better thinking

What kind of a relationship do you have with yourself and what exactly do you see when you take a long, hard look at yourself? Is it an accurate picture, or are you lying to yourself? If you are, what can you do about it? Daniel Fryer investigates

We tell lies every day: big ones and little ones, lies that wound and lies that are our attempt to avoid hurting people. We lie to ourselves about a whole host of issues and are capable of doing so in all sorts of creative ways. When we lie to ourselves, we fail to see ourselves as we truly are and are then prone to unhealthy thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Consider denial, when we refuse to see the warning signs, even when they are right before us; or perfectionism, where we place a demand on ourselves for a standard so unrealistically high that we are bound to fail to reach it. In these circumstances, many people can think they are worthless for not hitting that mark, and then ignore all their other positive accomplishments.

Equally, people with low self-esteem who put themselves down (usually despite strong evidence to the contrary) are also lying to themselves. Other people might see us as attractive or confident or with other good qualities, and yet our own view can be so skewed that we just don't see what they see.

Check your thinking

'The best way to tell if you're lying to yourself is to look at how you handle a compliment,' says cognitive behavioural therapist Carla Shehfe. 'If you have a healthy sense of who you are, you'll take that compliment in your stride. If not, then you'll pick it to pieces.'

You can usually tell when you are lying to yourself because there's usually an underlying physical tension in the body. 'This tension will be accompanied by one or more unhealthy emotions, such as anxiety, guilt, depression or shame. If you're feeling this way then, chances are, your self-perception isn't entirely accurate,' says Shehfe.

Often, people don't become disturbed by the events that happen to them in life, but by the beliefs they hold about those events. These beliefs take the form of demands – think about the times you say 'I must' or 'I must not', and 'I've got to' or 'I should', as in, 'I must control my weight', 'I must not admit I have a problem', or 'I should be as good as other people think I am'. These demands can be unhealthy for a number of reasons: they are rigid and inflexible, they might not be realistic and they might even help to sabotage our goals. >

Case study

Charlotte, 37, had weight issues for years, and had always convinced herself that things weren't that bad, even though her family worried about her health. She couldn't climb a set of stairs without getting out of breath and found it difficult to squeeze through tight spaces easily.

She held the unhealthy belief that she must not admit to being overweight, because life would be awful and unbearable if she did. She thought that admitting to her size would mean proving once and for all to herself that she was fat and therefore totally worthless – ignoring the fact that she was an attractive woman with a good job and a close circle of friends.

Charlotte had a whole system of lies in place to fend off the obvious anxiety that such a set of beliefs would trigger. And so she would come up with reason after reason for why her weight was in check, why her health was okay and why she was happy with the way she was.

To change her life she needed to realise that her thoughts were an unhealthy way of trying to protect herself. In fact she was harming herself by remaining resistant to change and the challenges it might bring. Once these unhealthy thoughts were challenged, her self-perception was altered and she could begin to explore change and was less likely to self-sabotage her goals.

As Shehfe explains: 'If we hold these kinds of demands and they are not met, we can conclude that things are catastrophic or unbearable and we might put ourselves down for not getting the things we are demanding. They become self-damning beliefs where you say to yourself: "I must not admit I have a problem – it would be awful if I did. I couldn't stand admitting I have a problem and if I did it would prove I am a useless, worthless person."'

Fortunately, there are healthy counterparts for all these things and it is possible to construct a more positive attitude. For example, instead of using the phrase 'I must not admit I have a problem', what about telling yourself 'I might prefer not to admit I have a problem, but I accept that I can admit it.' Or what about replacing the phrase 'It would be bad if I admitted I had a problem' with the more beneficial 'It might be difficult to admit, but it wouldn't be the end of the world if I did.'

In other words, rather than trying to find the language to prove you are useless, helpless and worthless, instead use language that explains that while life might be difficult and that you might be fallible, you can still remain useful and worthwhile.

