

Guide 7

“Iceberg beliefs”—underlying beliefs that can undermine our resilience



Some of our beliefs are difficult to identify because they are deeper and more complex. These beliefs operate at an unconscious level, lying like icebergs beneath the surface. But “iceberg beliefs” are powerful forces that can significantly undermine our resilience and our relationships.¹⁶

What is it like to experience an iceberg belief?

Iceberg beliefs cause intense feelings

Iceberg beliefs can cause extremely intense reactions that take us by surprise. Here’s an example of how it feels to be under the influence of an iceberg belief:

I KNOW I shouldn’t have blown up at Anna that way, but I just couldn’t help it!!!!

I don’t even really know why I’m so mad at her. All I know is I’m STILL SO ANGRY that it’s hard for me to even look her in the eye. I feel guilty for treating her this way, because it really doesn’t seem fair. I am puzzled by my reaction, because all she did was ask me if I was going to clean up the paint spill on the classroom floor. So now what am I supposed to do? If I don’t even know why I’m so mad, how am I going to talk with her about it?

Logically, we can say to ourselves, “I shouldn’t be feeling like this. Why am I so upset? This shouldn’t be such a big deal. Why can’t I let this go?”



As the example above illustrates, iceberg beliefs cause reactions that seem out of proportion to actual situations. The person in the example felt overwhelmed, stuck, and confused about the intensity of her reaction to a seemingly simple question asked by her co-worker.

Icebergs cause mismatches between B-C connections

Iceberg beliefs can cause the connections between our beliefs and feelings to seem “out of sync” with the universal and predictable B-C connections discussed in Guide 3, on page 10. Here’s an example of a B-C connection mismatch:

I was driving along the highway when, all of sudden, another motorist yelled out his window at me, raced past, and cut me off! It nearly caused an accident!! I kept driving, but I found myself feeling so sad that it was hard to keep focused. I mean, I should have been mad at what he did, but I wasn’t. I just felt sad and lost. My whole reaction was pretty confusing.

Instead of feeling anger—a typical connection to a “violation of rights” belief—the driver was extremely sad, a feeling usually associated with beliefs about loss.

Icebergs form in childhood

Iceberg beliefs start forming in childhood and are often passed down unconsciously, without question, from generation to generation.

Family-transmitted iceberg beliefs like “Never let them know you are hurting” could prevent people from reaching out to others for help. The belief “The most important thing a woman can do is have a child” may inhibit people from taking advantage of other opportunities that come their way.

Icebergs beliefs are our “shoulds”

Icebergs are deeply rooted beliefs about how the world should operate and how we should operate in the world.

“I should be able to handle anything that comes my way.”

“Women should never show their anger.”

“Things should always be fair.”

“People should always be on time.”



Iceberg beliefs can make us over-experience certain emotions. For example, the belief “Things should always be fair” could have us over-reacting to the many inequities that are bound to happen in daily life. As a consequence, our “violation of rights” scanner could be on “red alert,” and we might end up feeling angry much of the time.

Icebergs can lead to relationship problems

Icebergs can be at the root of personality clashes at work and in other environments. For instance, if one person believes “It’s important to be liked by everyone,” s/he may not express any opinions that might be unpopular. A person who believes “It’s important that people express their opinions” may challenge others when things don’t go a certain way. Conflict and negative judgments about how the other person communicates could ensue. For example, the person who holds back opinions may be offended or feel criticized by the person who always expresses his/her opinions. The person who always expresses his/her point of view may feel that the other person is abdicating a responsibility to others by *not* sharing his/her point of view.

Icebergs such as “If you want anything done right, you have to do it yourself” could cause a person to develop a generalized lack of trust in others and in their abilities. Such a belief could prevent a flexible response to conflict and stress, and eventually stunt relationships.

