Four Beliefs That Are Keeping You Immobilized in Your Career and Life

By *Harrison Barnes*

If you were suddenly told you were a professional boxer and were expected to get into a ring and fight night after night, you would probably get quite discouraged. At some point, you would probably stop fighting altogether. You would get into the ring and allow yourself to be knocked out, knowing that no matter how hard (and much) you fought you would likely lose. Rather than even fight, you would simply give up.

Many people are in a situation in their own lives where they have given up. After enough discouragement, pain and suffering they have concluded that trying anymore is worthless–that no matter what they do, they are not going to get the result they want. Instead of trying, fighting and moving forward, they stop.

This sort of belief–"***learned helplessness***"—is a state of fear: A belief that the outside forces, people and circumstances control us. This sense of impotence is the single most destructive belief that you can adopt. Your belief about whether you can do something to change your life ultimately controls your life and what you become.

You control your life by controlling your feelings and thoughts. The beliefs that you have about your own sense of power, or powerlessness, ultimately will control how you feel. Negative beliefs send thoughts to your mind about what is not possible.

The most dangerous belief you face in the world is the belief that you cannot change—that it is hopeless:

- To get a better job
- To be happy
- To lose weight
- To have the success you want

We learn to be helpless when we feel that nothing we will do will work. No matter what we do, we believe we are going to fail. If we act, there is going to be pain.

When people drop out of school at a young age, they generally do so because there is so much pain. They get poor test results and feel continually crushed and upset by this. Their behavior sends them to the principal's office over and over again. They may be ostracized and not treated well by better students. They do not fit in and do poorly in gym class. The only source of pleasure they may get during school is standing outside in a corner smoking with a few other people who are experiencing the same issues. They feel paralyzed in a school environment and so they run from it and drop out. They make decisions at the age of 15, 16 or 17 that will affect the entire course of their life.

People also become criminals and commit crimes because they feel paralyzed. They do not feel they can get ahead, or get the things they want or need unless they break the law. This seems the only option – hurting others (and, of course, themselves when they are punished). It is the sense that no matter what they do, nothing good will ever happen.

If you believe that there is nothing you can do to turn your life around, then your life is over. Your beliefs about whether or not you can do something to change your life and get ahead are what control your life.

A Harvard psychologist, Martin Seligman, started shocking dogs. He restrained the dogs and, when he rang a bell, he shocked them. After some time, he placed them into boxes with two halves and took the restraints off of the dog. Seligman believed that when he rang the bell, the dog would jump over the divider so it would not be shocked, but the dog did not. It just stayed there. It believed it was trapped.

When Seligman put dogs who had never been shocked before in the box (without any restraints) they quickly jumped over the divider.
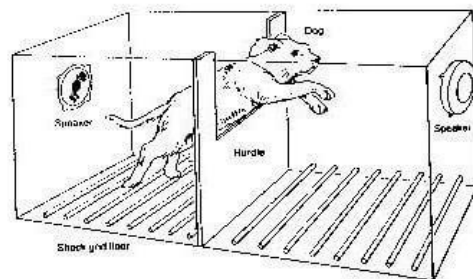
Many people are like dogs. If you have conditioned yourself over time to believe that no matter what you do, you will experience pain, then you will stop acting and believe that no matter what you do, you will fail. Many people who become extremely depressed have given up and just stop trying.

When I was in college at the University of Chicago, I watched some people become extremely depressed and, in cases, drop out of school. Many of these kids had been at the very top of their class in small rural high schools and had always done exceptionally well.

When they got to college, they enrolled in advanced chemistry classes, advanced calculus and other classes because they had always been in various advanced classes—so why not!? Instead of excelling in these classes like they had always

Instead of excelling at these classes, these kids got blown out of the water. In some case, they even failed. The next semester, the same thing happened. They did not have the study skills, or ability to compete at this level and were shaken to the core. Someone who has gotten "As" their entire life and is suddenly failing classes, unable to comprehend advanced material and threatened with expulsion is understandably going to be very upset by their circumstances.

A few of these kids stopped going to class, started smoking pot and lying around all day doing nothing. Two of them returned home and dropped out of school completely.

This is stupid when you think about it. All that happened was these kids got into a situation where they took various classes that were above their skill level. The same thing would happen to a 10-year old who walked on the field and attempted to quarterback a professional football game. Nonetheless, the feeling of not being able to act and succeed was so profound that they gave up.

At the time, they were up against something they could not handle. That does not mean, of course, that they could not handle it in the future. If they had stepped back and tried something else, the odds are they would have been able to handle those classes later. They were just not ready at the time.

