Who Controls You?

How Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy can help you change unwanted emotions and behaviors

By Wayne Froggatt

Most people want to be happy. They would like to feel good, avoid pain, and achieve their goals. For many, though, happiness seems to be an elusive dream. In fact, it appears that we humans are much better at disturbing and defeating ourselves! Instead of feeling good, we are more likely to worry, feel guilty and get depressed. We put ourselves down and feel shy, hurt or self-pitying. We get jealous, angry, hostile and bitter or suffer anxiety, tension and panic.

On top of feeling bad, we often act in self-destructive ways. Some strive to be perfect in everything they do. Many mess up relationships. Others worry about disapproval and let people use them as doormats. Still others compulsively gamble, smoke and overspend – or abuse alcohol, drugs and food. Some even try to end it all.

The strange thing is, most of this pain is avoidable! We don't have to do it to ourselves. Humans can, believe it or not, learn how to choose how they feel and behave.

As you think, so you feel.

People feel disturbed not by things, but by the views they take of them.' Ancient words, from a first- century philosopher named Epictetus – but they are just as true now.

Events and circumstances do not cause your reactions. They result from what you tell yourself about the things that happen. Put simply, thoughts cause feelings and behaviors. Or, more precisely, events and circumstances serve to trigger thoughts, which then create reactions. These three processes are intertwined.

The past is significant. But only in so far as it leaves you with your current attitudes and beliefs. External events – whether in the past, present, or future – cannot influence the way you feel or behave until you become aware of and begin to think about them.

To fear something (or react in any other way), you have to be thinking about it. The cause is not the event – it's what you tell yourself about the event.

The ABC's of feelings & behaviors

American psychologist Albert Ellis, the originator of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), was one of the first to systematically show how beliefs determine the way human beings feel and behave. Dr. Ellis developed the 'ABC' model to demonstrate this.

'A' refers to whatever started things off: a circumstance, event or experience – or just thinking about something which has happened. This triggers off thoughts ('B'), which in turn create a reaction – feelings and behaviors – ('C').

To see this in operation, let's meet Alan. A young man who had always tended to doubt himself, Alan imagined that

other people did not like him, and that they were only friendly because they pitied him. One day, a friend passed him in the street without returning his greeting – to which Alan reacted negatively. Here is the event, Alan's beliefs, and his reaction, put into the ABC format:

A. What started things off:
Friend passed me in the street without speaking to me.
B. Beliefs about A.:
1. He's ignoring me. He doesn't like me.
2. I could end up without friends for ever.
3. That would be terrible.
4. For me to be happy and feel worthwhile, people must like me.
5. I'm unacceptable as a friend – so I must be worthless as a person.

C. Reaction: Feelings: worthless, depressed.
Behaviors: avoiding people generally.

Now, someone who thought differently about the same event would react in another way:

A. What started things off: Friend passed me in the street without speaking to me.
B. Beliefs about A.:

1. He didn't ignore me deliberately. He may not have seen me.
2. He might have something on his mind.
3. I'd like to help if I can.

C. Reaction: Feelings: Concerned.
Behaviors: Went to visit friend, to see how he is.

These examples show how different ways of viewing the same event can lead to different reactions. The same principle

operates in reverse: when people react alike, it is because they are thinking in similar ways.

The rules we live by

What we tell ourselves in specific situations depends on the rules we hold. Everyone has a set of general 'rules'. Some will be rational, others will be self-defeating or irrational. Each person's set is different.

Mostly subconscious, these rules determine how we react to life. When an event triggers off a train of thought, what we consciously think depends on the general rules we subconsciously apply to the event.

Let us say that you hold the general rule: 'To be worthwhile, I must succeed at everything I do.' You happen to fail an examination; an event which, coupled with the underlying rule, leads you to the conclusion: 'I'm not worthwhile.'

Underlying rules are generalizations: one rule can apply to many situations. If you believe, for example: 'I can't stand discomfort and pain and must avoid them at all costs,' you might apply this to the dentist, to work, to relationships, and to life in general.

Why be concerned about your rules? While most will be valid and helpful, some will be self-defeating. Faulty rules will lead to faulty conclusions. Take the rule: 'If I am to feel OK about myself, others must like and approve of me.' Let us say that your boss tells you off. You may (rightly) think: 'He is angry with me' – but you may wrongly conclude: 'This proves I'm a failure.' And changing the situation (for instance, getting your

boss to like you) would still leave the underlying rule untouched. It would then be there to bother you whenever some future event triggered it off.

