

A VISUAL SUMMARY

Values Work & Belief Change

in Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP)

Clarifying what matters most, understanding how beliefs form, and changing limiting beliefs into empowering ones — with techniques, worksheets and a look at the evidence.

Values clarity | Hierarchy | Limiting beliefs | Belief change | Evidence | Worksheets

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SECTION 01

Overview: Values and Beliefs

Values are what matter to us. Beliefs are what we hold to be true. Together they act as powerful filters, shaping what we notice, how we feel and what we do.

In NLP, values and beliefs sit just beneath behaviour. Two people with the same skills can act very differently because one believes “I can do this” and the other believes “people like me don't succeed at this”. Likewise, a job that suits someone who values security may feel suffocating to someone who values freedom.

This guide covers two linked areas of practice: **values work** — discovering, ranking and aligning with what matters — and **belief change** — finding limiting beliefs and building more useful ones.

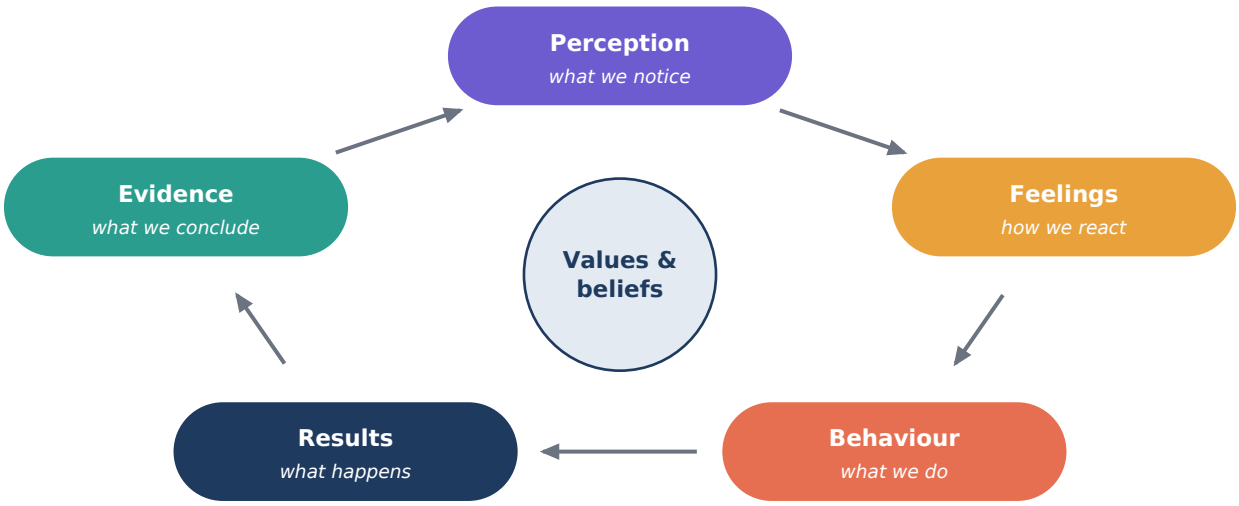


Figure 1. Values and beliefs filter perception; the results then feed back as “evidence”, often confirming the original belief.

	Values	Beliefs
Question	What's important to me?	What do I hold to be true?
Example	“Honesty matters most to me.”	“If I'm honest, people will respect me.”
Function	Motivation and direction; criteria for decisions	Expectations; permission or limitation
Change by…	Clarifying, ranking, aligning	Questioning, reframing, updating with new experience

SECTION 02

What Are Values?

Values are the things that are most important to a person — the standards they use to decide what is good, worthwhile and worth working for.

Values are usually expressed as abstract nouns — *freedom, security, love, achievement, honesty*. Because they are abstract, two people can share a value word and still mean very different things by it (see Section 5). Values tend to be relatively stable, but their order of importance can shift with life stage and context.

