

TOOLS FOR EMOTIONAL HEALING AND GROWTH

Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy

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INTRODUCTION

People's problems have cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components. REBT = Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy, a system that addresses thinking (cognition), feeling (emotion) and behaving. The three are often intertwined and affect each other. This book is about REBT.

REBT was conceptualized by the psychologist Albert Ellis in the late 1950's, and has been refined, taught and widely practiced by Dr. Ellis and his students and colleagues since that time. There are REBT institutes all over the world.

REBT and other cognitive therapies do not assume that thoughts are more important than emotions or behaviors or any other aspect of the human experience. But when we want to change, using thoughts as the point of intervention gives us considerable power. While we don't have 100% control over our thoughts and beliefs, by carefully examining them in the REBT framework we can alter them, in specific helpful ways.

We have more control over our thoughts and behaviors than we have over events and circumstances and other people. It makes sense to put your energy into that which you are likely to be able to change. Then, controlling or managing thoughts creates emotional control, and, behaviors which you identify as destructive or unwanted are more easily controlled when your thoughts are rational and your emotions are not disturbed.

This book is for people with problems, and for licensed psychotherapists who want to learn the REBT techniques and principals. If you are in the former group, the book will guide you to apply the principles of REBT to your emotional and/or behavioral problems. You will experience wonderful improvements!

The descriptions and explanations are jargon-free and conversationally delivered rather than academic. Psychotherapists who want an introduction to cognitive therapy in general and REBT in particular will find the discussion and examples useable, academically correct, and reasonably complete for a short presentation. You will have a good start on using cognitive therapy effectively.

REBT is effective and it is philosophically pleasing, it makes sense. It is pragmatic, directed at finding realistic solutions. It can work well in a "self-help" application. It provides a structure for analyzing what is happening when you're upset and fixing big parts of your dilemmas and your discomfort.

Many of the people I see in the psychology office will read the materials I give them but hesitate to apply what they've read on their own, between appointments. It is for most people a new way of approaching problems and new ways are initially difficult. Having a live "coach" to direct and advise when problems are a bit gnarly helps to get and stay on the right track.

Not all problems will be amenable to a self-help approach and not all people will want or be able to use these strategies without professional help. For those of you who are “do-it-yourself-ers”, this book will show you what is possible. You can then decide whether you want to do it yourself, or hire a professional to be your guide.

DESCRIPTION

The basic principle of REBT is that people are upset by their thoughts and beliefs much more than they are by events. Given any situation, no matter how dire, or how inconsequential, some people will be very angry or anxious, sad or happy, whereas someone else will have a different or much less intense feeling. *The difference in their feelings is caused by their different thoughts about the situation.* Even when there is a real objective catastrophe this is true. The amount of distress a person feels depends largely on his or her beliefs.

Thus, REBT is a cognitive therapy. Thoughts and beliefs are its main focus.

Emotional problems are feelings which you dislike and want to change. They are problems of discomfort, ranging from disgruntlement to severe emotional pain, or from feelings of loneliness to extreme isolation and alienation. Behavioral problems are behaviors which cause difficulties or habits which you would like to change. REBT is a psychotherapy approach and set of strategies which cure or significantly ameliorate emotional and behavioral problems.

REBT is about change and improvement. Ultimately it's about peace of mind and better functioning.

Even when practiced by trained licensed psychotherapists in a clinical setting, REBT teaches people strategies which they apply to their thinking and behavior, rather than being the kind of therapy in which a therapist *does something to* a client. Thus it readily adapts to self-help use. It is straightforward in principles and applications. The strategies and tools are clearly outlined below.

THE STRATEGIES

The solving of emotional and behavioral problems proceeds in an organized fashion. It is necessary to attend to details, to be particular and precise.

Often when people initially catch on to the REBT approach they have a tendency to run with it, to proceed with great enthusiasm and in the process to skip steps. For example, it's tempting to jump to rational thinking without first identifying the irrational thinking which was causing problems. This can cause lingering difficulties because the irrational beliefs which weren't identified don't get resolved.

Do the analyses in writing! Writing takes more time than thinking. The slower speed will force you to be more specific, then you can see exactly what your irrational beliefs are.

While you might be frustrated with the pace, it will lead to greater clarity and ultimately faster improvement. In addition, having your process available in written form will be beneficial later, because new problems will be similar to former issues.

