

# What's True and What's Just a Habit?

We humans have amazing brains! Most of us know that, but we often don't spend much time thinking about why that's so. One of the amazing things our brain does is automate common processes so we don't need to waste the very precious and limited conscious awareness we have on mundane activities we've done hundreds of times before. Consciousness brings one's full attention to some aspect of a task or situation. It would be both a huge waste and terribly overwhelming if we had full and complete awareness of every aspect of our experience. How would you get anything done if you were constantly distracted by sensation each time your clothes moved against your skin or by the individual movements of every single hair on your head! Automation allows us to do even highly complex things, like driving, grasping and manipulating objects, and walking on 'auto-pilot' so we can save our keenest focus for the really important stuff. This is truly an amazing ability, but it can become a problem when we sometimes allow [automated processes](#) to continue simply because they're already in place.

Belief systems are a good example of this because many of them are automated processes that we assume are valid even when they're inaccurate. We are forever taking information from the outside world, comparing it to what we think we know and then adapting, somehow. We say we've "learned something" when we consciously change a pre-existing belief to fit with new information. We say we're "biased" when we discount, dismiss, or outright ignore new information that doesn't fit



with those existing beliefs. Sometimes, we simply stop even thinking that something else might be possible when we've been in the habit of believing it to be a certain way for a long time. We call some of these "core beliefs" because they can become fundamental to who we accept ourselves to be as people.

Core beliefs develop early in life and are usually pretty black-or-white. They can include ideas that "I'm not good enough", "I'm weak", or "There's something wrong with me". Even though they tend to generate a lot of feelings and can have a big influence on the decisions we make (for example, deciding to avoid doing something difficult because we don't think we can do it), they usually don't reflect the whole story of who or what a person is. At this time of year, when so many people rethink the ways they're living and begin to plot a course for the future, it becomes important to really look at those ideas we have about ourselves. Who knows, you might be far more than you've been giving yourself credit for?

Dr. Ian Shulman, Psychologist

We can help you explore and change your core beliefs. Contact Shift Cognitive Therapy + Assessment to learn how.

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## **Bring Conscious Awareness to Your Actions**

Human bodies are exceptionally good at making complicated things routine, like driving cars down busy roadways at the same time that we're singing along to music and adjusting the mirrors. This is really useful because it means I don't have to waste my precious mental resources relearning everyday

things, like how to move my hand to some food and bring it up to my mouth. Once I learn how to do it, my body just does it and I'm free to preserve my very precious resource of conscious attention for other really important things, like determining which of those things in the environment is safe or dangerous.

One side effect of this continuous automation system is that once something becomes routine, we basically lose sight of the fact that it's happening. It's almost like it becomes invisible and we forget we're even doing it. This can be challenging when it comes to managing stress. Many people speed up when they feel stressed. They try to cope by getting busier and doing more things more quickly. When we cope like that over and over, without any conscious awareness of what we're actually doing, we can end up making challenging situations even worse.

Here at Shift Cognitive Therapy + Assessment we work to help you tune in to the kinds of invisible thoughts and pressures that drive you to push yourself too hard, and to those behaviours you might still do even when you'd rather not be doing them. Learning how to pay better attention gives you the chance to make new choices, right now, to decide whether you want to continue performing habits that may be familiar but no longer helpful. Visit us at [shiftct.com](http://shiftct.com) and see more about how we can help you change behaviours that are getting in your way.

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Shift Cognitive Therapy + Assessment helps people to cope with stress, anxiety and depression.

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# Make Your Choices, Whatever They Might Be

On the cusp of the Canada Day long weekend it's hard not to think about perspective – you might view this as the second long weekend of the summer or the second-last; if the weather is hot and sunny you might say it will have been a “good” weekend or a “bad” one if the weather is wet. Regardless of the way you choose to see it, the choice is ultimately yours.



People often wonder about that, whether they truly have any choice about how they view things, because thoughts occur so quickly – almost automatically. This is true. As our sense organs perceive elements of the environment around us, the brain is constantly labeling, judging and understanding everything that's coming in. Look around you right now and you might be able to appreciate that somewhere, deep inside your head, your brain is quietly rhyming off the names of everything it's seeing and hearing. But even as it's doing that, you can also purposely cause certain thoughts to come to mind. For example, think right now about what you did on last year's Canada Day long weekend. Now think about a summer weekend from your childhood. You have just taken control over your brain!

Because thoughts and feelings are so closely connected (see earlier articles on [Reacting AND Responding](#), [Anxiety – Automatic Protection](#)) our emotions and physiology often react

to sensory information before we're aware of it consciously. This can have the effect of leaving us feeling hijacked and out of control. But when you remember that [you always have a choice](#) about how you want to view things you can reframe those instantaneous reactions into something that feels more empowering.

A client recently provided a good example of this when he worried that his vacation might be ruined because he had to take his computer and work phone away with him on holidays. Knowing that he absolutely had to stay in touch over the break, he felt better by focusing instead on the fact that technology made it easy for him to be away on vacation AND periodically remain connected with important tasks back at work.

Choose to have a good holiday.

[www.shiftct.com](http://www.shiftct.com)

Shift Cognitive Therapy Oakville is a psychology practice that helps people learn to manage anxiety, stress and depression.

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## **Core Beliefs – The ‘I’ That is ‘Me’**

If you ask people how old they feel, many will say they feel younger than their years, as if they're still a kid, existing somehow within the body of a much older person. This happens because we all have an ‘I’ existing somewhere within us that

never ages and is somehow separate from our physical body. This 'I' is the 'Me' that we know ourselves to be, the collection of stories and beliefs that have accumulated over the whole of our lives and contribute to our impressions about who we are and what we can and cannot do.

