

# Emotional Disturbance and Its Treatment in a Nutshell

Albert Ellis, Ph.D.

When I presented my first paper on rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT) and cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) at the American Psychological Association convention in 1956, I fully realized how complex cognitions, emotions, and behaviors are and how they inevitably include and interact with each other.

REBT has always had a complex, interactional, and holistic view of the ABC's of human personality and disturbance. Simply stated, the ABC theory of REBT follows the views of several ancient philosophers—especially Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius—and of Robert Woodworth's stimulus-organism-response theory. It holds that activating events (A's) in people lives contribute to their emotional and behavioral disturbances or conse-

quences (C's) largely because they are intermingled with or acted upon by people's beliefs (B's) about these activating events (A's).

## BASIC HUMAN GOALS AND VALUES

People generally have a set of goals, values, or desires. Humans, biologically and by social learning, are goal-seeking animals and their fundamental goals normally are *to survive, to be relatively free from pain, and to be reasonably satisfied or content*. As subgoals of these primary goals, they want to be happy (1) when by themselves; (2) with other groups of humans; (3) intimately, with a few selected others; (4) informationally and educationally; (5) vocationally and economically; and (6) recreation-

ally. When, in response to an activating event, people think, at point B, "This is good! I like this activating event," they tend to experience the *emotional* consequence of pleasure or happiness and the *behavioral* consequence of approaching (or trying to repeat) this activating event. When these same people experience activating events that they perceive as blocking or sabotaging their goals, they normally react in an unpleasurable, avoiding manner. Thus, they preferentially think, at point B, "This is bad! I dislike this activating event," and they experience the *emotional* consequences of frustration or unhappiness and the *behavioral* consequence of avoiding or trying to eliminate this activating event.

## THE ABC'S OF EMOTIONAL DISTURBANCE

The ABC model of REBT becomes more complex and controversial when applied to neurotic disturbance. For it hypothesizes that when people's goals are blocked by activating events they have a conscious or unconscious choice of responding with disturbed or undisturbed negative consequences. If their belief system is rational or self-helping, *it will include attitudes or philoso-*

*phies that help them to achieve their goals*. These rational beliefs will mainly create healthy emotional consequences, such as appropriate feelings of disappointment, sorrow, regret and frustration. Rational beliefs will also tend to encourage healthy *behavior* such as trying to change, improve, or avoid activating events that sabotage their goals.

This ABC model of emotional/behavioral disturbance is fairly straightforward and, as noted above, is followed by most REBT and cognitive behavior therapy practitioners and theorists. It hypothesizes that the irrational beliefs or dysfunctional attitudes that constitute people's self-disturbing philosophies have two main qualities:

- (1) They have at their core explicit or implicit rigid, powerful demands and commands, usually expressed as *musts, shoulds, ought to's, have to's, and got to's* such as, "I absolutely must have my important goals fulfilled!"
- (2) They also have *derivatives* of these demands. For example, "If I don't have my important goals fulfilled, as I must," (a) "it's awful" (that is, one hundred percent bad); (b) "I can't

bear it” (that is, survive or be happy at all!); (c) “I’m a worthless person” (that is, completely bad and undeserving!); and (d) “I’ll always fail to get what I want now and in the future!”

This ABC model of human disturbance is followed, in REBT, by D — the disputing of people’s irrational beliefs (iB’s) — when they feel and act in a self-defeating way, until they arrive at E, a new set of more rational beliefs. For example, “I’d *prefer* to succeed and be lovable, but I don’t *have* to do so!” “I’d very much *like* others to treat me fairly and considerately, but there is no reason why they *must* do so.” “I greatly *desire* my life conditions to be comfortable and pleasant, but I don’t *need* them to be that way.”