These are the steps you will follow, in each instance of feeling upset or behaving “badly”:

1. Identify a particular troubling event.
2. Identify the problem feeling (or behavior) related to that event.
3. Identify the beliefs associated with the event, what you think about it or assume it means.
4. Identify the rationality or irrationality of each belief.
5. Dispute irrational beliefs.
6. Substitute rational beliefs for irrational beliefs.
7. Practice behaviors which incorporate and support rational beliefs.

Note: In step #2 above, we say the feeling which is *related* to the event rather than the feeling *caused* by the event because in the REBT framework it is your *beliefs* or thoughts or assumptions which are the primary cause of your disturbance, not the events.

(1) IDENTIFY THE DISTURBING EVENT:

The strategies require that a specific incident be identified. It will probably represent a class of events which usually cause problems, but abstractions and generalizations can't be used for REBT analyses. You must address a *particular* event.

When you're disturbed, identifying the exact precipitating event may be a surprise which provides improved focus. You know you're upset but you may not know exactly why or what you're upset about. When you carefully look for the event which started the problem, and find it, you will often know more about the problem than you did before.

Example: Eric was in his third year of graduate school, getting a Ph.D. degree in Biology. He was ordinarily easy going and was doing well in his program, but he was having an episode of anxiety. He had an appointment with his thesis advisor, Dr. Rutabaga, scheduled for the next morning. He realized that the anxiety started when he scheduled the meeting the day before. Dr. R. had said he was surprised that Eric was ready to talk about the thesis project so soon. Something about Dr. R.'s reaction to him made him worry.

(2) IDENTIFY THE FEELING OR BEHAVIOR RELATED TO THE PROBLEM EVENT:

You are using these tools because you are feeling some emotion which you would prefer not to feel. Or you find yourself behaving in an undesirable way, such as having a temper tantrum, or eating when you're not hungry. Carefully identify the undesirable feeling or behavior. In the case of the example, the problem is a feeling.

Note: When dealing with emotional upset, be careful that what you identify is really an emotion. Sometimes people will offer statements such as "He doesn't respect me" or "I must be doing something wrong" as their feeling. "He doesn't respect me" is an assumption or a hypothesis, not a feeling. The feeling might be anger or sadness. "I must be wrong" is not an emotion it's a concept/belief, it's cognitive. The feeling would probably be fear, or shame, possibly embarrassment. You will gain better clarity if you identify feelings in feelings language.

Look for the feelings words.

This is not picky semantics! One of the very valuable benefits of REBT is learning to distinguish between thoughts and feelings. Only when you are able to do this can you dispute irrational beliefs (thoughts)! (Feelings are neither rational nor irrational, they just *are*.)

Example: Eric identified his feeling as anxiety. When he thought about the situation he recognized that he felt some anger as well.

Sad, mad, glad, and afraid are the "primary" feelings. Anxious, nervous, and worried are forms of afraid (fear). Irritated and annoyed are forms of mad (anger). There are complex feelings such as frustration, hurt, remorse, embarrassment, and guilt, which are usually combinations of a primary feeling and a thought or a situation. Some psychologists have proposed additional primary feelings, such as disgust. You will find that you can almost always reduce your feeling, when you are upset, to some form of sad, mad, or afraid.

(3) IDENTIFY THE BELIEFS ASSOCIATED WITH THE PROBLEM EVENT:

Write down *all* your beliefs about the precipitating event, both those that seem rational, and those that don't. Try to brainstorm or free-associate in this section, be uncritical. If something comes to mind, write it down. If it's only partially what you believe, write it down anyway. You want to have access to all the nooks and crannies of your thinking. Later you will sort them out.

Often people will write down questions as beliefs, such as, "How could he question my judgment after working with me for two years?" A question can't be called rational or irrational. Turn questions, if they come to mind, into statements. For example, "How could he question my judgment?" becomes, "He shouldn't question my judgment" or just "He is questioning my judgment". Almost always, a belief is a simple statement with a subject and a predicate.