Some iceberg beliefs can be constructive

Not all iceberg beliefs cause negative outcomes. Many of our values are based on iceberg beliefs, and they can motivate us to maintain positive relationships, resolve conflicts, and make use of opportunities that come our way. Here are some examples:

“Giving people a chance to tell their side of the story is important.”

“Mistakes are part of the learning process.”

“Honesty is the best policy.”

“If you don’t succeed at first, try again.”



What are some common types of iceberg beliefs?

Iceberg beliefs generally fall into three general categories: achievement, acceptance, and control.

1) Achievement

People with “achievement” icebergs see success as the most important thing in life. Mistakes are seen as failures. This tendency toward perfectionism can produce unrealistically high expectations of oneself and others. Here are some examples of achievement icebergs:

“A person’s life is measured by what he/she achieves.”

“If you don’t do it right, it isn’t worth doing.”

Since the expectation is perfection, people with achievement iceberg beliefs often feel anxious about their performance, or are highly critical of others’ contributions. They can also feel overwhelmed and immobilized by their own unrealistic standards and may use procrastination as an attempt to avoid any sense of failure.

2) Acceptance

“Acceptance” icebergs are found in people who have a strong need to be liked, accepted, praised, and included by others. Here are some examples of acceptance icebergs:

“I always want people to think the best of me.”

“People need to be appreciated for what they do.”



These icebergs tend to make people “personalize,” or blame themselves for situations. For example, they might think that something *they* said or did caused a friend’s bad mood. Or they might interpret a lack of positive comment about an activity they organized as an indication that others thought the idea was of no value.



This intensive focus on gaining others’ acceptance can lead people to say things they don’t believe to get approval or, conversely, to *not* say things they *do* believe to keep approval.

3) Control

People with “control” icebergs tend to be uncomfortable when circumstances are out of their direct control, and have unrealistic expectations about the level of influence they have over themselves and the environment. Here are some examples of control icebergs:

“Only cowards buckle under pressure.”

“If I can’t make it happen, no one can.”

“Control” icebergs can cause people to believe they are not doing “enough,” or that an unsuccessful event or encounter is a sign of personal failure. This internalization of failure may cause a person to withdraw from others, putting relationships at risk. In addition, people under the influence of control icebergs may experience feelings of exhaustion or depression when things move out of their control.

What happens when icebergs conflict?

Sometimes, more than one iceberg belief is activated in the same situation, and the two beliefs can clash.

The feeling of tension that results from these clashing beliefs can paralyze a person’s decision-making process. For example, a woman with a family who is offered a “dream” job that would require long hours and a high degree of personal commitment may experience a significant dilemma if she had the following conflicting “Achievement” and “Acceptance” iceberg beliefs:

“Women should be ambitious and have equal opportunities to men.” (Achievement)

vs.

“Children and family should come first.” (Acceptance)

Why is it important to examine our iceberg beliefs?

It can be helpful to ask ourselves what types of icebergs might be operating in our lives. Is our behaviour influenced more by the need for acceptance, achievement, or control?

Our iceberg beliefs activate a radar in us that is hard to tune out—a sensitivity to our “shoulds” about a situation. This radar is based on **confirmation bias**.¹⁶ As described in Guide 5, this process causes us to take in only information that fits *our already held beliefs* about a situation and *filter out* information that doesn’t fit these beliefs.

We see what we want to see, and we hear what we want to hear.

Thus, our iceberg beliefs often cause us to assess a situation using incomplete and inaccurate information.

Getting to know our iceberg beliefs can help us become more flexible in how we think the world *should* operate and how we *should* act in the world.

In addition, when we become more conscious of our iceberg beliefs, we begin to uncover our biases about all kinds of issues related to people, such as sexism, ageism, and racism:



“Boys shouldn’t cry.” “Girls shouldn’t show anger.”

“Old people are too fragile to mountain climb.”

“Asian students are the brightest.”

When we acknowledge our biases about diversity, we take the first important step toward increased understanding, acceptance, and respect for interpersonal differences. Children learn to accept themselves and to negotiate differences associated with common biases from the adults around them.

