Assumptions made during “normal” or ideal times and experiences
(beliefs about ourselves, the external world, the relationship between the two)

**The world is a benevolent, safe and secure place.**
Other people are basically good, kind, helpful, and caring.

**The world is meaningful.**
What happens in life makes sense.

**The world is just and fair.**
There is a relationship between what people do and what happens to them.
Misfortune is not random or arbitrary. People get what they deserve.
Negative events are punishments. Positive events are rewards.
Good things happen to good people. Bad things happen to bad people.
Bad things don’t happen to good people. Good things don’t happen to bad people.

**We can control what happens to us by our behavior.**
- If we drive carefully, we won’t get in an accident.
- If we eat right and exercise, we can stay healthy.
- If we know “city survival tactics” we won’t get mugged or raped.

**Religious beliefs, assumptions:**
- God exists.
- God is good, merciful, beneficent
- God is omniscient, all-knowing
- God is omnipotent, all-powerful
- God rewards those who live a moral existence.
- God punishes those who live an immoral existence.

**The self is worthy**
We are good, decent, capable, competent, moral individuals.
We have the wisdom and effectiveness to have successful outcomes to our actions.

**Origins of our Assumptions**
A “sense of basic trust” (Erik Erikson) is developed in the first year of life,
based on the interactive experience of a friendly, responsive caregiver, who is sensitive to
the infant’s need for food, touch, warmth, cleanliness, etc.
The infant learns “There is someone good who cares for me, and I can do certain things
to bring about a caring response from this person…I must be worthy of care.” Thus the
world is seen as good and meaningful, and the self as confident and worthy.
Security, Trust, Sense of Invulnerability
“My world is benevolent. Even in such a good world negative things happen, even if
relatively infrequently. Yet when they occur they are not random, but rather
meaningfully distributed. They happen to people who deserve them, either because of
who they are or what they did or failed to do. I am a good, competent, careful person.
Bad things couldn’t happen to me.”

Are our assumptions illusions?
Bad things do happen to good and careful people.
(Job – a good, righteous man who suffers catastrophe after catastrophe, death of his
livestock, servants, sons & daughters)
The world is not wholly benevolent and meaningful.
Freud: Our illusions are our desires for wish-fulfillment.
Our illusions and expectations are overgeneralizations from our positive early
experiences.
Kushner: Illusions used to defend or justify God

Are our illusions adaptive or maladaptive?
Traditional views of mental health stress the accurate perception of reality.
Yet illusions are adaptive in that they are associated with positive emotions, better mental
functioning, physical health and social interactions.

Maladaptive illusions
On the more concrete level of physical skills or safety, e.g. jumping into a pool, when
one can’t swim; or foolishly chasing after a romantic interest, when they have clearly
shown a lack of interest; or persisting at a task or work long after it is counterproductive
and it would have been more beneficial to quit.
In these a reality check and feedback from the real world are valuable.

Adaptive illusions
More abstract, global beliefs about ourselves and the world can be helpful.
They provide positive emotions, hope, a sense of security and trust, confidence,
motivation to engage in new behaviors, explore the world, and test our limits.
Evidence to evaluate a situation is not always available. It’s better to have the trust and
confidence to try and to learn one’s limits than to never test them.

Traumatic events – what effect do they have on our assumptions?
A trauma is an extreme distressing event, outside the range of usual human experience,
that threatens our survival, and confronts us with the terror of our own vulnerability,
fragility, and mortality.

It shatters our sense of safety and security, the meaningfulness, fairness, and justice of
life, and our feeling that we can control what happens to us.

1 Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, (1992). Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma,