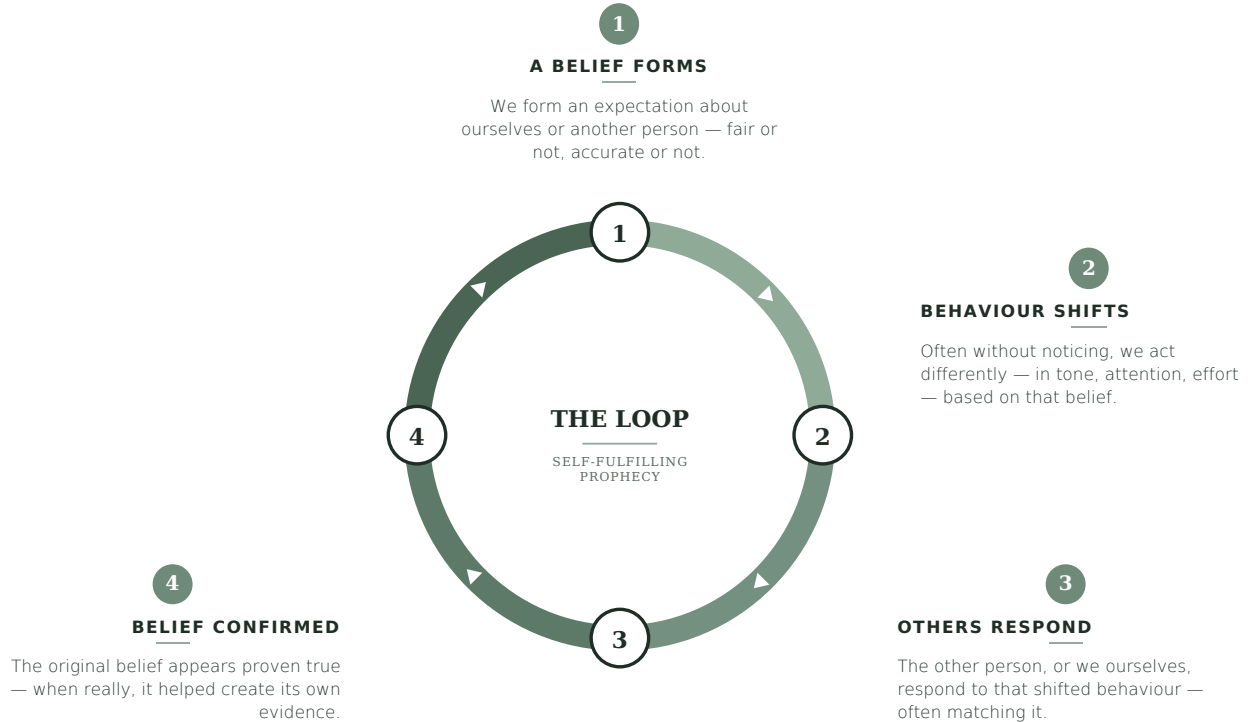


The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

MERTON · ROSENTHAL & JACOBSON

A self-fulfilling prophecy is a belief that becomes true, in part because it was believed. Sociologist Robert Merton first named the concept in 1948; psychologists Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson later showed how powerfully it operates in everyday relationships.



The Pygmalion Effect

In a classic 1968 study, Rosenthal and Jacobson told teachers that certain randomly-selected students were about to show sudden academic promise. Those students went on to show significantly greater gains — not because they were different, but because teacher expectations subtly changed how they were taught, encouraged, and given opportunities to succeed.

Where It Shows Up

Common domains for this pattern

RELATIONSHIPS

Expecting rejection can lead to behaviour that, ironically, invites it.

SELF-ESTEEM

Believing "I'll fail" can quietly reduce effort, making failure more likely.

EDUCATION

Teacher expectations can shape real differences in student outcomes.

WORKPLACE

Being seen as capable, or not, can shape the opportunities someone is given.

PARENTING

Labels given early in childhood can shape identity well into adulthood.

Noticing the belief is the first step to no longer being run by it.

A guiding principle for interrupting the cycle

SOURCES

Merton, R. K. (1948). The self-fulfilling prophecy. *The Antioch Review*, 8(2), 193-210.
Rosenthal, R., & Jacobson, L. (1968). *Pygmalion in the Classroom*. Holt, Rinehart & Winston.