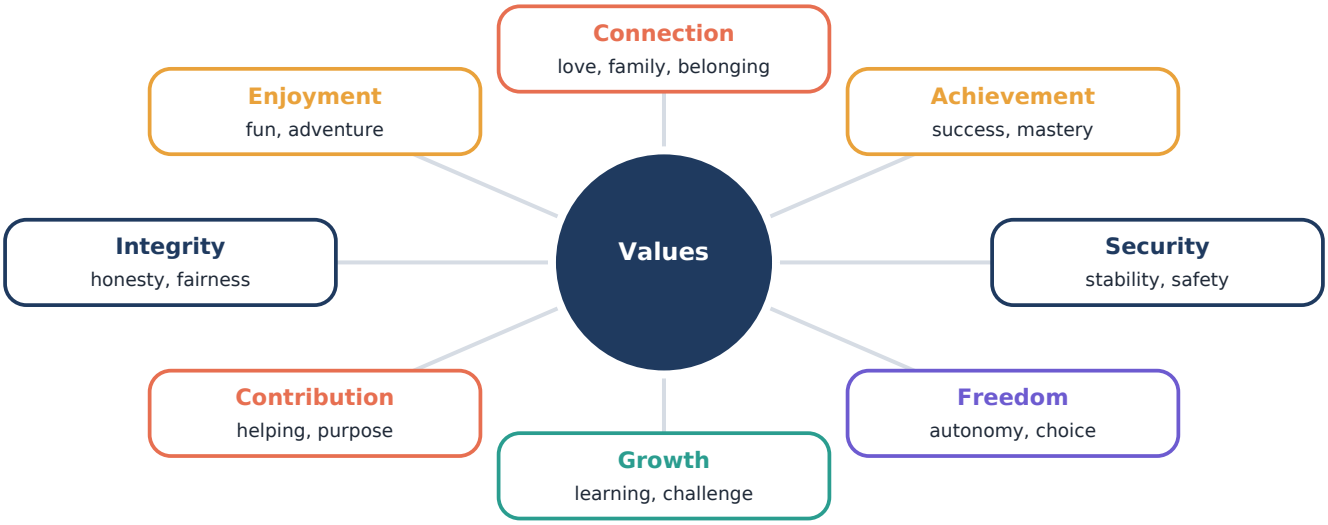


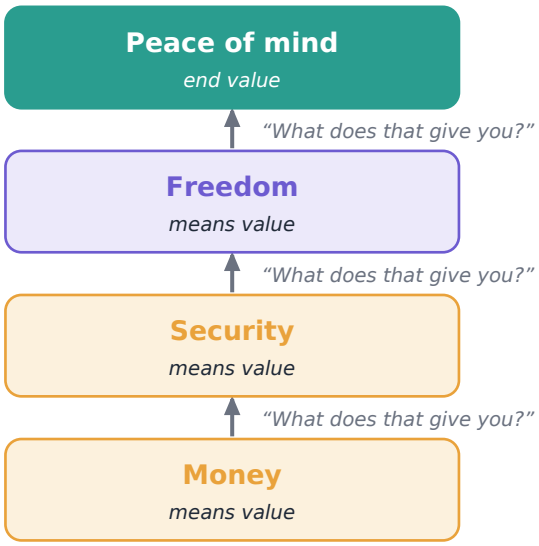
Figure 2. Common value families. Most people hold several, in a personal order of priority.

Values act as…	How	Example
Motivators	We move toward what we value	Someone who values growth seeks out new challenges
Decision criteria	We judge options against them	Turning down a well-paid job that conflicts with family time
Sources of emotion	Violations feel bad; fulfilment feels good	Anger when someone breaks a promise (integrity)
Filters	We notice what relates to our values	A security-minded person spots risks first

SECTION 03

Types of Values

NLP draws two useful distinctions: between means values and end values, and between values we move toward and states we move away from.



Means values

Things we want for what they bring us: money, a job title, a house, a car.

End values

Feelings or states we want for their own sake: peace, love, freedom, joy, security.

Why it matters

People can chase a means value long after it has stopped delivering the end value.

Figure 3. Asking "What does that give you?" leads from means values up to end values.

Toward and away-from values

Toward value	Away-from value	Typical language
Success	Failure	"I want to achieve..." vs. "I don't want to fail..."
Security	Insecurity	"I want stability" vs. "I can't risk losing..."
Acceptance	Rejection	"I want to belong" vs. "I'm afraid they'll reject me"
Health	Illness	"I want energy" vs. "I don't want to end up ill"

Why it matters

Away-from motivation can be strong at first but tends to fade once the threat recedes — and it can bring anxiety. NLP coaches often help people restate away-from values as what they want *instead*.

SECTION 04

Eliciting Values & Building a Hierarchy

Values elicitation is a structured conversation that brings a person's values into awareness and puts them in order of importance for a particular context.

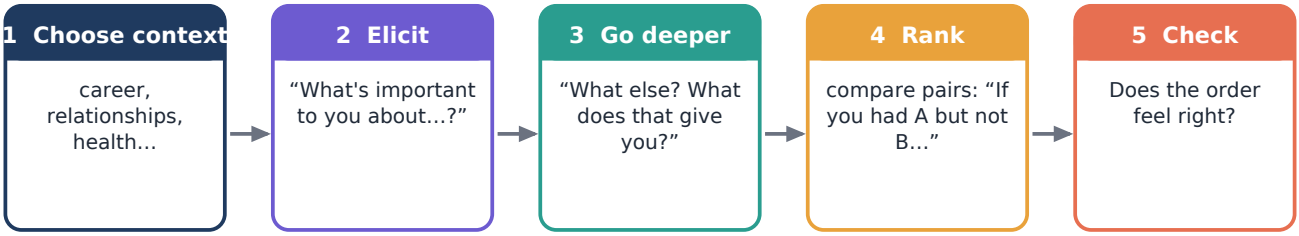


Figure 4. A five-step values elicitation process.

Purpose	Questions
Elicit	What's important to you about [your work]? · What else? · What must be present for you to be satisfied?
Find hidden values	What would have to happen for you to leave? · What has made you most fulfilled in the past?
Find end values	What does having [X] give you? · And what's important about that?
Rank	If you could have only one of these two, which would you choose? · Which matters more, [A] or [B]?

