How to Deal with Backsliding

Okay, you've found yourself backsliding. Now what?

Accept your backsliding as common – as something that happens to many people who at first improve emotionally and then fall back.

See it as part of your human fallibility, but don't give up!

Don't make yourself feel ashamed when some of your old symptoms return, and don't think that you have to handle them entirely by yourself. It's not "weak" for you to seek some additional help from others about your renewed problems.

Also, if you backslide, look at your self-defeating behavior as bad and unfortunate, but refuse to put yourself down for engaging in this behavior. It's behavior you probably practiced for a long time.

Rather than rate yourself or your being, measure your acts, deeds, and traits. You are a person who acts well or badly- and never a good or bad *person*.

No matter how badly you fall back and bring on your old disturbances again, work at fully accepting yourself with this unfortunate or weak behavior and then try- and keep trying- to change your behavior.

Use the ABCs of REBT and clearly see what you did to fall back to your old behaviors.

At A, (Activating Events) perhaps you experienced some failure or rejection.

At rational belief B (rB), you probably told yourself that you didn't like failing and didn't want to be rejected.

If only you had stayed with the rational beliefs, you would have only felt merely sorry, regretful, disappointed, or frustrated. But if you felt disturbed, you probably then went on to some irrational beliefs (iBs) such as: "I must not fail! It's horrible when I do!" or "I have to be accepted!" If you reverted to these iBs, you probably felt, at...

C (emotional consequences) once again depressed and self-downing.

Use the ABC process, as illustrated throughout much of our literature, reading material, and demonstrated live at online meetings to dispute (D) these IBs and form new effective beliefs (E).

Keep looking for, finding, and actively and vigorously disputing your irrational beliefs to which you have once again relapsed and that are now contributing to you feeling anxious or depressed. Keep doing them over and over, until you build intellectual and emotional muscle.

Ellis said, "No matter how clearly you can see that you upset yourself and make yourself needlessly miserable, you rarely will improve except through work and practice- yes, considerable work and practice- to actively change your disturbance-creating Beliefs and to vigorously (and often uncomfortably) act against them."

In other words, it takes work and practice to create new (and more helpful) thinking.

Don’t fool yourself into believing that if you merely change your language you will always change your thinking.

Again, from Albert Ellis: If you mildly Dispute your irrational Beliefs (iBs) you may not change them and keep them changed. Therefore, you had better powerfully and persistently argue against them and persuade yourself that they are false. You may for a while find it easy to change your feelings. But you’d better keep working, working, working to maintain your gains.

Convince yourself.

Here’s where the real work begins. It would be short sighted to believe that one or two exposures to a concept could totally make it yours. A long-time Smartie once told me the number one cause of relapse is lack of coping skills.

If you have only a brief understanding with the skills presented here, rather than a solid understanding built through study and repetition, how can you expect them to come to your aid when you need them the most?

Coping skills are learned like any other skills: first, learning them, then by practice and repetition until they become ingrained. Keep working on your disputes and coping skills until you are thoroughly convinced, not just mildly believing.

The hard work mentioned by Ellis can include:

a.. Written Work: The first exercise suggested by most here is the Cost Benefit Analysis (CBA). OK, you know that. But, do you really have one written down? Have you looked at it more than once or twice?

The CBA be a powerful tool when it is utilized in the manner suggested.

It should be an ongoing work that is revised, added to, and referred to in the face of temptation. Just having a general outline in your mind is not nearly as powerful as seeing your thoughts take form on paper. It can truly be illuminating.

You can, yourself, start your own list of the unhelpful thinking that is particular to you. (These are called Ib's, or Irrational Beliefs)

As you challenge (or "dispute") those thoughts, continued emotional discomfort on your part might signal other IB's that you still have to unearth. The written disputes of today might be forgotten 6 months from now and having a written record of these can help you from starting all over again.

b. REI: Rational Emotive Imagery is another underutilized tool that is so powerful, if practiced for a regular period of time (Ellis suggests at least 30 days). Ellis provides a dramatic, live demonstration at his seminars.

You can learn more about this technique in most any Ellis book.

The key to REI is practicing to use more helpful thoughts. SMART often recommends something we call "PPP." (Practice, Patience, and Persistence).

c. Taped Disputes: One powerful way to do highly powerful, vigorous disputing is to use a tape recorder and to state one of your strong irrational beliefs into it.