Awareness of our iceberg beliefs can also help us develop several critical resiliency abilities that can be modelled for children:

- Emotional regulation: A broader perspective helps us understand our reactions and let go of stuck emotions.
- Empathy for others: Openness to differing perspectives increases our understanding of others and helps us resolve conflicts and problem solve.
- Reaching out: Our views become less limited, and we find it easier to try new ways of relating to others and situations. We can take on challenges and opportunities with less fear of failure, which leads to an increased sense of competency in the world.

How do we detect our iceberg beliefs?

- First, do an ABC of the event.
- Then, ask these three questions
 - 1) Are my Cs out of proportion with my Bs?
 - 2) Is there a B-C connection mismatch?
 - 3) Do I feel paralyzed by a decision I am trying to make?
- If the answer to any of the above questions is “yes,” use the questions in “Understanding Iceberg Beliefs” to gain more understanding of what the iceberg belief might be. It doesn’t matter in what order you ask the questions, but it is important to follow up the first question with other questions.

This process is like tunneling into the ice to discover the core belief at the centre of the iceberg.

UNDERSTANDING ICEBERG BELIEFS

Use the belief from your ABC to start the process.

Questions

Assuming the belief is true:

- What does that mean to me?
- What is the most upsetting part of that for me?
- What is the worst part of that for me?
- What does that say about me?
- What’s so bad about that?

The process of answering one question, followed by another, and so on helps us chip away at frozen, inflexible beliefs so we can see beneath the surface of our reactions. Increased insight into our underlying beliefs is the first step toward change and a more resilient response.

For a comprehensive explanation of how to detect your iceberg beliefs, see Chapter 6 of *The Resilience Factor* by K. Reivich and A. Shatté.

What do teachers say about iceberg beliefs?

I now see the reality that our thinking is deep rooted and that others will trigger our iceberg beliefs until we resolve the beliefs within ourselves. –SL (centre director)

Detecting icebergs helps identify our biases and embedded thoughts. Going through the process of asking myself questions provides me with an immediate connection to what is driving my reactions and helps increase personal awareness and growth. –JP (preschool teacher)

I am learning how deep these beliefs are and how they affect our day-to-day lives. –PH (resource teacher)

Summary of Guide 7

“Iceberg beliefs”—underlying beliefs that can undermine our resilience



Some beliefs are difficult to identify because they are deeper and more complex. We call these beliefs “icebergs” because they lie below the surface, beneath our awareness. They are a powerful force that can undermine our resilience.

What is it like to experience an iceberg belief?

- Icebergs can cause **intense feelings** that seem out of proportion to the situation and that take us by surprise.
- They can cause a **mismatch** between our surface beliefs (B) and emotions (C), which can cause confusion.
- Icebergs start **forming early in life** and are passed down unconsciously from generation to generation.
- Iceberg beliefs are the **shoulds** in our lives—our deeply rooted beliefs about how the world should operate, and how we should operate in the world.
- Icebergs are important because they can lead to **relationship problems** and are at the root of personality clashes.

What are some common types of iceberg beliefs?

Iceberg beliefs often fall into three categories:

- Achievement
- Acceptance
- Control

Sometimes, more than one iceberg belief is activated in a situation. If the beliefs are in conflict, they can paralyze our decision-making process.

Why is it important to examine our iceberg beliefs?

- Our icebergs may cause us to assess a situation using incomplete and inaccurate information and, thus, contribute to non-resilient thinking.
- Getting to know our icebergs helps us become more flexible about how we think the world should operate and we should operate in the world.
- Becoming more conscious of icebergs helps uncover our biases and promotes understanding, acceptance, and respect for interpersonal differences.
- Examining our iceberg beliefs helps us develop important resiliency abilities—emotional regulation, empathy, and reaching out.

How can we detect our iceberg beliefs?

We can ask ourselves the questions on page 27, which are designed to reveal our deeper beliefs.