> 'If you have a healthy sense of who you are, you'll take a compliment in your stride. If not, then you'll pick it to pieces'

Dispute your beliefs

To see yourself in a true light, try adopting a flexible belief system, in which you may prefer to have something but accept you might not always get it. Tell yourself that if you don't get it, it might be bad but it certainly isn't awful. Usually, while a situation may be difficult to bear, you can find a way of coping with it.

There are many methods to help you let go of your unhealthy beliefs and accept your healthy beliefs. One way of doing so is to dispute them. For instance, take the belief 'I must be below a certain weight'. What you are saying is that you would really, really like to change your weight. But, just because you would like to change your weight, does it make sense to conclude that you must? The answer, logically speaking, is no. How do you think you feel when your decisions are characterised by words like 'must' and 'have to'? The most likely answer is anxious, depressed or guilty – and

Work on your thinking

1 Take a piece of paper or get an exercise book.

2 If you have a problem and are experiencing an unhealthy negative emotion, such as anxiety or guilt, write down that emotion.

3 Think of a clear and vivid example of a situation where you really experienced that emotion and write it down. Ask yourself exactly what it was about that situation caused the most emotion. For instance, if you have a work-based anxiety problem and the most anxiety-provoking element is feeling like you're not good enough at your job, write down: 'I am not good enough at my job.'

4 Then write down what you're demanding from that situation. For example, the demand attached to the above would be: 'I must be good enough at my job.'

5 When you have that demand, work out whether you're telling yourself it's awful and unbearable and that you're convinced that you're a useless, worthless failure for not fulfilling that demand. For instance:

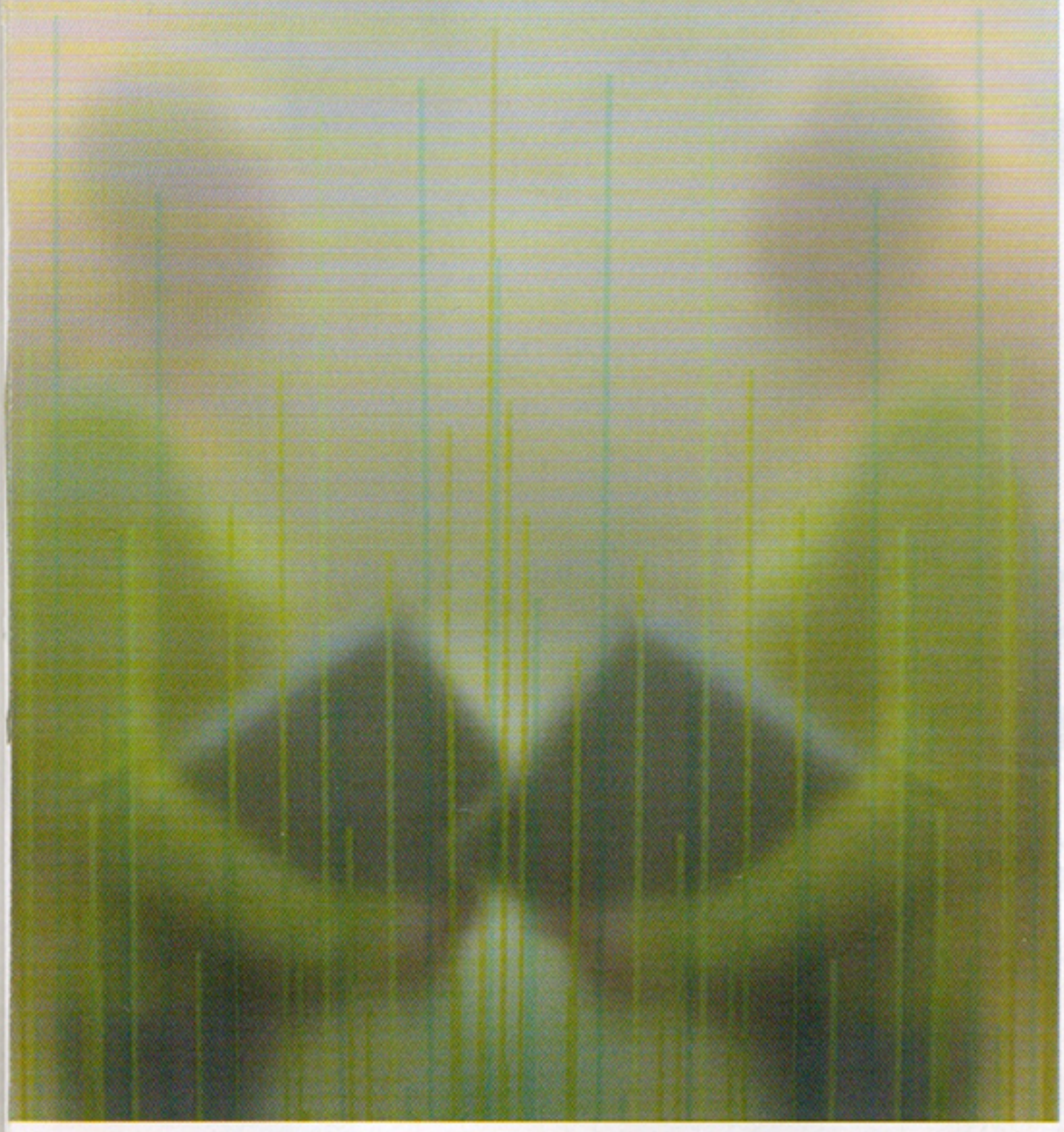
- I must be good enough at my job.
- It's awful that I'm not.
- I can't stand not being good enough at my job.
- Because it means I'm a useless, worthless person, a failure.