Figure out several disputes to this IB and present them strongly on this same tape. Listen to your disputing on tape. Do it over in a more forceful and vigorous manner and listen again, listening until you get better and better disputes. Keep

listening to it until you see that you are able to convince yourself that you are becoming more powerful and more convincing.

Reading and owning the material:

It is said numerous times in the meetings: to think rationally, rather than irrationally. Yes, you can look up the definitions of the two words, but does that really give you much more than a general help? If I weren't already in the habit of thinking irrationally, I wouldn't be here in the first place. How can I learn to think more rationally? Learning how to think? is a skill.

If you haven't read any of the authorities recommended in the suggested reading material, who could blame you for not being too adept at spotting thinking problems?

An excellent book that points this out is "Feeling Good" by David D. Burns. He refers to 10 Cognitive Distortions (sometimes called the "yeah buts" and gives lots of examples and exercises on how to recognize them.

You might have read the list at one time, but do you own the material? well enough to spot faulty thinking in your everyday thoughts?

Do you know the four common misconceptions about urges?

They are:

1. Urges are excruciating or unbearable.
2. Urges can compel you to use.
3. Urges will not go away until you drink or use.
4. Cravings and urges will drive you crazy.

None of the above ideas are true!

If you still feel like you don't really have a grasp on a lot of the basics, or these concepts just don't come to your rescue when you need them, one should ask themselves, What resources have I invested in to help make this material mine? Do you have the Smart Manual in your library? Do you have a resources library? (Not demanding, just suggesting.)

Topics: Pat (Skywiz) has been a real mentor to myself and many others here too. His knowledge of REBT and related topics and his grasp of how it all fits together is sometimes astounding.

How did that man get to be so Smart?

I know that he has read and continues to read every book he can get his hands on to learn as much as he can about this subject and all related topics.

As you start to explore and learn, you realize that getting sober is just the first step. The implications and applications of REBT and a balanced life-style can become an on-going search leading you from topic to topic. Other topics of interest that intertwine with REBT may be:

a. USA (Unconditional Self Acceptance). Surprisingly, it is not the same as self-esteem.
b. Guilt- A topic brought up in most every meeting I have attended. An excellent book is *Woulda, Coulda, Shoulda.. Overcoming regrets, mistakes, and missed opportunities* by Dr. Arthur Freeman and Rose DeWolf.
c. Urges. Do you know the four common misconceptions (irrational beliefs) about urges? They are:

1. Urges are excruciating or unbearable.
2. They compel you to use.
3. They will not go away until you drink or use.
4. They will drive you crazy.

d. Anger- For many of us, when we don't get our way, we get angry. Useful IB's and disputes about this subject abound in the book "How to control your anger before it controls you? Ellis and Raymond Chip Tafrate.
e. Semantics- You will notice a distinct concentration (some say nit-picking) about ones choice of words around here. The subject of semantics delves into how our language says so much about what we think. Having trouble unearthing your IBs? What you say might help you zero in on them. That is why you might have seen the ATW (Absolute Thought Warning) that we have employed form time to time. A useful device to make us more aware of what we are saying.

I have only touched on a few topics and the field is open to wherever it leads you. It reminds me of websurfing. I start out

researching one topic, see another interesting topic and surf over there, and hours later find myself 6 or 7 topics away! Anyone having trouble coming up with a Vital Creative Absorbing Interest (VACI)?

In conclusion, backsliding isn't the end of the world. It is quite common.

Rather than the awful, terrible event that we so often portray it to be, it could be the impetus for us to get back to some much-needed personal work. It can even help us to go back to some areas that we originally glossed over the first time around.

With this attitude of healthy disappointment for our behavior, (rather than unhealthy attitudes that stifle growth) we can get back to the basics of the ABCs and REBT that helped us in the first place.

We can keep looking for and vigorously disputing our irrational beliefs, that is, to find our unhelpful thinking and replace these old thinking habits with new and more helpful thinking.

We won't fool ourselves that we have done the work by only mildly believing but we will continue working hard until we are thoroughly convinced of the truth of our disputes and the rational choices we have chosen to make.

Learning and making our own the basic concepts of REBT will help us avoid the kind of thinking that caused the incident of backsliding for the future.

(Portions of this article is from the Ellis article "*Maintain and Enhance Your Rational Emotive Behavior Gains*" and Based on a post submitted by "Ali".)