Here are some beliefs that disempower you and make you feel helpless.
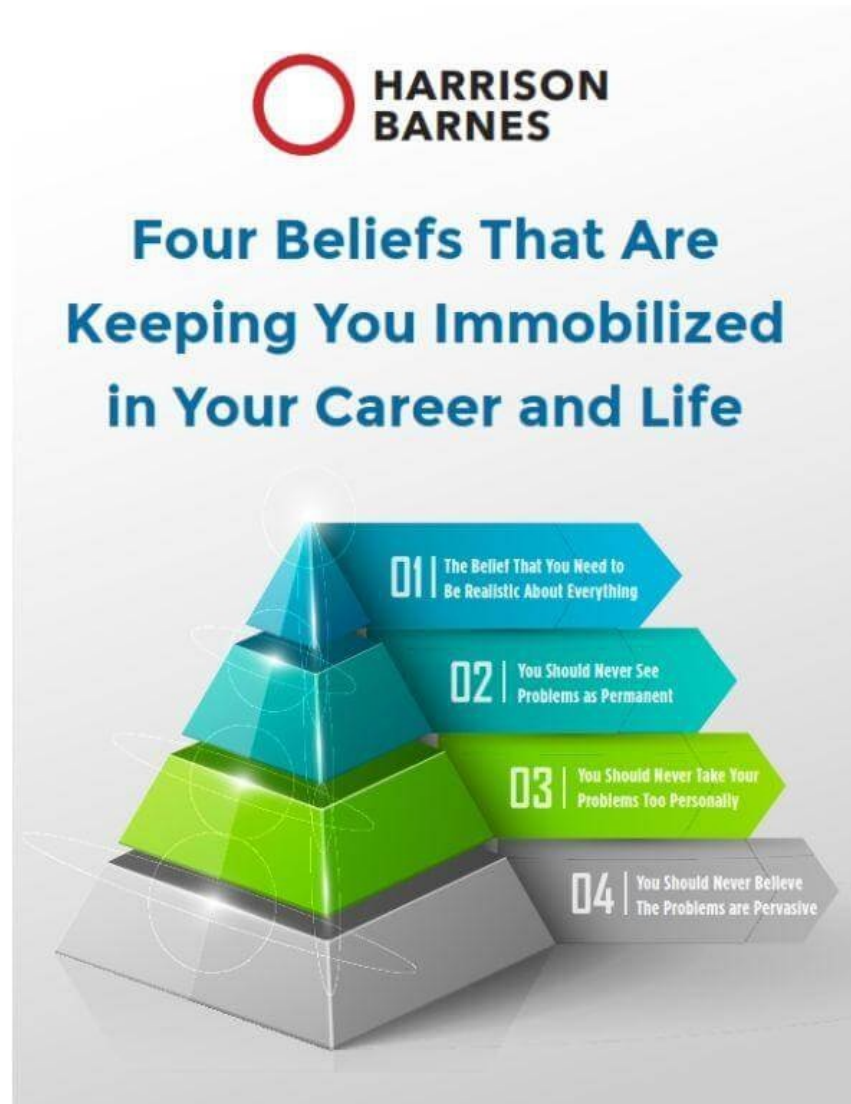
1. The Belief That You Need to Be Realistic About Everything

Ralph Waldo Emerson said "The measure of mental health is the ability to find good everywhere." There is a tremendous amount of truth to this. Think about the people you know that are happy. Do they see the world in an optimistic way, or a negative way?

Most people spend more time thinking about what could go wrong than possibilities.

For example, when Walt Disney wanted to open a theme park where he charged admission (and did not charge to go on rides) people around him told him that was impossible. Nevertheless, he believed in the possibilities of this, and look what happened!

When Bill Gates read about someone who had developed a computer, he saw the possibility and contacted the person and told him he had a system to make the computer run (although he did not have a working system at the time). He contacted the person, met with him, wrote a program and Microsoft was born. He saw the possibilities and was not being realistic.

In fact, what few people understand is that you do not need to be realistic about everything. You can be realistic and be fat, broke and alone. You need to take action and believe you will succeed. People like Bill Gates and Walt Disney were rewarded because they were not realistic and somewhere inside believed that they could succeed.

Whatever you can believe, you can manifest and make true. You need to stop buying into the limitations of the moment. You need to focus on what is great and what can be. If you feel lousy and are pessimistic, you will end up being defeated. You need to avoid this thinking at all costs. Your power comes from being optimistic, and being optimistic is a sign of great power.

