

Theory

REBT -- Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy -- begins with **ABC!** A is for activating experiences, such as family troubles, unsatisfying work, early childhood traumas, and all the many things we point to as the sources of our unhappiness. B stands for beliefs, especially the irrational, self-defeating beliefs that are the actual sources of our unhappiness. And C is for consequences, the neurotic symptoms and negative emotions such as depression, panic, and rage, that come from our beliefs.

Although the activating experiences may be quite real and have caused real pain, it is our irrational beliefs that create long-term, disabling problems! Ellis adds D and E to ABC: The therapist must dispute (D) the irrational beliefs, in order for the client to ultimately enjoy the positive psychological effects (E) of rational beliefs.

For example, "a depressed person feels sad and lonely because he erroneously thinks he is inadequate and deserted." Actually, depressed people perform just as well as non-depressed people. So, a therapist should show the depressed person his or her successes, and attack the belief that they are inadequate, rather than attacking the mood itself!

Although it is not important to therapy to pin-point the source of these irrational beliefs, it is understood that they are the result of "philosophical conditioning," habits not unlike the habit of answering the phone just because it rings. Further, Ellis says that we are biologically programmed to be susceptible to this kind of conditioning!

These beliefs take the form of absolute statements. Instead of acknowledging a preference or a desire, we make unqualified demands on others, or convince ourselves that we have overwhelming needs. There are a number of typical "thinking errors" people typically engage in, including...

1. ignoring the positive,
2. exaggerating the negative, and
3. overgeneralizing.

I may refuse to see that I do have some friends or that I have had a few successes. I may dwell on and blow out of proportion the hurts I have suffered. I may convince myself that nobody loves me, or that I always screw up.

There are twelve examples of irrational beliefs that Ellis often mentions...

12 Irrational Ideas That Cause and Sustain Neurosis

1. The idea that it is a dire necessity for adults to be loved by significant others for almost everything they do -- instead of their concentrating on their own self-respect, on winning approval for practical purposes, and on loving rather than on being loved.
2. The idea that certain acts are awful or wicked, and that people who perform such acts should be severely damned -- instead of the idea that certain acts are self-defeating or antisocial, and that people who perform such acts are behaving stupidly, ignorantly, or neurotically, and would be better helped to change. People's poor behaviors do not make them rotten individuals.
3. The idea that it is horrible when things are not the way we like them to be -- instead of the idea that it is too bad, that we would better try to change or control bad conditions so that they become more satisfactory, and, if that is not possible, we had better temporarily accept and gracefully lump their existence.
4. The idea that human misery is invariably externally caused and is forced on us by outside people and events -- instead of the idea that neurosis is largely caused by the view that we take of unfortunate conditions.

5. The idea that if something is or may be dangerous or fearsome we should be terribly upset and endlessly obsess about it -- instead of the idea that one would better frankly face it and render it non-dangerous and, when that is not possible, accept the inevitable.
6. The idea that it is easier to avoid than to face life difficulties and self-responsibilities -- instead of the idea that the so-called easy way is usually much harder in the long run.
7. The idea that we absolutely need something other or stronger or greater than ourself on which to rely -- instead of the idea that it is better to take the risks of thinking and acting less dependently.
8. The idea that we should be thoroughly competent, intelligent, and achieving in all possible respects -- instead of the idea that we would better do rather than always need to do well and accept ourself as a quite imperfect creature, who has general human limitations and specific fallibilities.
9. The idea that because something once strongly affected our life, it should indefinitely affect it -- instead of the idea that we can learn from our past experiences but not be overly-attached to or prejudiced by them.
10. The idea that we must have certain and perfect control over things -- instead of the idea that the world is full of probability and chance and that we can still enjoy life despite this.
11. The idea that human happiness can be achieved by inertia and inaction -- instead of the idea that we tend to be happiest when we are vitally absorbed in creative pursuits, or when we are devoting ourselves to people or projects outside ourselves.
12. The idea that we have virtually no control over our emotions and that we cannot help feeling disturbed about things -- instead of the idea that we have real control over our destructive emotions if we choose to work at changing the masturbatory hypotheses which we often employ to create them.

(From **The Essence of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy**, by Albert Ellis, Ph.D. Revised, May 1994.)

To simplify, Ellis also talks about the three main irrational beliefs:

1. "I must be outstandingly competent, or I am worthless."
2. "Others must treat me considerately, or they are absolutely rotten."
3. "The world should always give me happiness, or I will die."

The therapist uses his or her skills to argue against these irrational ideas in therapy, or, even better, leads the client to make the arguments. For example, the therapist may ask...

1. Is there any evidence for this belief?
2. What is the evidence against this belief?
3. What is the worst that can happen if you give up this belief?
4. And what is the best that can happen?

In addition to argument, the REBT therapist uses any other techniques that assist the client in changing their beliefs. They might use group therapy, use unconditional positive regard, provide risk-taking activities, assertiveness training, empathy training, perhaps using role playing techniques to do so, encourage self-management through behavior modification techniques, use systematic desensitization, and so on.

Unconditional self-acceptance

Ellis has come to emphasize more and more the importance of what he calls “unconditional self-acceptance.” He says that, in REBT, no one is damned, no matter how awful their actions, and we should accept ourselves for what we are rather than for what we have achieved.

One approach he mentions is to convince the client of the intrinsic value of him or herself as a human being. Just being alive provides you with value.

He notes that most theories make a great deal out of self-esteem and ego-strength and similar concepts. We are naturally evaluating creatures, and that is fine. But we go from evaluating our traits and our actions to evaluating this vague holistic entity called “self.” How can we do this? And what good does it do? Only harm, he believes.

There are, he says, legitimate reasons for promoting one’s self or ego: We want to stay alive and be healthy, we want to enjoy life, and so on. But there are far more ways in which promoting the self or ego does harm, as exemplified by these irrational beliefs:

- I am special or I am damned.
- I must be loved or cared for.
- I must be immortal.
- I am either good or bad.
- I must prove myself.
- I must have everything that I want.

He believes very strongly that self-evaluation leads to depression and repression, and avoidance of change. The best thing for human health is that we should stop evaluating ourselves altogether!

But perhaps this idea of a self or an ego is overdrawn. Ellis is quite skeptical about the existence of a “true” or “real” self, ala Horney or Rogers. He especially dislikes the idea that there is a conflict between a self promoted by actualization versus one promoted by society. In fact, he says, one’s nature and one’s society are more likely to be mutually supporting than antagonistic.

He certainly sees no evidence for a transpersonal self or soul. Buddhism, for example, does quite well without it! And he is skeptical about the altered states of consciousness mystical traditions and transpersonal psychology recommend. In fact, he sees these states as being more inauthentic than transcendent!

On the other hand, he sees his approach as coming out of the ancient Stoic tradition, and supported by such philosophers as Spinoza. He sees additional similarities in existentialism and existential psychology. Any approach that puts the responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the individual and his or her beliefs is likely to have commonalities with Ellis’s REBT.