

# SCENE

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## The Rule of the White Shoes

by Christine Michaels and Lonne Sterling

**“Man is not disturbed by events, but by the view he takes of them.”**

*Epicetetus*

**P**eople must love me or I will be miserable.” “If others criticize me, I must have done something wrong.” “If I am not perfect, I am not good enough.” “I should never show any weakness.” “Strong people don’t ask for help.” “People should do what I want.” “The world ought to be fair.”

The above statements are examples of what are called distorted cognitions or irrational beliefs. They usually are based on outright misperceptions or perfectionistic “shoulds,” “oughts,” and “musts.” Because irrational beliefs are automatic, they are rarely questioned or challenged. However, they have the power to govern how we feel about ourselves, how we view the world around us and how we function in it.

Mistaken beliefs are at the root of much of the anxiety and stress we experience in our lives. It is what we say to ourselves in response to any particular situation that determines our moods. Most of us assume that what we see is an accurate reflection of reality. Not so. What we are actually doing is continually filtering every piece of information that comes in through our senses. It is our thoughts interpreting what we see and hear that form the basis for our feelings and behaviors.

Discussing this topic the other day, we were surprised to discover that, although we had grown up in different communities, we had both believed there was a universal dress code, which mandated that white shoes could only be worn from Easter Sunday through Labor Day. Neither of us ever thought of questioning this “unwritten rule” and dutifully obeyed it. Why did we hold onto this belief for so long even though we had no legitimate evidence that it was true? Over the years, undoubtedly we had seen people wearing white shoes during the “forbidden period.” In fact, Floridians seemed downright oblivious to the rule, casually sporting white shoes throughout the year.

Most rules and beliefs are learned and instilled in us at a very early age by our parents (and presumably by their parents and their parents, parents before them) and appear, on the surface, relatively benign. However, attached to them are a whole host of distorted thoughts that ensure our blind obedience. Small children operate on the assumption that their parents know and are right about everything. By following parental rules, they therefore feel good, valued and loved. Unfortunately, the opposite is also true. To disobey means they are bad, unworthy and unlovable.

Absurd? Not at all. Children have very primitive interpretive skills

so, for example, a harsh look from a parent can be devastating to a child’s self worth. Repeated looks of disapproval can eventually erode a child’s self image. Here begins the cycle of internal dialogue of negative beliefs. Each repeated harsh look reinforces this dialogue until the process is self-perpetuating with the parent no longer needed as a catalyst for the thought.

How we think about ourselves directly affects how we feel. So, if I think I’m bad, unworthy and unlovable, I will feel self-disdain, inadequate and undesirable. As a child and adolescent, I might externalize these feelings into behaviors such as shyness, defiance, isolation, bullying, combativeness and thrill seeking. As an adult, these feelings might lead to more self-destructive behaviors, addictions, unhealthy relationships, under achievements, chronic illness and domestic violence.

Now getting back to, “The White Shoe Rule.” As children, we thought that by mere disobedience to this edict, we would be rendered unstylish, unattractive and most of all stupid. These beliefs about ourselves would then cause us to feel sad, self conscious, embarrassed and anxious. To experience these unpleasant feelings (and we all know them well) would most likely result in our obsessing about our shoes all day. This would affect our focus and concentration, limit our engagement with others in fear of being noticed or cause us to make preemptive excuses about our attire. Presumably we believed our cognitive distortions are true as we both routinely followed the White Shoe Rule into early adulthood. Why else would we have ignored what we actually saw around us? There were stylish, attractive and intelligent people wearing white shoes all year ‘round. So we can now see how even such a seemingly inconsequential childhood dictate as this has the power to shape personality development and adult behavior.

The key to changing unhealthy and distorted beliefs is to continually challenge and check them against both our internal and external reality by asking questions such as: “Where is my evidence for this?” “Does thinking this way make me feel better?” “Is this always true?” “What might happen if I change this belief?” “Do I have choices to think another way?” When we finally can accept that our distorted beliefs are irrational and only serve to feed a negative self-image, we can then begin to reframe these cognitions into positive, supportive statements. Through constant repetition of this reframing process, we will eventually develop new and healthier beliefs and feelings about ourselves and live happier and more fulfilling lives.