

Is What You Believe Out Of Date?



The Nuer and the Dinka tribes of southern Sudan share an unusual custom. Both of these cattle-herding societies remove several of their kids' permanent front teeth as soon as they sprout: two on the top and four to six on the bottom. It's a very painful procedure, done with a fish hook, and it leaves all tribe members with a distinctive slack-jawed look and speech impediments.

This practice probably started long ago, when tetanus was rampant in central Africa. Tetanus causes "lockjaw," but the tooth removal would have allowed children afflicted by this infectious disease to drink liquids even when their jaw muscles clamped shut. Although there has been no tetanus or lockjaw in the southern Sudan for ages, both the Nuer and the Dinka continue the custom of extracting the front teeth. Indeed, they believe the sunken jaw and lower lip are beautiful. People with front teeth, they say, look like jackals.

[Newsweek – Toothless Is Beautiful](#)

I don't know about you but the thought of having my teeth pulled with a fish hook makes me cringe. I can't imagine any good reason to do that. But the Dinka people create a wide range of justifications to support the removal of the teeth in such a way. They believe it is right, proper and necessary to behave in this way.

Beliefs are all around us. We don't often see them, they are part of our inner operating system, they support how we think and feel, what the world means and how it works. Not only that beliefs determine what we do.

Just in case you were thinking you are not like the Dinka, I bet you have some beliefs and ideas of your own that aren't serving you. If you have a limiting belief about what you can and can't do I bet you have a list of reasons to back it up.

Beliefs are both **descriptions** and **prescriptions** – they tell you about how things are now, how they have been in the past and how they will be in the future.

Description: If you tell me "I can't sing" – You are describing this situation as it appears to you. You may be convinced that you can't sing, it's true, it's just a statement of the facts.

Prescription: The prescription element is more insidious and consists of two parts: filters and permissions.

Filters: Because beliefs are a short-cut, a way for us to understand an overwhelming world, part of their function is to organise what you notice. If you have ever bought a new car you will probably have

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noticed that just after you get it you start to see there are so many of that model around that you just hadn't noticed before. Your perception, what you pay attention to, is being directed.

Beliefs do that to us as well. If you believe you are a bad singer you will be completely oblivious to the times you sing well and painfully aware of all those times when it has not gone well. In other words the belief begins to maintain itself, it seeks corroborating evidence and discounts what doesn't fit in with our expectations.

Permissions: The second element of the prescription is that beliefs give or deny us permission to act. If we want to do something and we believe that we are too young, too old, too tall, too fat, too thin, (insert your favourite excuse here) then we will not get the internal permission to go ahead and take action to get what we want. If we believe that we don't deserve success or that it is our place in life to be unhappy then trying to change those beliefs will generate resistance and even if we have temporary success we will drift back to our old patterns of behaviour later

Beliefs are not good or bad in themselves, they may be helpful or unhelpful in a context, empowering or limiting. Having beliefs themselves is not optional they are the brain's way of simplifying the business of managing a huge amount of information quickly and with the best chance of having you survive from one day to the next. They may not be optional but they can be changed, updated and amended.

Most deep therapeutic work is about updating unhelpful or limiting beliefs. The therapy du jour in the UK is Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) which uses rational means to challenge and hopefully update limiting beliefs. This is changing the belief at the level of thought, NLP, EFT and other processes also have ways of helping you reframe or change limiting beliefs.

Underneath the thought of a belief is the feeling of a belief. The emotional charge that goes with the belief is the glue that holds the belief in place, if you can soften the glue then the belief becomes much more malleable. NLP and EFT have techniques that address the feelings of the belief. Since beliefs are formed throughout life by significant emotional experiences, some beliefs carry a very strong charge of emotion especially if these beliefs were created in traumatic circumstances. In these cases this is where EFT and NLP shine in reducing the emotional charge and the strength of a belief at the same time.

Remember the Dinka, they started the tooth pulling practice as the only way available to solve the problem they were having at the time. If you got tetanus, you had lock jaw and if you couldn't be fed or watered you died. Times have changed, treatments and preventatives exist for tetanus, the Dinka no longer need to remove their children's front teeth but they still do. In some ways it is easier to stick with a solution that is familiar and used to work than to change. It is often the same with our personal beliefs which were once solutions to the problems of getting through life, if your belief is a problem to you it's worth thinking about it as a solution that has passed its sell by date. Part of the therapeutic endeavour is to identify and neutralise unhelpful beliefs and allow more choice where before there was none.

If you are living from the beliefs: "you are no good", "you can't sing", "you'll never succeed in business", they will seem completely convincing, this is the just the way it is. You probably weren't born that way. No one's first words were "I'm not good enough", "I can't sing", "I'll never succeed in business" – you learned those ideas along the way.

Even though those ideas seem very convincing it might be worth entertaining the thought that those beliefs have passed their sell by date. Time moves on, things change. Given a choice would you prefer an

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anti-tetanus injection or your front teeth removed
with a fish hook?

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