Example: a values hierarchy for work

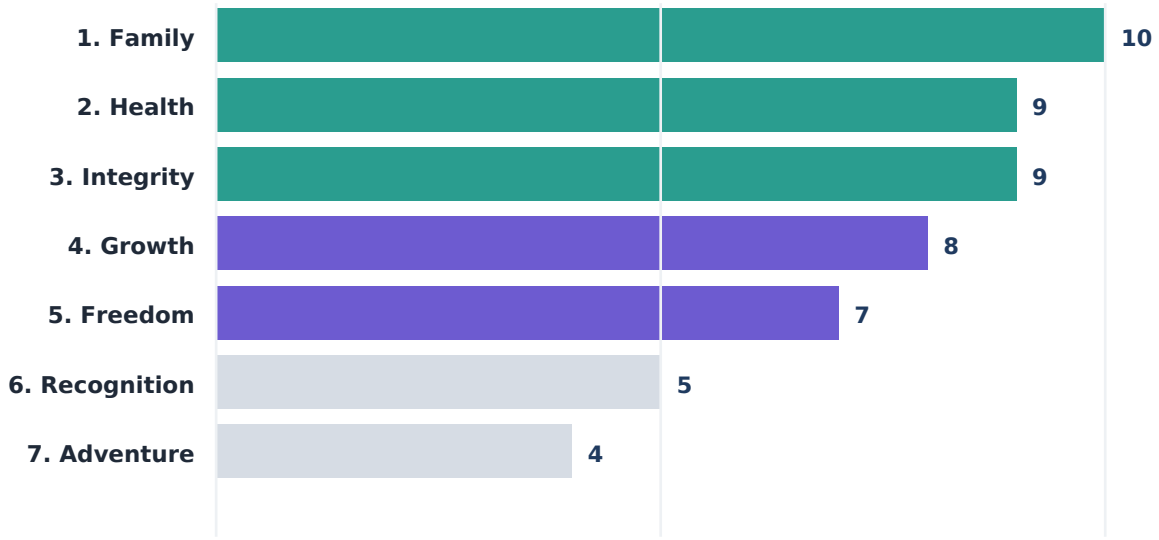


Figure 5. One person's ranked work values, rated 0–10 for importance (illustrative). Teal = top three.

SECTION 05

Criteria & Evidence: How You Know a Value Is Met

Every value has hidden evidence rules — the specific things that must happen for a person to feel that value is being met. Many conflicts come from different rules for the same word.



Different evidence → different behaviour → easy misunderstandings

Figure 6. Same value, different evidence. NLP calls these the person's "complex equivalences" for a value.

To uncover evidence rules, ask: **"How do you know when you have [value]?"** or **"What has to happen for you to feel [value]?"** The answers are often surprisingly specific — and sometimes surprisingly hard to satisfy.

Value	Hard-to-meet rule	More achievable rule
Success	"Only if I'm the best in my field and everyone recognises it."	"When I make progress on something that matters to me."
Love	"When my partner knows what I need without my saying it."	"When we're kind to each other and spend time together."
Health	"Only when I'm at my ideal weight and never ill."	"When I move my body and feel energetic most days."
Security	"When I have enough savings that nothing could go wrong."	"When I have a plan and a buffer for emergencies."

Key insight

If a value is rarely fulfilled, the problem may lie in the evidence rule rather than in the person's life. Making rules more achievable — while keeping them meaningful — is a powerful values intervention.

SECTION 06

Values Conflicts & Alignment

Problems arise when important values are not being met, when two values pull in opposite directions, or when our actions don't match what we say matters.



Figure 7. A values gap chart (illustrative). Large gaps between importance and satisfaction show where change is most needed.

Type of conflict	Example	Ways to work with it
Internal: two values clash	Freedom vs. security when considering self-employment	Chunk up to a shared end value; find options that serve both
Gap: value not met	Health is ranked high but rarely acted on	Set small actions with achievable evidence rules
Interpersonal	One partner values adventure, the other stability	Explore each person's evidence rules; look for overlap
Organisational	A person valuing integrity in a culture that rewards cutting corners	Clarify non-negotiables; negotiate or change context

Alignment question

Ask: *"If I were living fully in line with my top three values, what would I be doing differently this week?"*

SECTION 07

What Are Beliefs?

Beliefs are generalisations we hold to be true about ourselves, others and the world. They are not facts — they are conclusions drawn from experience, and they guide what we expect and attempt.

Belief structure	Form	Example
Cause and effect	“X causes Y”	“If I speak up, people will think I'm stupid.”
Meaning (complex equivalence)	“X means Y”	“Making a mistake means I'm incompetent.”
Identity	“I am…”	“I'm not a creative person.”
Capability	“I can / can't…”	“I can't learn languages.”
Possibility	“It is / isn't possible…”	“Nobody my age changes careers.”
Rule	“I / people should…”	“I should always put others first.”