6 Write down the healthy-thinking version of the above, for example:

- I would prefer to be good enough at my job.
- It's bad, but not the end of the world that I'm not.
- It's difficult to bear, but I can stand it.
- I'm not useless, or worthless, or a failure. I am a worthwhile but fallible human being.

7 Dispute each of the beliefs in your unhealthy and healthy lists, using the empirical, logical and pragmatic argument methods from the main feature.

‘It’s only when we really accept ourselves that we see ourselves accurately’



probably a mixture of all three. It’s hardly the right frame of mind in which to make decisions.

Changing your mind

There’s little truth, sense or helpfulness in unhealthy beliefs. However, if you apply the same arguments to your healthy beliefs, you will find the opposite.

For instance, ‘I would prefer to be below a certain weight but I accept I might not be’, is true: you would like to be doing something, even if you are not actually doing it.

Holding a flexible belief system helps you see yourself in a true light, and will help you to recognise that you are always in control of your actions, whether they have a positive or negative effect on you. You will feel less anxious, less depressed, less guilty and much more likely to be in a frame of mind in which you can make changes to your weight. Self-acceptance, more than anything else, will help you see yourself as you truly are.

‘The best way to get in touch with ourselves is to learn acceptance and, preferably, unconditional acceptance. It’s only when we really accept ourselves, with our good and bad points, that we are not lying to ourselves and we see ourselves accurately,’ says Shehfe. **LL**

Case study

Mark was 40, with a very well-paid and successful career in HR. Despite being very good at his job, he had work-related anxiety.

Outwardly very confident, he was riddled with insecurities. He had a negative view of himself and was suffering with depression on top of the anxiety.

Mark had extreme perfectionist issues, to such an extent that he couldn’t believe that he was good at his job, despite all the evidence to the contrary. He thought himself a failure for not achieving the impossible on a daily basis.

Eventually, his anxiety was so great that his worst fears were realised and he couldn’t even manage simple presentations or conference calls. By demanding perfectionism and writing himself off as a failure, Mark actually became the very thing he told himself he was.

The healthy version would have been for Mark to prefer perfection, but to accept that he wasn’t always going to get it and that, if he wasn’t perfect, it didn’t mean that he was a complete failure, but a worthwhile, albeit fallible, human being.

ABOUT THIS ARTICLE

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