Disputing of irrational beliefs is first done *cognitively*, by using scientific questioning and challenging to uproot people’s *musts* and *demands*. For example, “Why *must* I perform well, even though it’s desirable that I do?” “Where is

the evidence that you *have* to treat me considerately, however much I’d *like* you to do so?” Disputing is also done *emotively*. For example, using rational emotive imagery, people imagine one of the worst failures to achieve their goals, letting themselves feel very depressed. They are then to fully work to change their inappropriate feeling of depression to the healthy ones of *keen disappointment* or *regret*. Disputing is also done *behaviorally*. For example, people who avoid socializing can force themselves to socialize while simultaneously convincing themselves that it is not awful, but only inconvenient, to get rejected.

The more specific clinical application of the ABCs of REBT has been successful in thousands of reported cases and in scores of therapy outcome studies. Most of these studies have used REBT cognitive disputing, but have failed to add its emotive and behavioral disputing methods. So I predict that when REBT is properly tested it will do even better against control groups than has up to now been shown.

---

*Albert Ellis, Ph.D., the originator of Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy, was the founder of the Albert Ellis Institute in New York City.*

## REFERENCES

- Bernard, M.E., and Wolfe, J.L. *The REBT Resource Book for Practitioners*. New York: Albert Ellis Institute, 2000.
- Ellis, A. *Reason and Emotion in Psychotherapy, Revised*. Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1994.
- Ellis, A. *Anger—How to Live with and without It*. New York: Citadel Press, 1977.
- Ellis, A. *How to Stubbornly Refuse to Make Yourself Miserable About Anything—Yes, Anything!* New York: Citadel Press, 1998.
- Ellis, A. *Feeling Better, Getting Better, Staying Better*. Atascadero, CA: Impact, 2001.
- Ellis, A. *Overcoming Destructive Beliefs, Feelings and Behaviors*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2001.
- Ellis, A., and Dryden, W. *The Practice of Rational-Emotive Therapy*. New York: Springer, 1997.
- Ellis, A., and Harper, R.A. *A Guide to Rational Living*. North Hollywood, CA: Wilshire Books, 1997.
- Walen, S., DiGiuseppe, R. and Dryden, W. *Practitioner’s Guide to Rational-Emotive Therapy*. New York: Oxford, 1992.

---

*Additional copies of this handout are available at:*

10 copies for \$5.00 • 50 copies for \$20.00 • 100 copies for \$35.00  
from the

### **ALBERT ELLIS INSTITUTE**

45 East 65th Street, New York, NY 10065

Phone: (212) 535-0822 ♦ Fax: (212) 249-3582

e-mail: [orders@albertellis.org](mailto:orders@albertellis.org) ♦ [www.albertellis.org](http://www.albertellis.org)

*Call for a FREE catalogue of REBT CDs, tapes and publications.*

# Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy's A-B-C Theory of Emotional Disturbance

"People are disturbed not by things, but by the views which they take of them."  
— Epictetus, 1st century A.D.

It is not only the event, but also our *attitudes and beliefs* about it, that cause our emotional reaction.

A

## Activating Experience

Womanfriend breaks the news that she is going out with another man, and therefore wishes to break off her relationship with you.



B

## Irrational Beliefs About the Experience

"I really must be a worthless person."  
"I'll *never* find another great woman like her."  
"*She* doesn't want me; therefore *no* one could possibly want me."  
and/or  
"This is *awful!*" "Everything happens to me!"  
"That bitch! She *shouldn't* be that way."  
"I can't *stand* the world being so unfair and lousy."

C

## Upsetting Emotional Consequences



DEPRESSION

and/or

HOSTILITY



D

## Disputing of Irrational Ideas

"Where's the evidence that because this woman wishes to end our relationship, that I am a worthless person; or that I'll *never* be able to have a really good relationship with someone else; or even that I couldn't be happy alone?"

"Why is it *awful* that I'm not getting what I want?"  
"Why *shouldn't* the world be full of hassles?"  
"How does her rejecting me make me a *bad* person (or *her* a bad person)?"



E

## New Emotional Consequence or Effect

**SADNESS:** "Well, we did have a nice relationship, and I'm sorry to see it end— but it did have its problems, and now I can go out and find a new friend."

or

**ANNOYANCE:** "It's annoying that she is seeing someone; but it isn't awful or intolerable."