Most self-defeating rules are a variation of one or other of the '12 Self-defeating Beliefs' listed at the end of this article. Take a look at this list now. Which ones do you identify with? Which are the ones that guide your reactions?

What are self-defeating beliefs?

To describe a belief as self-defeating, or irrational, is to say that:

It distorts reality (it's a misinterpretation of what's happening); or it involves some illogical ways of evaluating yourself, others, and the world around you: awfulizing, can't-stand-it-itis, demanding and people-rating;

It blocks you from achieving your goals and purposes;

It creates extreme emotions which persist, and which distress and immobilize; and

It leads to behaviors that harm yourself, others, and your life in general.

Four ways to screw yourself up

There are four typical ways of thinking that will make you feel bad or behave in dysfunctional ways:

1. awfulizing: using words like ‘awful’, ‘terrible’, ‘horrible’, ‘catastrophic’ to describe something –
   e.g. ‘It would be terrible if …’, ‘It’s the worst thing that could happen’, ‘That would be the end of the world’.

2. Cant-stand-it-itis: viewing an event or experience as unbearable – e.g. ‘I can’t stand it’, ‘It’s absolutely unbearable’, I’ll die if I get rejected’.

3. Demanding: using ‘shoulds’ (moralizing) or ‘musts’ (musturbating) – e.g. ‘I should not have done that, ‘I must not fail’, ‘I need to be loved’, ‘I have to have a drink’.

4. People-rating: labeling or rating your total self (or someone else’s) – e.g. ‘I’m stupid /hopeless / useless /worthless.’

Rational thinking

Rational thinking presents a vivid contrast to its illogical opposite:

It is based on reality – it emphasizes seeing things as they really are, keeping their badness in perspective, tolerating frustration and discomfort, preferring rather than demanding, and self- acceptance;

It helps you achieve your goals and purposes;

It creates emotions you can handle; and

It helps you behave in ways which promote your aims and survival.

We are not talking about so-called ‘positive thinking’. Rational thinking is realistic thinking. It is concerned with facts – the real world – rather than subjective opinion or wishful thinking.

Realistic thinking leads to realistic emotions. Negative feelings aren’t always bad for you. Neither are all positive feelings beneficial. Feeling happy when someone you love has died, for example, may hinder you from grieving properly. Or to be unconcerned in the face of real danger could put your survival at risk. Realistic thinking avoids exaggeration of both kinds – negative and positive.

The techniques of change

How does one actually set about achieving self-control and choice? The best place to start is by learning how to identify the thoughts and beliefs which cause your problems.

Next, learn how to apply this knowledge by analyzing specific episodes where you feel and behave in the ways you would like to change. It is most effective to do this in writing at first, and later it will become easier to do it in your head. You connect whatever started things off, your reaction, and the thoughts which came in between. You then check out those thoughts and change the self-defeating ones. This method, called Rational Self-Analysis, uses the ABC approach described earlier, extended to include sections for setting a goal or new desired effect (‘E’), disputing and changing beliefs (‘D’), and, finally, further action to put those changes into practice (‘F’).

That final step is important. You will get there faster when you put into action what you have changed
in your mind. Let us say you decide to stop feeling guilty when you do something for yourself. The next step is to do it.

Spend an hour a day reading a novel. Purchase some new clothes. Have coffee with a friend or a weekend away without the family. Do the things you would previously have regarded as 'undeserved'.

Overcoming obstacles

While change is possible, it is not easy – mainly because of a very human tendency known as 'low- discomfort tolerance'.

Most of us want to be physically and emotionally comfortable. But personal change means giving up some old habits of thinking and behaving and 'safe' ways of approaching life.

Whereas before you may have blamed others for your problems, now you start to take responsibility for yourself and what you want. You risk new ways of thinking and acting. You step out into the unknown. This could increase your stress and emotional pain – temporarily. In other words, you may well feel worse before you feel better.

Telling yourself that you 'can't stand it' could lead you to avoid change. You might decide to stick with the way things are, unpleasant though it is. You know you would be better off in the long run, but you choose to avoid the extra pain now.