Where beliefs sit: Dilts' logical levels

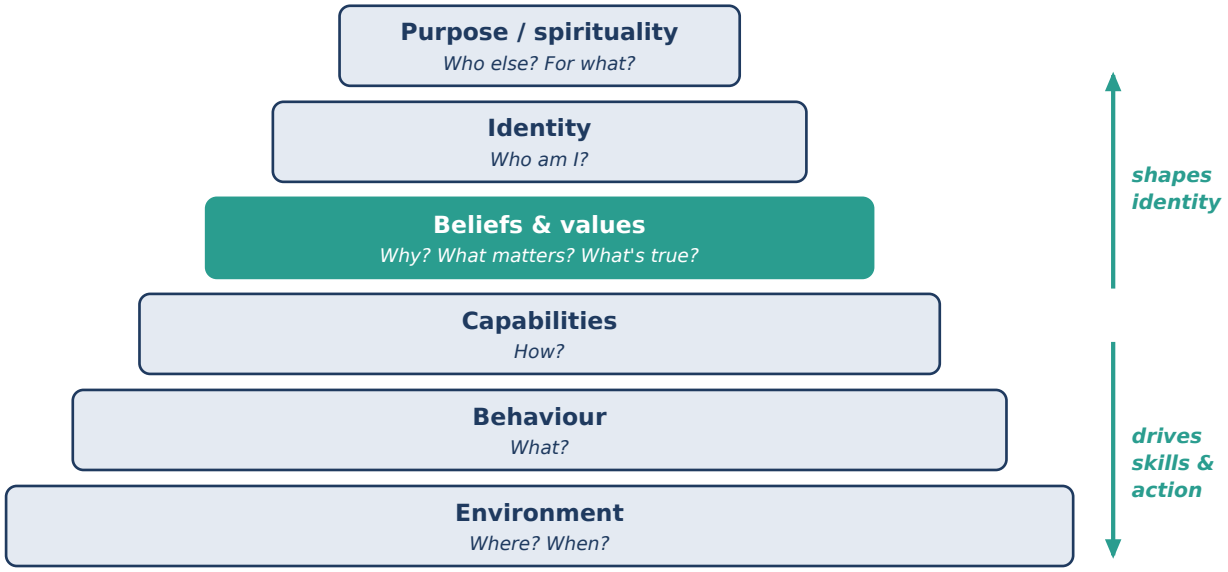


Figure 8. In Robert Dilts' logical levels, beliefs and values sit between identity above and skills and behaviour below.

SECTION 08

How Beliefs Form & Reinforce Themselves

Beliefs form through experience, repetition and the people around us. Once formed, they tend to filter new experience in ways that keep them in place.

Source	How it works	Example
Single strong experience	One emotional event creates a generalisation	Being laughed at once → “I'm bad at speaking up”
Repetition	Hearing the same message many times	“You're the clumsy one” said throughout childhood
Authority figures	Accepting what parents, teachers or experts say	A teacher says “You're not a maths person”
Modelling	Copying beliefs of people around us	Adopting a parent's worries about money
Culture and media	Absorbing wider norms	Beliefs about age, gender, success

Morris Massey's periods of value formation

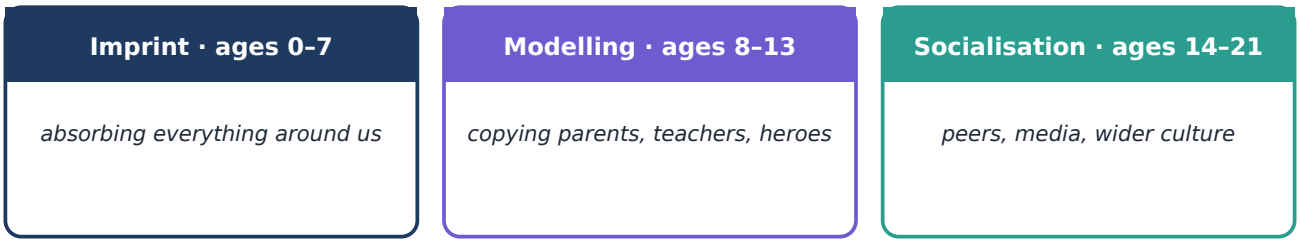


Figure 9. Sociologist Morris Massey's model, widely quoted in NLP. The age bands are approximate and not strongly research-based.