Example: Eric came up with these beliefs:

1. He thinks I'm a plodder, that's why he's surprised I'm ready to present my preliminary work.
2. He doesn't care at all about my work.
3. He isn't interested in my thesis or me.
4. He's annoyed with my request or me.
5. He doesn't want to take the time to talk with me.
6. He's going to block my progress.
7. I shouldn't have chosen him as my thesis advisor.
8. Everything was going too well.
9. I'm going to have all kinds of problems now; this is just the beginning.

When you look at your beliefs, it is often informative to ask about them, "So what?" or "What does that make me think?" or "What would I have to believe in order to come to *that* conclusion?" This takes you to underlying umbrella beliefs or core beliefs, or further irrational beliefs.

Example: Eric took the belief, "He doesn't care at all about my work", and asked, "What does that make me think?" He added to his list of beliefs:

1. My thesis isn't very interesting.
2. He's not going to give me the help I need in order to do a good job in a reasonable time.
3. People are never helpful when you really need them.
4. It's not fair; he shouldn't have taken me on if he didn't care enough to work with me.
5. There must be something wrong with my approach.

(4) DESIGNATE RATIONALITY/IRRATIONALITY:

Whether a belief is rational or irrational is determined by specific REBT criteria. Irrational beliefs are characterized by being extreme or excessive, overly exclusionary (black-and-white, either/or), global, presumptive (assuming something you do not or cannot know), demanding (thinking that things *have* to be a certain way), predicting the future, or sometimes just plain illogical, coming to a conclusion not warranted by what you observe or know.

On page 11-12 you will find a list of common irrational beliefs and characteristics of beliefs which make them irrational.

Example: Eric looked at the beliefs he had written down, and decided that most of them were presumptive, they were arbitrary guesses stated as facts, and not things he really knew. His beliefs way exceeded what he knew; they were expressions of fears and worst-case scenarios. He was treating possibilities as though they were fact. Some of the beliefs were excessive; a more moderate hypothesis could equally well fit the events he was experiencing.

- “He thinks I’m a plodder, that’s why he’s surprised I’m ready for discussion” is an arbitrary explanation, when many others would fit equally well.
- “He doesn’t care at all about my work” is excessive and presumptive.
- “He isn’t interested in me or my thesis”, “He’s annoyed with me or my request”, and “He doesn’t want to take the time to talk with me” are arbitrary assumptions.
- “He’s going to block my progress” is predicting the future.
- “I shouldn’t have chosen him as my thesis advisor” is demanding, fortune telling and goes beyond the facts, in needing everything to go smoothly and implicitly predicting a dire outcome.
- “Everything was going too well” is a colloquial phrase indicating that he believes his “luck” is going to turn, that it isn’t possible for his progress through the program to continue to be relatively smooth. This is a negative assumption; it is presumptive, assuming something he doesn’t know.
- “I’m going to have all kinds of problems now” elaborates on the immediately preceding superstitious belief. It’s an assumption, and it’s black-and-white, thinking that things will either proceed smoothly, or with great difficulty, an assumption which doesn’t allow for the continuum of everything between those extremes.

Regarding the beliefs which he uncovered when he asked himself questions about the belief “He isn’t interested in me or my thesis”, the first (“My thesis isn’t very interesting”) is irrational because it comes to a conclusion not warranted by events or by his own perceptions and feelings. When someone is reluctant or unenthusiastic, there are a multitude of possible reasons; to assume any one of them is irrational. In fact, Eric’s thesis advisor wasn’t even showing displeasure, merely surprise. So Eric was assuming that the surprise represented something negative and that the negativity was about his (Eric’s) work, and that Dr. R.’s opinion represented a greater truth than Eric’s own opinion. A lot of assuming there!

The second belief (“He’s not going to give me the help I need in order to do a good job”) is predicting the future, with no real evidence; it also is characterized by black-and-white thinking: either my advisor is enthusiastic about my thesis and me at every turn, or he won’t give me sufficient help when I need it. Both are extreme positions; what about something in the middle?

The third belief (“People are never helpful when you really need them”) is black and white, unrealistically negative (given the event), and looks like a lurking global umbrella belief, a thought which will occur to Eric and seem to be true under many different circumstances.

