

# Belief Systems and Assumptions

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss how our beliefs affect the way we view different situations. In particular, we'll focus on:

1. Beliefs and Assumptions
2. Belief Systems
3. Role of Belief Systems in Conflict

## 1. Beliefs and Assumptions

A **belief** is a person's mental sense of what is true, or right/correct in a given situation. Our beliefs come from our own experiences, as well as:

- The relationships we have
- The communities we grow up in
- What we read (e.g. religious texts, history books)
- What we hear

Someone who grew up in the city may have a different set of experiences that formed their beliefs than someone who grew up in the country.

Whether someone grew up rich or poor is another example of an experience that can shape beliefs.

Out of these beliefs come **assumptions**, or expectations formed as a result of a person's beliefs.

↪ **EXAMPLE** Perhaps you're growing up in a family where everybody works hard, but nobody seems to get ahead. No matter how hard you work, it's always going to be a dog-eat-dog world. You feel like you're not going to make it; you haven't been able to achieve your goals. The assumption here is that regardless of hard work, there are forces outside of one's control that decrease the likelihood of achievement.

↪ **EXAMPLE** Or you may grow up in an environment where you believe that if you study hard, you'll get a scholarship. Then if you go to college, you'll be able to get a good job and achieve your dreams. In this case, the assumption is that if you follow the proper steps, you'll be rewarded with a good job and dream achievement.

Based on our beliefs and assumptions of how we think the world works, we have certain expectations. These expectations could be anything from how safe or dangerous we think the world is to how much or how little

support we think we'll receive from our families and friends. When our expectations differ from our experiences, conflict can happen.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Belief**

A person's mental sense of what is true or right/correct in a situation.

##### **Assumption**

An expectation formed from a person's beliefs.

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## 2. Belief Systems

When we take our assumptions and put them together, they form a **belief system**, or a combination of beliefs that becomes a model for an aspect of a person's world. This model is the way we make sense of the world and how it works.

The beliefs that make up a belief system are non-contradictory; they are strung together to form a person's world model, which might be shared by many other people.

### IN CONTEXT

Residents of the United States are commonly thought to share a belief system that democracy and freedom are important.

However, the national events of Sept 11th, 2001 changed our perception of air travel and the way freedom is experienced when flying by air, causing an increase in security measures and protocols that can limit free movement. These new protocols are widely accepted even though residents value freedom.

Although we may share beliefs, each person also takes their unique experiences and evaluates them according to their own belief system. We all have personal experiences, such as life events and relationships, that form the way we see the world.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** Someone may experience a personal tragedy when they're young, such as the death of a parent, health issues, or financial problems. This event is going to influence the person's belief system about how the world works.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** On the other hand, someone might have a defining experience that is positive, such as winning a scholarship, traveling abroad, or receiving encouragement from teachers/mentors. This positive experience also influences this person's belief system.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### **Belief System**

A combination of beliefs that becomes a model for an aspect of a person's world.

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### 3. Role of Belief Systems in Conflict

Because we have personal experiences that shape our belief systems of how the world works, these belief systems are slow to change. Thus, when we have new experiences, we evaluate how they fit into our individual belief systems by considering the following:

- *Does the experience confirm the belief system?*
- *Does the experience challenge the belief system?*

➡ **EXAMPLE** A person might have a particular belief system about a group of people. This person thinks this group isn't getting ahead because they're lazy and don't have the right values. Perhaps the person believes this because of a personal experience that they feel confirms that way of thinking.

However, this person might then have an experience that challenges that belief system, causing the person to reconsider: "Before I met someone from this group, I assumed laziness caused the group's struggles. Now I'm beginning to see that it might not be so simple. Maybe it's not an equal playing field out there."

The more experiences we have, the more we're able to either confirm or challenge our belief systems. Yet because belief systems are slow to change, people have the tendency to want to fit certain experiences into their existing belief systems.

➡ **EXAMPLE** Joe believes that men are not nurturing enough to be nurses. His belief system is that men are gruff and cold, because that's what he is like, and that's what his father and brothers are like. But after an accident, he is cared for by a male nurse who is very warm and nurturing. Joe thinks: "This nurse is an exception. Most men would be bad nurses, even though this guy seems to have a talent for it."

We often don't want to challenge dearly held belief systems; if we've grown up thinking the world works in a particular way, we're going to cling to that and try to consider whatever opposing experiences we have as an exception to the rule.

Therefore, depending on what we do with our experiences, our belief systems have the ability to either:

- Escalate a conflict
- De-escalate a conflict

If you insist on making an experience conform to your beliefs, that could escalate a conflict because you aren't as willing to take in new information. But if you're willing to understand that something might be different than the way you have always thought it would or should work, that could de-escalate the conflict.



HINT

In order to consider how strongly we hold belief systems, try imagining a belief system as a string that holds individual beads, or beliefs, together. We keep trying to fit new beliefs onto the string because it's much easier to do that than to change the belief system.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned how our personal experiences shape our **beliefs and assumptions** about

how the world works. These beliefs then come together to form **belief systems**, which serves as a models for certain aspects of our lives. You now understand the **role that belief systems play in conflict** when we are either willing or unwilling to allow an experience to challenge the views we have established. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



## TERMS TO KNOW

### **Assumption**

An expectation formed from a person's beliefs.

### **Belief**

A person's mental sense of what is true or right/correct in a situation.

### **Belief System**

A combination of belief that becomes a model for an aspect of a person's world.