The self-fulfilling loop

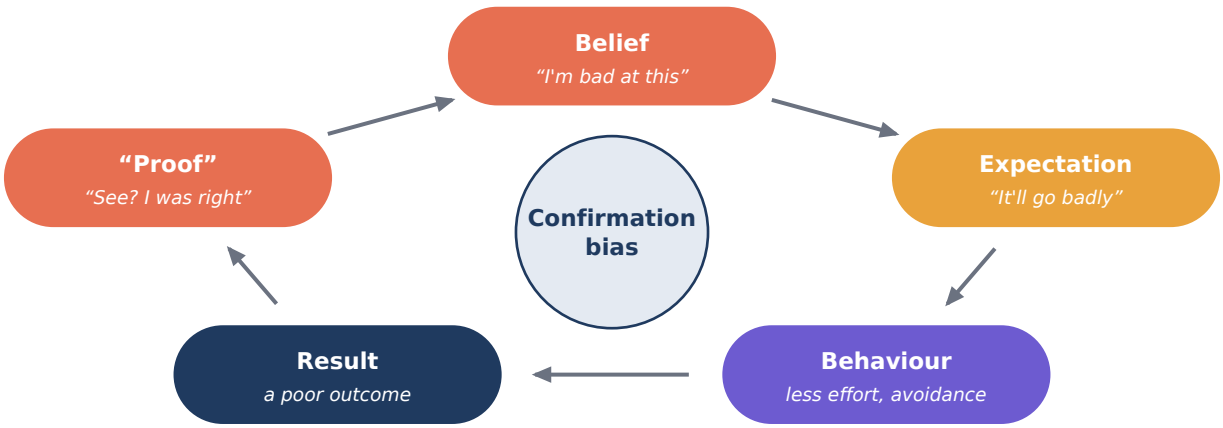


Figure 10. Beliefs shape behaviour, and the results are read as evidence for the belief.

SECTION 09

Limiting Beliefs: Hopelessness, Helplessness, Worthlessness

Robert Dilts groups the most common limiting beliefs into three types. Each blocks change in a different way and calls for a different kind of empowering belief.

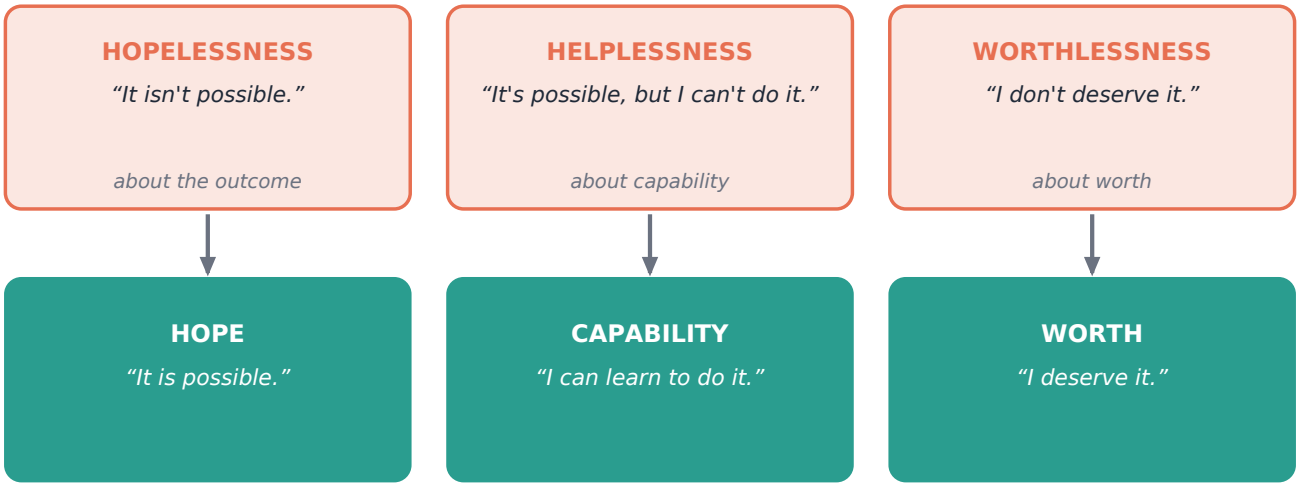


Figure 11. Dilts' three types of limiting belief and their empowering counterparts.

Type	Sounds like	Questions that help
Hopelessness	“It's no use.” “Nothing will change.” “It's impossible.”	Has anyone ever done this? What would make it possible?
Helplessness	“Others can, but not me.” “I'm not clever enough.”	What would you need to learn? When have you learned something hard before?
Worthlessness	“I don't deserve it.” “Who am I to want that?”	What would you say to a friend who felt this way? What would change if you deserved it?

Order matters

Before working on capability, check worth and possibility. Someone who believes they don't deserve success may undermine progress however capable they become.

Quick self-check

- ☐ Do I believe this outcome is **possible** — for anyone?
- ☐ Do I believe **I** am capable of it, or could learn to be?
- ☐ Do I believe I **deserve** it?

SECTION 10

Identifying Limiting Beliefs

Limiting beliefs often hide in plain sight — in everyday language, in emotional reactions and in the goals people quietly avoid.

Language cue	Example	Possible underlying belief
Absolutes	“I **always** mess this up.” “I'll **never** be good at it.”	A fixed, generalised capability belief
Can't / impossible	“I **can't** ask for a raise.”	Capability or possibility belief
Should / must	“I **should** be further along by now.”	A rule about worth or success
Identity labels	“I'm **just not** a numbers person.”	Identity belief
People like me	“**People like me** don't do that.”	Belonging or worth belief
Yes, but...	“**Yes, but** it won't work for me.”	Hopelessness, or fear of change



The downward arrow

A questioning method from cognitive therapy (Burns, 1980) that NLP practitioners also use. Each answer is followed by the same question until a core belief appears.

Signs you've reached the core:

- it's about identity (“I am...”)
- it carries strong feeling
- the answers start to repeat

Figure 12. Following an event down to a core belief.

SECTION 11

Questioning Beliefs: Meta Model & Sleight of Mouth

A belief loosens when it is examined. NLP uses precise questions (the Meta Model) and reframing patterns (Sleight of Mouth) to open beliefs to doubt.

