

A question to Deepak Chopra MD on 7 Ways to Heal the Past

Q: I've worked hard to change my life for the better, but I continually deal with negative thinking when actually things are okay. I manifest ideas that accumulate into hating myself and thinking the love people have for me is really short-lived and fictional. I have spent a lot of time on self-realization, and I know growing up in difficult situations has influenced my thinking, but I don't want to blame my past for the way I think today. How do I get past this bad behavior of negative thinking? I've conquered a lot in my life, but this pattern is affecting my relationships and how I treat myself. How do I change?

— Edith B., Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Dear Edith,

What you are talking about is past conditioning, and it affects us all. Whether you call these influences from the past emotional debt or karma, they function the same way. A new experience enters the mind, but instead of being evaluated for itself, the experience is shunted down a well-worn track. This happens so automatically that we don't have time to intervene. Let's say past conditioning tells you that you are unlovable. Then when someone says "I love you," you react not to those words, but to old doubt, insecurity and negative experiences with love. The new gets obliterated by the old.

If this is the case, how do we get rid of **old conditioning**? I often approach the problem through the concept of "stickiness." Some old memories are stickier than others. They cling to us, and we can't shake them loose. What makes an experience from the past so sticky? If we can break it down, perhaps each aspect will be easier to deal with one piece at a time.

Let's stay with the idea of feeling unlovable. Feeling you are unlovable usually has the following aspects that make it stick to you:

1. **Someone in authority, usually a parent, told you that you are unlovable.**

Solution: Realize that this person no longer has authority over you, and you are not the child you once were. Ask if this person was in fact the one who was unlovable. Ask if this person could even give love to the most lovable child in the world. If the information you took to be true is actually highly unreliable, why accept it?

2. **Being loved was scary in the past.**

Solution: Find safe ways to get over the scariness. One way is to help a needy child. You will find yourself loved in an innocent, grateful way that is very safe. Examine what the scariest part of being loved is for you. Is it rejection? A sense that the real you will be exposed and found unworthy? Don't evade these questions—examine them, first alone and then with a confidante you trust.

3. **Love seems far away and long ago.**

Solution: Get to the bottom of regret. Regret is a two-edged sword. It has a kind of nostalgic side, a sweet melancholy that feels protective, but it also has a self-defeating side. It tells you that it is never better to have loved and lost. The experience is painful, and when it turns into an excuse to never love again, regret is a mask for fear. Look at your regrets and then renounce them.

4. **Love is tied in with negative emotions.**

Solution: Realize that emotion is the strongest glue of all. The things we feel strongest about turn into indelible memories. The way to unstick the memory is to work through the emotion. Bad feelings have to be faced. The trick is not to relive them again. Avoiding that may take a good counselor or therapist. But know in advance that there's a big difference between a negative feeling you are hiding and one that is leaving you. Give yourself permission to experience what letting go really feels like.

5. **Memories have turned into beliefs.**

Solution: Stop generalizing. We all turn our worst experience into rules about life, but such beliefs are false. Just because a schoolyard bully made your life miserable at the age of 10 doesn't mean the world is out to get you. The worst breakup in the world doesn't mean you are unlovable. Look at your most negative beliefs and untangle them from bad experiences that no longer exist. As you yourself point out, your present life is good; it's your interpretation of it, based on flawed beliefs, that is undermining you.

6. **Electric fences can't be touched.**

Solution: When a feeling is so painful that you can't bear to look at it, it acts like an electric fence. The very prospect of touching it, which is the real solution to any feeling, becomes a deterrent. You will find that touching the fence is possible, but it has to be worked up to. If you feel shame inside, or if a parent abused you or otherwise betrayed your trust, then love becomes an electric fence. What should be a joyful feeling has been merged with pain. The two must be untangled before you can touch upon love without hurt. If you know you are suffering in this way, professional help is definitely called for.

7. **"I have to be this way."**

Solution: The voice that tells us we can't change is one that countless people believe. They choose inertia, yet think it was forced upon them. The answer is to reclaim your freedom of choice. Look at the thing that simply cannot be changed. Sit down and approach this as not your problem, but one belonging to a friend. Write this friend a letter containing all the best, most objective advice you can devise. Tell your friend she has a choice to change—always—and then give specific steps to bring about this change. If you find that you draw a blank, consult a good book about change and adopt the advice given there.

Love,

Deepak

Deepak Chopra is the author of more than 50 books on health, success, relationships and spirituality, including his current best-seller, *Reinventing the Body, Resurrecting the Soul*, and *The Ultimate Happiness Prescription*