The belief “It’s not fair, he shouldn’t have taken me on if he didn’t care enough to work with me” is implicitly demanding: Life should be fair and people should be fair. Possibly Eric knows that at times life isn’t fair, and possibly that fact isn’t upsetting to him. But if that were the case he wouldn’t be upset about the hypothesis that his advisor’s behavior is unfair, and he wouldn’t be thinking that his advisor *shouldn’t* have taken him on (shouldn’t be behaving the way he was). One can believe that life isn’t fair, and that could be a rational belief, and it wouldn’t be distressing.

When you use the word “should” you are making demands on yourself or others or on the universe; you are declaring a moral imperative. Most often you are referring to your *preference* rather than an important rule, and while it is quite rational to state your preferences as such, it is irrational to make rules of them, and impose those rules on others.

The belief “There must be something wrong with my approach” is presumptive on two counts. It continues the unproven belief that his advisor is displeased with him and it assumes that if his advisor is displeased, it is due to some fault of his. This also has the sound of an underlying umbrella belief.

(5) DISPUTE IRRATIONAL BELIEFS:

Sometimes, as in the example above, you can readily see that your belief statements are excessive or illogical, but sometimes you won’t be sure. The following questions challenge and dispute your irrational beliefs:

- Where is the evidence; *is* there any evidence?
- Is this the only way of looking at this, or is there a different way of seeing this or an alternative explanation, which would have a different implication or feeling?
- Would a qualifier be appropriate, such as “sometimes” or “might” or “slightly”?

The answers to these questions provide the disputations (e.g., “There is no evidence for that”), and lead to the rational beliefs which will be substituted for irrational beliefs (the next step).

Example: As Eric had already realized, there wasn’t any evidence that his advisor thought ill of him, or didn’t care about his work, just because he was surprised that Eric was at the stage of discussion so soon. He could readily imagine different ways of interpreting his advisor’s behavior, when he set himself that task. He was able to discard the first seven of his original beliefs.

As for the next two beliefs, there was no evidence that his progress in his doctoral program couldn’t or wouldn’t continue to go relatively smoothly. The subject matter was interesting to him and he’d proven to himself that he had the academic and intellectual skills to manage the challenges presented. There were certainly different ways of thinking about his advisor’s surprise other than assuming it was the tip of an iceberg of catastrophe!

When he looked at the beliefs which had come from questioning the third belief (“He isn’t interested in me or my thesis”), Eric thought that “My thesis isn’t very interesting” was way too strongly put and black-and-white; that at least he could have said “He might not be very

interested in my thesis”, if he had doubts about his advisor’s interest, though really there was no evidence at all for going in this direction.

If you introduce a qualifier, or specify *how much*, what was previously irrational becomes relativistic rather than absolutistic, possible rather than certain, and therefore rational because the statement is no longer excessive or presumptive.

“He’s not going to give me the help I need” was in fact doubtful, as the appointment to review the project had readily been made; there was no evidence for that belief. “People are never helpful when you really need them” was certainly not a fact proven or even suggested by his advisor’s behavior, as well as being a black-and-white view. (He could have said “People sometimes don’t help you when you need them” and the belief would have been rational.) The more Eric looked at his beliefs using the disputing questions, the more he could see how arbitrary they were, that he had been choosing or reflexively, neurotically adopting beliefs which generated anxiety.

He also realized that he was under-using qualifying words, such as “might”, “sometimes”.

You may notice that there is overlap between assigning rationality or irrationality, and disputing irrational beliefs, steps (4) and (5). In assigning irrationality you are in fact starting the disputation. Then with the disputation questions you clarify, and sometimes determine rationality when it isn’t clear in step (4).

(6) SUBSTITUTE RATIONAL BELIEFS:

Using the concepts of stating plain facts, using qualifiers, being relativistic and acknowledging shades of gray, derive beliefs which are rational, beliefs which are accurate, useful and helpful. A good trick for coming up with alternative and rational beliefs is to ask yourself, “What would a person who wasn’t disturbed by this be thinking?”

Example: These are the rational beliefs Eric wrote down:

- It appears that my advisor didn’t expect me to be ready for discussion this soon.
- I don’t know why he expected me to take longer. It might have something to do with his opinion of me, or it might be a reflection of what his other students usually do. Or something else.
- He might be pleased with what I’ve done so far.
- When we have our meeting it will become clearer to me what his opinions are, of my work and me. I will then proceed as indicated, probably without difficulty, and I’ll show him that this is an interesting project and I’m capable of doing a good job with it.
- I have to take things one step at a time, in this work with him. It isn’t helpful to read things into his behavior.
- If I find myself doubting his involvement I can ask him questions about his interests and get him more involved, if necessary.
- We will probably be able to work well together.