In sales, I have noticed that optimists generally always outsell pessimists. In politics, have you noticed that politicians with the most optimistic messages generally win elections? It is important to be optimistic and not so realistic. Realism will keep

2. You Should Never See Problems as Permanent

There is a huge danger in seeing problems as permanent. If you believe that a problem is permanent, then your entire life will be screwed up. Once you start identifying a problem as permanent then the game is over.

The people I knew from school that had a few bad semesters with a few tough classes identified their problems as permanent. That is crazy. Why would a few bad semesters in a mismatched set of classes be the end of their academic careers? Instead, they should have viewed these as "motivators" to try harder and do their absolute best at all times.

When I was in eighth grade, I did not get "asked back" to a private school I had attended because my grades were not good enough. I was very upset by this. Initially, I gave up and felt like I never would amount to anything. My first year of high school, I got a "C-" grade point average. Then, I realized that my failures were a call to action. I needed to work like crazy and never stop. I needed to give school my all and never let up and be everything I could be. It worked. At the end of my second year of high school, I had the best grades in my class. After that, I never stopped applying myself and being the best person I could be.

I learned that my past did not equal my future, and that my problems were in no way permanent. They were temporary setbacks that I needed to move through and get through.

No matter how many times you have failed, lost a job, failed in a relationship or anything, you need to pick yourself up and keep going and try harder the next time. It is your only option. You can never view life and your environment as a permanent failure–because it is not.

One thing I like to do when I get down is start doing everything positive I possibly can for myself. I do yoga, I go running, I read things that feed my mind with positive thoughts, I meditate. Regardless of the cause of your negative feelings, you can generally "shock" yourself out of this by putting more positive in than negative.

If you allow yourself to feel bad for a long period of time it will make you accept your fate. You need to snap out of it and take control of the situation.

You need to throw off any belief or feelings you have that the problems you are facing are permanent. That is dangerous and, most importantly, not true.

3. You Should Never Take Your Problems Too Personally

If you believe that you, and you alone, are the source of your problems, that is going to incapacitate you. While it is important to learn lessons from your failures, you also want to look for outside causes to blame so you can stop feeling bad about yourself and move on. The average person will say they had a "crazy boss" or that "the teacher did not like them and wanted to give them a bad grade." If there is any truth to this, as a psychological coping mechanism, this can help you cope and you can move on.

It never does you any good to demonize yourself and take failure too personally. In fact, depressed people generally are very good at blaming themselves for their problems instead of at least letting others and their environments take some of the blame.

If we lose a job, or fail in a relationship, the odds are almost certain that if we were in the right job or better matched with the right person, we would not have failed. It is not always your fault, and taking it personally is only going to immobilize you and make you feel badly about yourself.

An optimist generally does not hold themselves out to be the problem. They believe that only their behavior needs to change.

4. You Should Never Believe The Problems are Pervasive

Pervasive means that the problems you are experiencing are widespread and everywhere in your life. This is simply not true. Your problems are generally related to one thing: (1) a lost job, (2) a bad relationship and so forth. The more pervasive you believe the problem is, the worse off you are going to be. You need to see the problem for what it is: An issue in one area of your life.

Believing a problem is pervasive will completely immobilize you because you will believe that no matter what you do, there will be pain. You control your feelings, and you control your life by controlling your thoughts. Believing a problem is pervasive sends a message to our nervous system that escape is impossible. If a dog experiences pain everywhere, it makes no effort to escape no matter what. It feels that wherever it goes, there will be pain. Are people who believe that problems are pervasive any different from the dog?

Linking pain to any form of action that you might take is extremely dangerous. You should link pain to having negative feelings about life and being immobilized–not the object of your pain. When things are bad, you need to look for what is right and not wrong. When you start seeing what is right (and not wrong), your optimism will return.

Ask yourself "What are the beliefs that empower me and make me feel positive and not negative?"

- Do you have some positive beliefs in people?
- Do you have some positive beliefs about opportunities?

Give yourself the gift of a new thought pattern and realize that nothing is permanent. Be bold and have the courage to be optimistic. You have a choice to look for what is right or wrong. Choose to look for what is right.

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Conclusions

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Learned helplessness has been associated with several different psychological disorders—depression, anxiety and phobias. In addition, shyness and loneliness can all be exacerbated by learned helplessness. For example, a woman who feels shy in social situations may begin to feel there is nothing she can do to overcome her symptoms, and she may stop trying to engage in social situations. She may isolate herself inside and never socialize believing that the only thing that will happen will be something negative. This is the same thing as someone who performs poorly on tests. He may believe that nothing he does will have any effect on his performance.

You need to believe that you can turn your life around. Nothing is more important than this.

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