about intimacy and closeness:

★ **THE BELIEF THAT PEOPLE CLOSE TO YOU DON'T HAVE THE INTEREST OR ABILITY TO MEET YOUR NEEDS:**

"No one really cares or understands me, so getting close to people will only lead to frustration and disappointment."

★ **THE BELIEF THAT PEOPLE WOULD REJECT YOU IF THEY REALLY GOT TO KNOW YOU:** "I won't let myself get close to others or let them get close to me because if they really knew what I was thinking or feeling they couldn't handle it and would leave me."

★ **THE BELIEF THAT GETTING CLOSE TO OTHERS WOULD OVERWHELM OR BURDEN YOU:**

"I feel out of control already dealing with my own stuff, so I am damn sure not going to get close to others and have to deal with theirs."

★ **THE BELIEF THAT YOU ARE TOXIC TO OTHERS:** "I've been through a lot of hellish things and I don't want to burden other people with the terrible things I carry inside."

How has your deployment(s) affected your beliefs about intimacy and closeness?

Justice



Everyone has unspoken beliefs about justice (e.g., people who are good should be rewarded, people who are bad should be punished). War can challenge beliefs about justice and fairness. Here are some examples of changes in beliefs about justice:

★ "There is no justice. My friend was a good person who didn't deserve to die."

★ "Our legal and political systems are corrupt and unjust. No laws are worth obeying."

★ "People who believe in right and wrong are naïve. The world is filled with evil people. There is no justice or fairness."

How has your deployment(s) affected your beliefs about justice?

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Planning for the Future



Writing about how your deployment experiences have impacted your core beliefs can be helpful to clarify how your beliefs have changed. Did you notice some belief changes that sounded like a problem? Would you like to work toward reclaiming or changing these beliefs and attitudes? If so, you have taken the first step, which is doing an inventory. This puts you in a better position to start to challenge unhelpful beliefs. Changing your beliefs is difficult because you may feel convinced that your way of seeing things is set in stone, regardless of whether it's in your best interest to hold these views. The reality is, the only sure thing in life is that things change; we all tend to see things differently over time as our circumstances change and we grow and mature. In this spirit, look at the following statements and try challenging yourself to view things differently.

I can't trust anyone.

If it is hard for you to trust people that you used to trust, or if you can't imagine forming new relationships,



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you can learn to trust again by starting out slow. Giving others a chance to show they can be trusted requires some risk — and there are no guarantees. In spite of this, if you don't ever give people a chance, it will be impossible to have close relationships. If you lost a friend you were close to, trusting others can be especially challenging.

The world is a dangerous place; I have to be on guard all the time.

During your deployment, it may have been useful to be tense, keyed up, and always ready to respond to potential threats, but now that you are home, there is no reason to be on guard all the time. It can be very hard to break these habits, but the more wound up you are when you don't need to be, the more you will feel you can never be safe. Learning ways to reduce your stress and relax will go a long way to changing this belief.

If I don't control my emotions, I will go crazy.

It takes time to recover from the challenges and stress of deployment. You might be troubled by emotions you are not used to feeling, such as sadness and fear. Emotions are NOT a sign of weakness. There is a good reason why humans are hard-wired to experience emotion; emotions give us important information about what we need to focus on and do. For example, sadness signals legitimate pain of some kind and a need to get support from people you trust. Don't waste your energy trying to avoid or control your emotions. The emotions will keep coming anyway, and you will become exhausted trying to bottle them up. You will not go crazy or lose control if you allow yourself to feel intense emotions. Prove this to yourself by allowing yourself to experience emotions in small steps.

I am permanently damaged; I am no good.

This is a really tough one to tackle, and there is no quick fix; you can't completely erase the painful memories you have of war, but you CAN learn to cope with them. This may be a lifelong challenge, but it does not mean you are "damaged goods" or unable to have a good, rewarding life. Veterans who have endured certain types of combat events often feel so tainted or scarred by the experience that they think they have lost their value as a human being. You can slowly but surely reclaim the person you were prior to your deployment(s) and incorporate this person with who you are now. Don't let your memories control or define you.

Nothing good can happen to me anymore.

Because you may have experienced really terrible things in the past, you might believe nothing good will happen in the future. This is the same logic as a gambler mistakenly thinking because they lost a series of hands, it means they are "due" to win big. The truth is that the odds of something good happening are the same as they were before your deployment. You will have good things happen to you in the future, especially if you are open to them and work toward them. You do have control over whether good things can happen to you again — even if there are times when it doesn't feel like things can improve.

No one can ever understand what I have been through.

This is very common. True, it might be very difficult for civilians or nondeployed service members to understand what you saw, what you did, and how you may have suffered, but it is not impossible. Even if civilians can't ever fully understand what war was like, it doesn't mean they don't want to be there for you or to help in some way. If you shut people out too much, they may pull away from you, and you might lose them and the support and understanding they can give you. You can always test the waters; you don't have to jump right in and tell people everything. Also, it can help to tell people what you need (support, patience, etc). Connecting with your fellow veterans may help you feel more comfortable than reaching out and talking to other friends or family members.



See the following list of more helpful tips for opening up to others. This is an important part of learning how to rebuild trust.

- ★ You don't have to jump right in and tell people everything all at once. Try testing the waters. You may find you don't have to share too many details for others to get a sense of what you have been through. It may be helpful to share bits of information over time as you both feel comfortable and ready to handle it.

- ★ Even people close to you don't need to hear every detail. Some people, including children and



sensitive people, may become very upset by graphic details. In such cases, simply sharing the emotional impact of your experiences (how hard it is for you, if that is the case, or how you feel right now, if you are willing to share this) may be enough to convey a sense of what those experiences were like to live through and how they still affect you.

- ★ Tell others what you want them to do. Remember, even if people don't understand what it was like, they still want to be there for you and help in some way. They may simply be unfamiliar with how to respond appropriately to someone who is sharing a life-changing experience. Suggest specific types of support that would be helpful to you: for example, just listening with an understanding ear, being patient and understanding, giving you space when you run into triggers or have a bad day, spending time with you during times when you get reminded of losses (such as anniversaries), or helping you get "grounded" in the here and now when you start getting reminded of past sad events.
- ★ Disclose at times and settings that are appropriate. If you choose to disclose, select a time and place where you don't feel rushed and have some privacy. Sharing powerful life experiences can draw people together and increase understanding and support, but these stories and responses must be treated with care and respect to allow these exchanges to take place.