Note his use of qualifiers, such as “probably” and “might”. Note also that Eric reminds himself that he doesn’t know the reasons for his advisor’s behavior or surprise, and he’s willing to leave it at that, to *not know*, until he finds out or until there’s clearly a need to know. He’s not demanding that he have explanations or information to help him to deal with his insecurity.

(7) PRACTICE BEHAVIORS WHICH FIT THE RATIONAL BELIEFS

Imagine how someone who had emotional comfort and rational thinking would behave. Think of how you would like to feel and what behaviors would support such feelings.

Example: Eric decided to practice these behaviors:

- He made a list of questions to ask his advisor so he’d be more knowledgeable about his advisor’s expectations of him for the next segment of his thesis project. This reinforced his rational belief that his advisor might be perfectly happy to help him.
- He resolved to ask Dr. R. what the expected time frame was for the future steps he would be taking. This reinforced his rational belief that he and Dr. R. would be able to work together productively and with good communication.
- He went to a movie with a friend, because he was able to relax in the time before the meeting when he had relatively little to do. He was able to relax because of the rational belief that he and Dr. R. would probably be able to work well together, and because he’d eliminated so many dire irrational beliefs.
- He resolved that in the future when he was uncertain about Dr. R.’s opinion he would ask him questions right away, in order to get clarity and to improve communication. This was consistent with his beliefs that he would be better off taking things one step at a time and that Dr. R was not against him.

OVERVIEW OF THE STRATEGIES

In the process of identifying precipitating events, pinpointing your reactions, writing down your beliefs, and generating down-to-earth, realistic, rational beliefs, your emotions become less intense or uncomfortable emotions disappear, and you become more comfortable and effective. In order to continue in a rational frame of mind, you will institute behaviors which are consistent with the rational beliefs.

In the example, Eric realized he was doing “worst case scenario” thinking, presumptive and illogical thinking, black-and-white thinking, jumping to conclusions, and sometimes his thinking was

demanding, as when he had “should” thoughts. As he modified his beliefs, the anxious and angry feelings he had been experiencing diminished and almost disappeared.

In order to strengthen his more rational beliefs and more comfortable feelings he resolved to behave in ways which would be consistent with a down-to-earth attitude, such as asking questions when he was unsure of something which was important to him, and to stop inventing explanations for ambiguous events.

Reminder: “Rational” in REBT has a particular meaning. In addition to signifying logical, undistorted, and unexaggerated, “rational” means useful, supporting productive and satisfying feelings and behavior.

REBT GLOSSARY

The glossary defines the meaning and use of the terms used in the explanation and discussion of REBT; it also highlights key concepts.

awfulize (or) catastrophize:

To consider something extremely awful or dire, to think that something is, or will be, intolerably bad, a “10” on a scale from 0 to 10.

elegant solution:

Correction of an underlying irrational belief which is affecting many other beliefs, a root problem belief, so that when that belief is corrected many assumptions and fears drop away.

LFT:

Low frustration tolerance, beliefs that stress is unbearable and intolerable, and beliefs that things shouldn’t be difficult and one shouldn’t have to suffer or even be inconvenienced.

This is very common, and its opposite, high frustration tolerance, reduces a lot of unnecessary distress.

musterbating:

Believing you *must* have what you want, or things *must be* the way you want them to be or believe they “should” be. Urgent needs.

rational:

Logical, productive, realistic, matter-of-fact, relativistic rather than black-and-white or dogmatic.

self-downing:

Criticizing oneself severely, usually including global black-and-white thinking and always including self-rating, e.g., because I made a particular mistake, I'm a bad person.

Note: it may be useful to criticize behaviors, but criticizing a person globally, yourself or someone else, is never accurate or useful.

short-term hedonism:

Putting a high value on short-term pleasure or immediate gratification. Often goes with LFT. Long-term hedonism is preferred: taking into account what the later consequences will be, and behaving in such a way as to maximize pleasure in the long run.