Example belief

“I'm not a creative person.”

Approach	Question / response	Effect
Counter-example	“Have you ever solved a problem in a new way?”	Finds evidence against the rule
Specify	“Creative at what, specifically?”	Narrows a sweeping generalisation
Source	“Who first told you that? How did you decide it?”	Reveals the belief's origin
Redefine	“Maybe you're not artistic in the traditional sense, but you're inventive.”	Changes the meaning of key words
Consequence	“How has believing that held you back?”	Shows the cost of the belief
Intention	“Maybe that belief protects you from being judged.”	Honours its purpose; opens alternatives
Model of the world	“Many people who say that turn out to be creative in practical ways.”	Shows it's one view among many
Time frame	“Is that true for every stage of your life — past and future?”	Loosens the permanence

Tone

Questioning works best with curiosity and rapport. The aim isn't to win an argument but to help the person notice that the belief is a conclusion they can revisit.

SECTION 12

The Belief Change Cycle

Robert Dilts observed that beliefs change naturally through a cycle. Belief change techniques aim to guide this process deliberately rather than leaving it to chance.



Figure 13. The belief change cycle as commonly taught in NLP. In training it is often laid out as spaces on the floor.

Stage	What happens	Helpful question
Currently believe	The limiting belief feels true	"What do you believe now?"
Open to doubt	Exceptions and costs come into view	"What would you have to doubt?"
Museum of old beliefs	The old belief is respected and retired	"What did that belief do for you?"
Wanting to believe	A new belief is chosen	"What would you rather believe?"
Open to believe	The new belief begins to feel possible	"What would make it believable?"
Now believe	Evidence accumulates; the belief stabilises	"How will you keep noticing evidence?"

SECTION 13

Submodality Belief Change

NLP proposes that we code certainty and doubt differently in our inner images and sounds. Changing those qualities is claimed to change how strongly a belief is held.

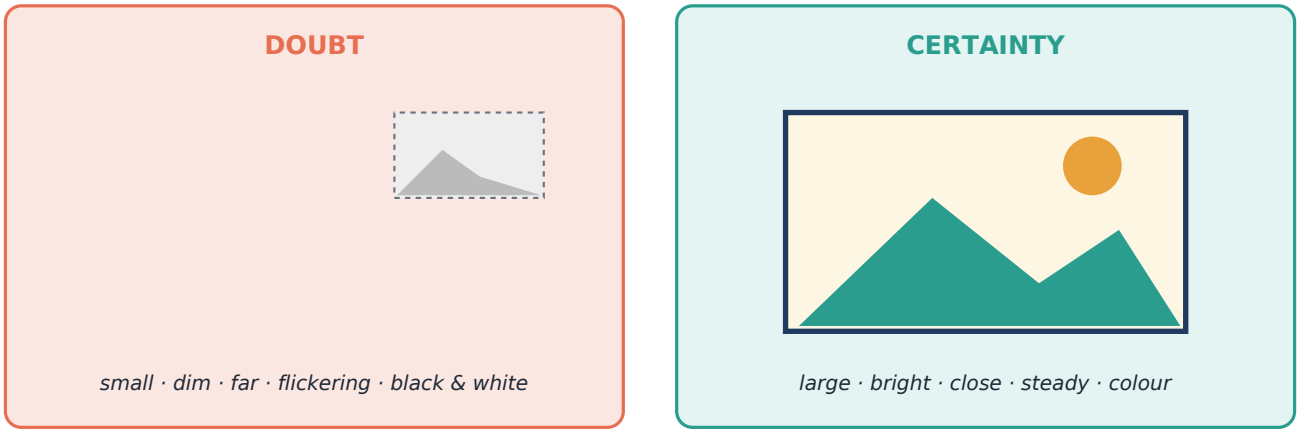


Figure 14. One person's example of how doubt and certainty are represented. Everyone's pattern is different.

TECHNIQUE

Submodality belief change

Based on Richard Bandler's submodality work.

1	**Doubt**	Think of something you're unsure about. Notice its qualities: size, brightness, distance, location, movement
2	**Certainty**	Think of something you're sure is true (e.g. the sun will rise). Notice its qualities
3	**Contrast**	List the differences between the two
4	**Old belief → doubt**	Bring up the limiting belief; change its qualities to match doubt
5	**New belief → certainty**	Bring up the new belief; give it the qualities of certainty
6	**Ecology & test**	Check it fits; notice whether the new belief feels more true

Keep in mind

Changing how a belief is pictured may change how it *feels* in the moment. Lasting change usually needs new experiences that support the new belief.

SECTION 14

Re-imprinting & Updating Old Experiences

Many limiting beliefs trace back to early experiences that NLP calls “imprints”. Re-imprinting, developed by Robert Dilts, revisits these memories with adult resources.

