How can one recognise when one is caught within a self-reinforcing delusion?

https://www.quora.com/How-can-one-recognise-when-one-is-caught-within-a-self-reinforcing-delusion/answer/John-Ringland

http://anandavala.info/article/How-does-one-recognise-when-one-is-caught-within-a-self-reinforcing-delusion.pdf

A self-reinforcing delusion operates atop of a web of closed loops of hidden assumptions. Hence if one questions everything that one believes, explaining these beliefs in terms of lower-level beliefs, and works down the levels of beliefs, whilst propagating any changes up through the levels, then continues working down again... At some point one is faced with beliefs that are held without any justification whatsoever. It is at this level that one has a chance of recognising that one is caught in a self-reinforcing delusion. However I can think of two major complicating factors and one source of outside assistance.

Firstly, the conscious mind operates within the high-level context of a world-experience, self-image and life-story, and it can become very disturbed and defensive when the conceptual foundations of these are undermined, hence there is usually strong (unconscious) resistance to facing up to unquestioned assumptions. The history of paradigmatic tensions and shifts generally indicates that the more lower-level the delusion is the more resistance there is because more has been built on top of it and more will be affected by any changes at that level (thus there is more potential for radical change).

Secondly, to use a visual metaphor, we cannot directly see what we cannot see, i.e. a persistent blind spot doesn't show up as a dark patch in our field of vision because the subconscious mind adapts and fills in the gaps in order to present the conscious mind with a seamless view.

It is not just in a visual context that this processes occurs. In all cognitive processes the subconscious mind pre-processes information, making many assumptions and filling in the gaps in order to present the conscious mind with a seamless world-experience, self-image and life-story. The conscious mind doesn't question what it experiences, it simply accepts what it is given and (due to naïve realism) assumes that it is experiencing a direct perspective on reality rather than merely a cognitive construct.

To reinforce the fact that this last point is not just some vague and unrealistic assertion designed to create doubt in your mind about your grasp on 'reality', you can perform an experiment.

There is a way to reveal the presence of some visual blind spots (which also suggests a way to reveal the presence of other kinds of blind spots, e.g. conceptual). We all have two blind spots, where the optic nerve fixes onto the back of each eyeball, however the mind routinely covers them over by filling in the gaps with what it assumes 'should' be there. There is a simple way to reveal these blind spots, which I will explain...

Consider the line below with the three markings. If you scroll the text until that line is approximately at eye level, then gently cover your right eye, then stare at the central dot but remain aware of the outer dots in your peripheral vision, and then steadily move your head closer to the screen. When your head is about 10-15 cm (4-6 in) from the screen you will see that whilst the central and right dots remain quite clear the left dot disappears (keep staring at the central dot but notice the absence of the left dot in your peripheral vision). If you then keep your head in the same position and swap (covering your left eye) you will see that the right dot disappears.

If you really stop and think about this, it reveals something very profound about your mind and the world that you perceive. In countless subtle ways the subconscious mind is filling in such blind spots all the time, including unquestioned assumptions and logical fallacies upon which our beliefs and world-views depend. We do not experience anything directly, everything that we become conscious of is the product of the subconscious mind, hence gaps or knots in the subconscious mind lead to a distorted world-experience, self-image and life-story.

The above experiment suggests a general principle to revealing such blind spots by creating situations in which one should be able to apprehend something if the blind spot was not there, and then to recognise the existence of the blind spot by the fact that one cannot apprehend that something.

In a logical context, if one observes a phenomenon and one has an adequate logical paradigm, then observation results in the apprehension of an understanding, which can then be used to imagine and predict variations. For example, if one understands Newton's laws of mechanics (either mathematically or intuitively) and one observes a ball rolling down an incline, one can easily understand that it is not going to suddenly start rolling upwards, and that if the incline is steeper it will roll with more force, and so on.

However if one observes a phenomenon and one lacks an adequate logical paradigm, then observation results in confusion and a sense of paradox. It is in such situations that the mind often unconsciously attempts to use denial tactics to mitigate the cognitive dissonance. Just as in the visual example above, the subconscious mind normally fills in the gap with an assumption and then carries on as usual without the conscious mind even noticing - unless one goes through some process like the experiment above to force it to notice. If one remains sceptical (open minded) in such times and doesn't succumb to cynicism then one can learn a great deal. Although, too often such phenomena and related subjects become taboo, dismissed and generally pushed to the fringes of science, culture and the mind or they are neutralised and wrapped up in protective assumptions that prevent the mind from having to face up to the contradictions.

To further illustrate I will briefly mention some examples. One of the greatest sources of paradox in modern times has been quantum mechanics. For over 80 years it has mostly been kept wrapped up in instrumentalist attitudes, which can be summed up by the quote "shut up and calculate" (David Mermin). Instrumentalists avoid trying to understand what quantum mechanics says about the world, ourselves or our place in the scheme of things, they simply use it as a mathematical tool to provide answers to questions which are framed within the traditional paradigm.