USA:

Unconditional self-acceptance: this is a deep conviction that one is entitled to exist, though imperfect and fallible. It includes tolerance of one's mistakes and flaws. **This is one of the most important concepts in REBT.**

COMMON IRRATIONAL BELIEFS

The better you know these concepts and criteria the less you tend to have irrational beliefs and the faster you catch and correct them when they pop up.

The first four are the core irrational beliefs or belief characteristics, those which are most important to identify and dispute:

DEMANDINGNESS:

Things must be the way I want them, or think they "should" be.

AWFULIZING:

Things which are unwanted or distressing are seen as being incredibly horrible.

SELF-DOWNING:

When you have a critical, disparaging, hateful attitude toward your whole self; negative global self-rating.

FRUSTRATION INTOLERANCE:

The belief that it is unbearable if you are thwarted; or an extremely negative emotional reaction to things going wrong. (This comes in part from demandingness, thinking you shouldn't have to suffer or things shouldn't go wrong.)

Other common irrational beliefs or belief characteristics:

- black-and-white, “either-or” thinking
- inappropriate generalization
- distortion of probability
- thinking you know, when in fact you just have a hypothesis, a “hunch”
- rating people (others or yourself) -- note: it is appropriate to rate behaviors, not people
- illogical thinking
- any dysfunctional belief which is neither objective nor provable
- any belief which is incorrect or not consistent with objective reality

RATIONAL ANALYSIS FORM OR GUIDE

The questions below are used to identify and correct irrational beliefs which are assumed to be present when you find yourself very disturbed or behaving in an undesirable way. The form would be printed on full sheets of paper, with ample space between the items for filling in your answers. In the version below, it’s a guide. If it works better for you to do so, transfer the questions to blank paper with space for your answers between the questions.

Activating Event: What happened to precipitate emotional upset or regrettable behavior?

Consequence: What is the feeling, or behavior?

Beliefs: What are your beliefs about the Activating Event?

Which of these beliefs are irrational?

What would be more moderate, simple, factual, rational beliefs, which you can believe instead of your irrational beliefs?

What behaviors will exercise and reinforce the rational beliefs?

IMPORTANT GENERAL PRINCIPALS

Be specific, rather than global, in your rational analyses. Analyzing your beliefs and achieving clarity about your feelings is only possible when you deal with particular incidents and particular words spoken by specific people.

When there is uncertainty or ambiguity, believe that which makes you feel better, while remaining realistic.

We can't read others' minds, we can't predict the future, so there is much uncertainty in our lives. You will feel better and behave with more confidence and poise if you choose to think as positively as you are able and as is consistent with the facts you know. (Don't make statements which are unrealistically positive, such as "Everything will be fine". Rather, say: "Probably everything will be fine, and if there are problems I'll deal with them".)

Achieving rational beliefs and the much less distressed emotions which go with rational beliefs sometimes happens easily, but more often takes repeated, vigorous disputing of the irrational beliefs. Though there is wonderful clarity and specificity in REBT, solving emotional or behavioral problems with it may not be easy or simple or short.

Unconditional Self-Acceptance (USA) means that you accept yourself "warts and all". Human beings, yourself included, aren't perfect; we make mistakes and have glitches in our functioning, that's reality. REBT maintains that you are unconditionally acceptable because all human beings have basic worth. No number of problems or mistakes takes it away and you don't have to do anything to earn it, it comes with existing and doesn't depend on your performance. Aspire to be happier and to behave better, but do not aspire to be perfect!

An Organizational Note:

Dr. Ellis's former institute, the Albert Ellis Institute in New York City, changed direction in the mid-00's to a path which deviated from the specific teachings of REBT, though it remains operative as a center for cognitive therapy. The current training/research group which was subsequently founded by Dr. Ellis and his colleagues and remains faithful to Dr. Ellis's work is the REBT Network, rebtnetwork.org.

A Note To Therapists:

REBT is powerful and elegant but you will have to pay as much attention to individual differences and resistances as you do with any technique. Proceed gently and encourage feedback. If the pursuit of rationality and the analysis of thought processes becomes laborious, you can slow down or back off temporarily. It is entirely consistent with good REBT therapy to be reflective, inquisitive or passive at times. Rapport and good communication are always most important. You must be your patient's ally. That means respecting his/her hesitations and objections. The tools can be used effectively only when you and your patient are working together.