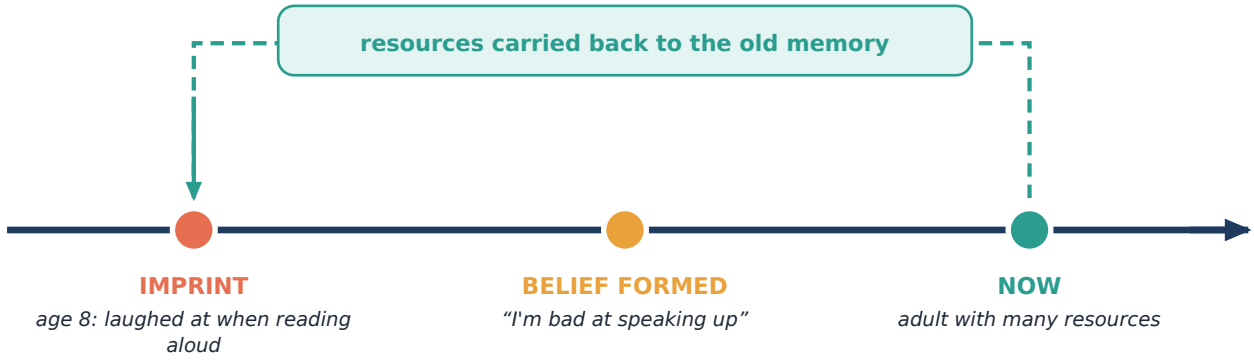


Figure 15. The idea behind re-imprinting: today's resources are brought back to the experience where the belief formed.

TECHNIQUE

Re-imprinting (simplified)

Usually done with a trained practitioner, using a timeline laid out on the floor.

1	**Identify the belief**	and the feeling that goes with it
2	**Trace back**	Follow the feeling back along the timeline to an early memory
3	**Step outside**	Observe the memory from a safe, dissociated position
4	**Understand everyone**	Find the positive intention of each person involved
5	**Add resources**	Ask what each person needed; bring those resources to them
6	**Return & update**	Walk forward to now, noticing how the belief has changed

Important

Do not use re-imprinting for trauma, abuse or severe distress outside qualified clinical care. Evidence-based trauma therapies exist and should come first.

SECTION 15

Creating Empowering Beliefs

Removing a limiting belief leaves a gap. NLP emphasises deliberately choosing and building a more useful belief to take its place.

A well-formed empowering belief is…

Positive
States what you want, not what you don't

Believable
A stretch, but not a leap

Within your control
About you and your actions

Ecological
Fits your values and life

Belief stepping stones

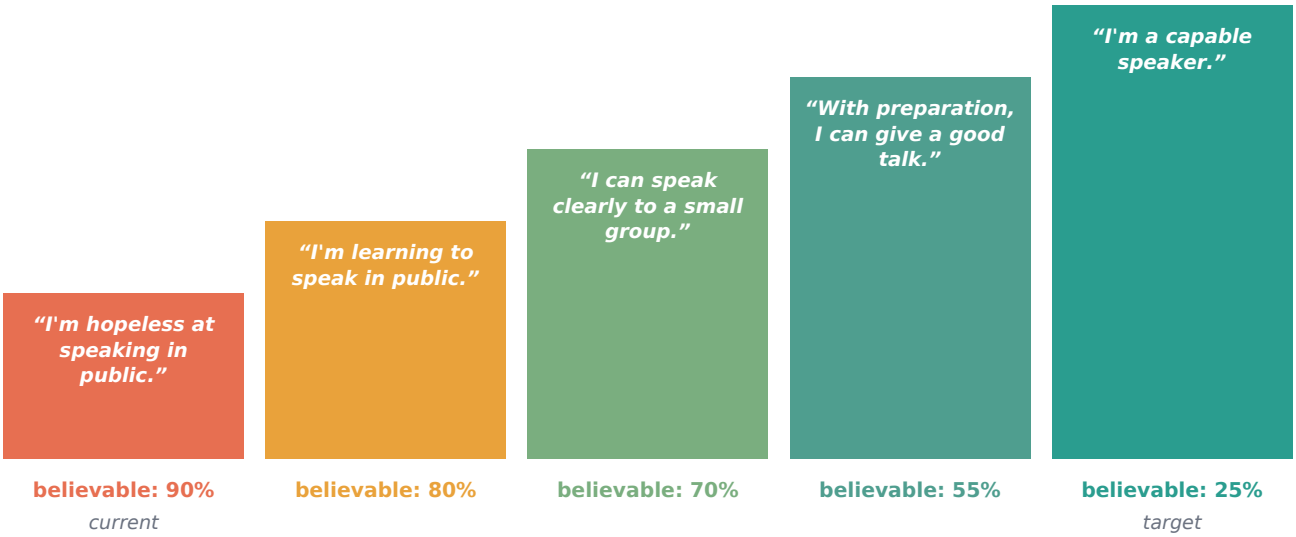


Figure 16. If the target belief feels unbelievable, build a ladder of smaller beliefs (ratings illustrative).

Method	How	Example
Evidence gathering	Each day, note one piece of evidence for the new belief	"I spoke up in today's meeting."
Acting as if	Act as though the new belief were true, in small ways	Volunteer for a short presentation
Modelling	Find people who hold the belief; ask how they think	Interview a confident speaker
Process language	Use "I'm learning to…", "I'm becoming…"	"I'm becoming more confident."
Future pacing	Imagine acting from the new belief in a future situation	Rehearse next week's meeting

SECTION 16

Applications

Values and beliefs work appears in coaching, therapy, leadership and everyday decisions. The same principles apply across contexts.