You can get in touch with that 'Me' simply by considering whether you would be willing to do something outrageous. Would you go sky-diving right now? Get on stage and sing, dance or tell jokes in front of a hundred people? Would you run a marathon? Would you switch careers and do something totally different? Regardless of whether that little voice in your head said "Sure" or "Never!" the fact that your little voice said anything at all demonstrates that you too have a collection of stories that tells you who You are and what is and isn't possible in your life. Psychologists call these core beliefs.

Core beliefs are formed in our earliest years when we have only the most basic ability to understand the complexities of the world. When we feel afraid as children, when we're separated from our caregivers or when they're angry, our young brains instantly create terribly unsophisticated stories to explain why those things happened. The theme of the stories often goes something like 'There's something wrong with ME that made that painful thing happen. It was my fault.' (Of course, the stories can be positive as well.) The brain accepts those stories as The Truth, carving them into the granite of our knowledge base, and we move on from there forever believing that that is just how things are.

Core beliefs are tenacious and sticky, meaning that they hold onto their existence with a fierce intensity, bending facts to fit them, blinding vision so we cannot see things that don't fit and convincing us in so many ways that they are the real truth. Negative core beliefs try to convince us that no matter how much we achieve in life or which positive things happen, for some reason or another those things simply don't count,

we're not really that good, strong or worthy. The beliefs influence our actions, resulting in choices that seem only to confirm what the beliefs say is true.

Examining and changing disruptive core beliefs, for example through cognitive behaviour therapy with a psychologist, can be a rewarding process. The world can suddenly seem much more open and available when we realize that the 'Me' I always thought I was is not the only 'Me' I can be.

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Shift Cognitive Therapy Oakville is a psychology practice with a focus on change.

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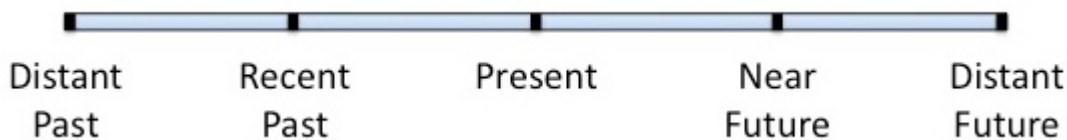
## **Where is My Mind?**

'Where are my keys? My glasses? My wallet? Where was I going just now?' These are questions that we ask ourselves all the time, to check-in, to make sure that we know we have what we should and are still headed in the right direction. They help us to orient ourselves because the events of daily life are always nudging us off course. 'Where is my mind at this moment?' is another orienting question, but one that we don't usually ask as often.

The mind has a mind of its own and no matter where we put our focus it inevitably moves on to something else. That the mind does this so automatically is perfectly consistent with many other bodily processes that also happen outside of our conscious control. For example, we don't typically know how to grow hair and fingernails, the body just does it. Thinking happens similarly: You can decide to think about something

specific, like the name of your teacher from grade 3 or the route to a particular store, but as soon as you release control of your mind, it will take off somewhere all on its own.

The challenge for people who struggle with anxiety, worry or depression occurs because the body's [fight-flight](#) alarm and defence systems activate all by themselves, depending on what the mind happens to be thinking about. When the mind is off in the future, thinking about difficult things that *might* happen, the body feels fear. When the mind is back in the past, thinking about difficult things that have already happened, we feel emotional pain. These physical and emotional reactions can occur even when there are no actual threats or dangers in front of you in the present moment. This is the same process that allows you to almost taste or smell your favourite food even if you're only imagining a plate of it floating in front of you.



Try this exercise to begin coping better with anxiousness and depression. Find a place where you can sit quietly for a few minutes. Starting with your finger on the word 'Present' above, move it like a needle on a gauge so it's consistent with where the focus of your mind is meandering to. You might be surprised by how much your mind jumps from past to present to future and back.

Use this same exercise the next time you feel anxious, stressed, worried or depressed. Check-in with your thinking and see where your mind is at. If it's off in the future or back in the past, bring it back to whatever is happening right now, in the present moment. The present moment is the only one we have and it's the only one we need to cope with, ever.



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## Reacting AND Responding

Human survival has always depended on our ability to react to quickly. Acting on instinct, without thought was rewarded by the opportunity to continue living, so our bodies became exceptionally good at it. We've never lost that ability.

Whenever we perceive some thing or event, that is, when we see it, hear it, smell it, taste it or feel it, the body activates positive or negative emotions and gets ready for action. This system is so much a part of our basic life support that these reactions occur even in the absence of any actual threats! All we have to do is have a thought about something frightening or come into contact with something that we viewed as dangerous or scary in the past, and the body can instantly go from rest to full-throttled arousal, complete with sweat, a pounding heart, shortness of breath, wobbly knees and dizziness. We often call this "panic."

Even though we cannot control when our reaction systems will activate and can do nothing to stop them once they start, we always retain some ability to control how we RESPOND to them afterwards. Responses are choices, thoughtful decisions about how we want to manage with something. Recognizing the difference between responses and reactions is important for coping because it gives us the chance to come back to the

present moment and reconnect with our goals and values. It gives us back a sense of control. When I catch myself feeling anxious, angry, stressed, or depressed I can always ask 'How do I want to feel in this moment?' and then change my focus and my behaviour to start the process of bringing that change about.

The video below is a fun example of this. Passengers forced to wait on a delayed Air Canada flight were serenaded by a Klezmer band traveling on the same plane. Every passenger made their own choice about how to cope with the wait: to enjoy the music and the fun of such an unusual experience, to remain angry and frustrated at the inconvenience, to worry about whether they'll make their connecting flights. We always have the choice. The trick is just to remember that.