The reason why the meaning of quantum mechanics hasn't been interpreted is because it cannot be comprehended within the traditional paradigm because it contradicts the fundamental axioms of that paradigm. For example, how can the traditional paradigm make sense of this:

"We have no satisfactory reason for ascribing objective existence to physical quantities as distinguished from the numbers obtained when we make the measurements which we correlate with them.... On the contrary, we get into a maze of contradiction as soon as we inject into quantum mechanics such concepts as carried over from the language and philosophy of our ancestors... It would be more exact if we spoke of "making measurements" of this, that, or the other type instead of saying that we measure this, that, or the other "physical quantity"." (E. C. Kemble, The Fundamental Principles of Quantum Mechanics)

Or

“[W]e have to give up the idea of realism to a far greater extent than most physicists believe today." (Anton Zeilinger)... By realism, he means the idea that objects have specific features and properties – that a ball is red, that a book contains the works of Shakespeare, or that an electron has a particular spin... it may make no sense to think of them as having well defined characteristics. Instead, what we see may depend on how we look.” (P Ball, Physicists bid farewell to reality?, Nature News http://www.nature.com/news/2007/070416/full/070416-9.html)

Quantum mechanics has produced many paradoxes from the perspective of the traditional paradigm hence it is understandable that Roger Penrose said: "The theory has, indeed, two powerful bodies of fact in its favour, and only one thing against it. First, in its favour are all the marvellous agreements that the theory has had with every experimental result to date. Second, and to me almost as important, it is a theory of astonishing and profound mathematical beauty. The one thing that can be said against it is that it makes absolutely no sense!"

And John von Neumann said: "He has a grad student who is thinking about the meaning of quantum mechanics – he's doomed."

And Richard Feynman said: "I think I can safely say that nobody understands quantum mechanics."

This attitude has dominated quantum mechanics for over 80 years now which is evidence of cognitive repression. If one lacks an appropriate paradigm within which to make sense of something then no amount of intelligence will help. Only a paradigm shift that allows one to break out of closed loops of hidden assumptions and self-reinforcing delusions to see things from a different perspective can help. However accommodating a new paradigm is no simple matter - it can radically change things...

“The reception of a new paradigm often necessitates a redefinition of the corresponding science. Some old problems may be relegated to another science or declared entirely “unscientific”. Others that were previously non-existent or trivial may, with a new paradigm, become the very archetypes of significant scientific achievement. And as the problems change, so, often, does the standard that distinguishes a real scientific solution from a mere metaphysical speculation, word game, or mathematical play”. (T. S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. University Of Chicago Press, 1962. p103)

See What are some taboos in science? and its comments for more on this example.

Another example of a persistent paradox that is routinely avoided by mainstream science is the results of experiments such as those performed by the Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research laboratory (PEAR) where it was found that "consciousness itself, unaided by known physical mechanisms, can influence physical reality" http://www.consciousness-studies.org/tiki-index.php?page=PEAR+Orientation

In over 30 years of rigorously peer reviewed experiments it was shown that consciousness creates a field of ambient 'coherence' that drives quantum processes away from randomness and towards order. This can also be focused as intentional influence.

They found that bonds of love, meditation and so on strengthen the measured deflection from randomness. Aligned minds merge into a group field with greater influence. Influence can be projected without attenuation regardless of separation in space or time between the influencer and the influenced.

There is currently a network of devices monitoring the coherence of global consciousness, and collecting statistical data that shows strong correspondences with world events. http://noosphere.princeton.edu/

See What do the results of the PEAR GCP ICRL experiments say about consciousness and how can we scientifically explain them? for more on this example.

From a traditional naïve realist / materialist paradigm both of these examples are truly paradoxical

and they are connected to that other persistent source of paradox - mysticism. Whilst mysticism is usually kept wrapped up in cynical denial and outright suppression by mainstream society, it has been a part of human culture since pre-history and it has never gone away, but has existed in almost all times and places as a persistent background to the dominant paradigm. All of these paradoxes point to the possibility that the world is not what we think it is, that we are not what we think we are and that existence is far stranger than common sense would have us believe.

See What is consciousness? for some related comments.

Hence, to recognise a self-reinforcing delusion it is useful to question everything, no matter how well you think you and others already know it, and to seek out paradox wherever it can be found, especially if it is taboo. Then to remain staunchly sceptical (open minded) in the face of paradox, even if it challenges everything that you thought that you knew and even if others believe that you are crazy. It is also necessary to clarify your mind, in terms of what you think, by questioning your beliefs and digging down to the foundations of your belief systems, and also in terms of how you think (meditation is good for this). As you clarify your mind and integrate your conscious and subconscious levels of mind your seamless view will begin to reveal cracks. By penetrating through those cracks you can clearly apprehend your unquestioned assumptions and the related unconscious thought processes. By directing focused attention squarely at these you can "untie the knots" and come to see things from an entirely different perspective. This will eventually affect all the higher-level belief systems, producing a paradigm shift that changes what you thought you knew about the world, yourself and life in general.