Context	Values work	Belief work
Career	Choose roles that match top values; spot value conflicts in job offers	“I'm too old to change careers” → stepping-stone beliefs
Relationships	Share evidence rules for love and respect	“If I ask for what I need, I'll be rejected” → test it in small ways
Health	Link exercise to end values (energy, family)	“I'm not a sporty person” → identity as “someone who moves daily”
Leadership	Make team values explicit and agree evidence rules	Spot team-level limiting beliefs (“we always miss deadlines”)
Money	Clarify what money gives you (security, freedom)	Question inherited money beliefs
Learning	Connect learning to personal values	“I'm not good at maths” → “I'm learning maths”

A values-based decision matrix

Option	Family (×10)	Health (×9)	Growth (×8)	Freedom (×7)	Weighted total
Stay in current job	8	5	4	5	80 + 45 + 32 + 35 = **192**
New role, more travel	4	5	9	6	40 + 45 + 72 + 42 = **199**
Go part-time & study	9	7	8	8	90 + 63 + 64 + 56 = **273**

Figure 17. Score each option 0–10 against each value, multiply by the value's weight and add up (illustrative example).

> **Use it as a mirror**
> A matrix doesn't make the decision for you — but if the “winning” option feels wrong, that feeling often reveals a value you haven't yet named.

SECTION 17

Evidence, Ethics & Cautions

Values clarification and belief change both draw on ideas well supported in psychology. The specific NLP techniques have been tested far less.

Approach	Status	Comment
Reflecting on core values (self-affirmation)	**Well supported**	Many studies show values reflection can reduce defensiveness and stress (Cohen & Sherman, 2014)
Values clarification in therapy	**Well supported**	Central to Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), which has a solid evidence base
Questioning and restructuring beliefs	**Well supported**	Core of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)
Growth-mindset interventions	**Mixed**	Meta-analyses find small average effects (e.g. Sisk et al., 2018)
Repeating positive self-statements	**Caution**	Can backfire for people with low self-esteem (Wood, Perunovic & Lee, 2009)
Belief change cycle, submodality belief change, re-imprinting	**Little evidence**	Rarely tested in controlled studies

Why affirmations can backfire

In one study, people with low self-esteem who repeated “I am a lovable person” felt **worse** afterwards. A belief that is too far from what someone currently believes can trigger counter-arguments. Stepping-stone beliefs and real evidence are safer.

Ethical guidelines

- **Respect autonomy**: the person chooses which values and beliefs to keep. Never impose your own.
- **Check ecology**: a belief that seems limiting may protect something important.
- **Stay within competence**: refer depression, trauma and other clinical issues to qualified professionals.
- **No manipulation**: don't use someone's values to pressure them (e.g. in sales) into decisions against their interests.

SECTION 18

Practice & Worksheets

Use these worksheets to clarify your values and work on one limiting belief. Revisit them every few months — values and beliefs evolve.

Worksheet 1: Values clarity

Rank	Value	Evidence rule: “I know this is met when…”	Importance (0–10)	Satisfaction (0–10)
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				

Worksheet 2: Changing one limiting belief

Step	Your answer
1. The limiting belief (in your words)	
2. Type: hopelessness / helplessness / worthlessness?	
3. Where did it come from?	
4. What has it cost you? What has it protected?	
5. Counter-examples	
6. New empowering belief	
7. First stepping-stone belief	
8. One action this week that fits the new belief	

SECTION 19

Cheat Sheet, Glossary & Further Reading

Tool	In one line
Values elicitation	“What's important to you about…?” then “What else?”
Means → end values	“What does that give you?”
Evidence rules	“How do you know when you have…?”
Values gap chart	Importance vs. satisfaction shows where to focus
Three limiting types	Possible? Capable? Deserving?
Downward arrow	“If that were true, what would it mean?”
Belief change cycle	Doubt the old, retire it, open to the new
Stepping stones	Build believable beliefs on the way to the target

Term	Meaning
Value	Something important to a person; a standard for judging what's worthwhile.
Belief	A generalisation held to be true.
Complex equivalence	“X means Y” — the evidence rule linking behaviour to meaning.
Imprint	An early experience that shaped a lasting belief.
Ecology	Whether a change fits the person's wider life and values.

Further reading

Work	Why read it
Dilts, R., Hallbom, T. & Smith, S. (1990). *Beliefs: Pathways to Health and Well-Being*.	The NLP classic on belief change
James, T. & Woodsmall, W. (1988). *Time Line Therapy and the Basis of Personality*.	Values elicitation and Massey's model in NLP
Cohen, G. L. & Sherman, D. K. (2014). *Annual Review of Psychology*, 65.	Research on self-affirmation and values
Wood, J. V., Perunovic, W. Q. E. & Lee, J. W. (2009). *Psychological Science*, 20(7).	When positive self-statements backfire
Harris, R. (2008). *The Happiness Trap*.	Accessible ACT-based values work