Or you might look for a quick solution. Do you hope that somewhere there's a fancy therapy which will cure you straight away – without you having to do anything? I meet many people who try therapist after therapist, but never stay with one approach long enough to learn anything that will help. They still live in hope, though, and often get a brief boost from meeting new therapists or therapy groups.

As well as fearing discomfort, you may also worry that you 'won't be a real person'. You think that you will end up 'pretending' to feel and behave in new ways, and imagine yourself as false or phony. Somehow, it seems, to choose how you feel seems 'less than human'.

You are, though, already choosing your reactions – even though you may not be fully aware of doing so. And using conscious choice is what sets humans apart from instinct-bound animals. It is also what makes you a unique person – different to every other. So give up the notion that it is false and machine- like to use your brain to avoid bad feelings. Getting depressed, worried, and desperate does not make you more human.

You might worry that learning self-control will make you cold and unemotional, with no feelings at all. This common fear is quite misguided. The opposite is true: if you learn how to handle strong feelings you will be less afraid of them. This will free you to experience a fuller range of emotions than before.

While self-improvement may be hard, it is achievable. The blocks I have described are all self-created. They're nothing more than beliefs – ideas you can change using practical techniques you can learn.

Rational thinking is not just academic theory. People from a wide range of social and educational backgrounds have already used it successfully. You will be able to as well.

It is true that human beings start life with a biological predisposition to irrational thinking, which they then add to by learning new and harmful ways of behaving and viewing life. But there is a positive side to human nature – we also

have the ability to think about our beliefs and change the dysfunctional ones.

What about problems you can't sort out on your own? Some outside help may be a useful supplement to your self-help efforts. Whether or not you have such help, though, taking responsibility for your feelings and actions will be the key to success. You will also need some hard work and perseverance. But, happily, by learning how to identify and change self-defeating beliefs and attitudes, these things can be within your control – and happiness within your reach.

From Self-defeat to Rational Living

12 Self-defeating Beliefs

1. I need love and approval from those significant to me – and I must avoid disapproval from any source.

2. To be worthwhile as a person I must achieve, succeed at what ever I do, and make no mistakes.

3. People should always do the right thing. When they behave obnoxiously, unfairly or selfishly, they must be blamed and punished.

4. Things must be the way I want them to be – otherwise life will be intolerable.

5. My unhappiness is caused by things outside my control – so there is little I can do to feel any better.

6. I must worry about things that could be dangerous, unpleasant or frightening – otherwise they might happen.

7. I can be happier by avoiding life's difficulties, unpleasantness, and responsibilities.

8. Everyone needs to depend on someone stronger than themselves.

9. Events in my past are the cause of my problems – and they continue to influence my feelings and behaviors now.

10. I should become upset when other people have problems and feel unhappy when they're sad.

11. I should not have to feel discomfort and pain – I can't stand them and must avoid them at all costs.

12. Every problem should have an ideal solution, and it is intolerable when one can't be found.

12 Rational Beliefs

1. Love and approval are good things to have, and I'll seek them when I can. But they are not necessities – I can survive (even though uncomfortably) without them.

   2. I'll always seek to achieve as much as I can – but unfailing success and competence is unrealistic. Better I just accept myself as a person, separate to my performance.

   3. It's unfortunate that people sometimes do bad things. But humans are not yet perfect – and upsetting myself won't change that reality.

4. There is no law which says that things have to be the way I want. It's disappointing, but I can stand it – especially if I avoid catastrophizing.

5. Many external factors are outside my control. But it is my thoughts (not the externals) which cause my feelings. And I can learn to control my thoughts.

6. Worrying about things that might go wrong won't stop them happening. It will, though, ensure I get upset and disturbed right now!

7. Avoiding problems is only easier in the short term – putting things off can make them worse later on. It also gives me more time to worry about them!

8. Relying on someone else can lead to dependent behavior. It is OK to seek help – as long as I learn to trust myself and my own judgment.

9. The past can't influence me now. My current beliefs cause my reactions. I may have learned these beliefs in the past, but I can choose to analyze and change them in the present.

10. I can't change other people's problems and bad feelings by getting myself upset.

11. Why should I in particular not feel discomfort and pain? I don't like them, but I can stand it. Also, my life would be very restricted if I always avoided discomfort.

12. Problems usually have many possible solutions. It is better to stop waiting for the perfect one and get on

with the best available. I can live with less than the ideal.

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