

# REBT DIMINISHES MUCH OF THE HUMAN EGO

Albert Ellis, Ph.D.

Much of what we can call the human “ego” is vague and indeterminate and, when conceived of and given a global rating, interferes with survival and happiness. Certain aspects of “ego” seem to be vital and lead to beneficial results: for people do exist, or have aliveness, for a number of years, and they also have self-consciousness, or awareness of their existence. In this sense, they have uniqueness, ongoingness, and “ego”. What people call their “self” or “totality” or “personality”, on the other hand, has a vague, almost indefinable quality. People may well have “good” or “bad” traits—characteristics that help or hinder them in their goals of survival or happiness—but they really have no “self” that “is” good or bad.

To increase their health and happiness, Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) recommends that people would better resist the tendency to rate their “self” or “essence” and had better stick with only rating their deeds, traits, acts, characteristics, and performances. In some ways they can also evaluate the *effectiveness* of how they think, feel, and do. Once they choose their goals and purposes, they can rate their efficacy and efficiency in achieving these goals. And, as a number of experiments by Albert Bandura and his students have shown, their *belief* in their efficacy will often help make them more productive and achieving. But when people give a global, all-over rating to their “self” or “ego”, they almost always create self-defeating, neurotic thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

The vast majority of systems of psychotherapy seem intent on—indeed, almost obsessed with—upholding, bolstering, and strengthening people’s “self-esteem.” This includes such diverse systems as psychoanalysis, object relations, gestalt therapy, and even some of the main cognitive-behavioral therapies. Very few systems of personality change, as does Zen Buddhism, take an opposing stand and try to help humans diminish or surrender some aspects of their egos; but these systems tend to have little popularity and to engender much dispute.

Carl Rogers ostensibly tried to help people achieve “unconditional positive regard” and thereby see themselves as “good persons” in spite of their lack of achievement. Actually, however, he induced them to regard themselves as “okay” through their having a good relationship with a psychotherapist. But that, unfortunately, makes their *self*-acceptance depend on their *therapist’s* acting uncritically toward them. If so, that is still highly *conditional* acceptance, instead of the *unconditional* self-acceptance that REBT teaches.

REBT (Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy) constitutes one of the very few modern therapeutic schools that has taken something of a stand against ego-rating, and continues to take an even stronger stand in this direction as it grows in its theory and its applications. This paper outlines the up-to-date REBT position on ego-rating and explains why REBT helps people *diminish* their ego-rating propensities.

## LEGITIMATE ASPECTS OF THE HUMAN EGO

REBT first tries to define the various aspects of the human ego and to endorse its “legitimate” aspects. It assumes that an individual’s main goals or purposes include: (1) remaining alive and healthy and (2) enjoying himself or herself—experiencing a good deal of happiness and relatively little pain or dissatisfaction. We may, of course, argue with these goals; and not everyone accepts them as “good.” But assuming that a person does value them, then he or she may have a valid “ego,” “self,” “self-consciousness,” or “personality” which we may conceive of as something along the following lines:

1. “I exist—have an ongoing aliveness that lasts perhaps 80 or more years and then apparently comes to an end, so that ‘I’ no longer exist.”
2. “I exist separately, at least in part, from other humans, and can therefore conceive of myself as an individual in my ‘own’ right”.
3. “I have different traits, at least in many of their details, from other humans, and consequently my ‘I-ness’ or my ‘aliveness’ has a certain kind of uniqueness. No other person in the entire world appears to have exactly the same traits as I have nor equals ‘me’ or constitutes the same entity as ‘me’.”
4. “I have the ability to keep existing, if I choose to do so, for a certain number of years—to have an ongoing existence, and to have some degree of consistent traits as I continue to exist. In that sense, I remain ‘me’ for a long time, even though my traits change in important respects.”
5. “I have awareness or consciousness of my ongoingness, of my existence, of my behaviors and traits, and of various other aspects of my aliveness and experiencing. I can therefore say, ‘I have self-consciousness’.”

6. “I have some power to predict and plan for my future existence or ongoingness, and to change some of my traits and behaviors in accordance with my basic values and goals. My ‘rational behavior,’ as Myles Friedman has pointed out, to a large extent consists of my ability to predict and plan for my future.”

7. “Because of my ‘self-consciousness’ and my ability to predict and plan for my future, I can to a considerable degree change my present and future traits (and hence ‘existence’). In other words, I can at least partially control ‘myself’.”

8. “I similarly have the ability to remember, understand, and learn from my past and present experiences, and to use this remembering, understanding, and learning in the service of predicting and changing my future behavior.”

9. “I can choose to discover what I like (enjoy) and dislike (disenjoy) and to try to arrange to experience more of what I like and less of what I dislike. I can also choose to survive or not to survive.”

10. “I can choose to monitor or observe my thoughts, feelings, and actions to help myself survive and lead a more satisfying or more enjoyable existence.”

11. “I can have confidence (believe that a high probability exists) that I can remain alive and make myself relatively happy and free from pain.”

12. “I can choose to act as a *short-range* hedonist who mainly goes for the pleasures of the moment and gives little consideration to those of the future, or as a *long-range* hedonist who considers both the pleasures of the moment and of the future and who strives to achieve a fair degree of both.”

13. “I can choose to see myself as having worth or value for pragmatic reasons—because I will then tend to act in my own interests, to go for pleasures rather than pain, to survive better, and to feel good.”

14. “I can choose to accept myself unconditionally—whether or not I do well or get approved by others. I can thereby refuse to rate ‘myself,’ ‘my totality,’ ‘my personhood’ at all. Instead, I can rate my traits, deeds, acts, and performances—for the purposes of surviving and enjoying my life more, and *not* for the purposes of ‘proving myself’ or being ‘egoistic’ or showing that I have a ‘better’ or ‘greater’ value than others.”

15. “My ‘self’ and my ‘personality,’ while in important ways individualistic and unique to me, are also very much part of my sociality and my culture. An unusually large part of “me” and how “I” think, feel, and behave is significantly influenced—and even created—by my social learning and my being tested in various groups. I am far from being *merely* an individual in my *own* right. My personhood includes socialhood. Moreover, I rarely am a hermit but strongly *choose* to spend much of my life in family, school, work, neighborhood, community, and other *groups*. In numerous ways “I” am “me” and *also* a “groupie!” “My” individual ways of living, therefore, coalesce with “social” rules of living. My “self” is a personal *and* a social product—and process! My unconditional self-acceptance (USA) had better intrinsically include unconditional other-acceptance (UOA). I can—and will!—accept other people, as well as myself, with our virtues *and* our failings, with our important accomplishments *and* our non-achievements, just because we are alive and kicking, just because we are human! My survival and happiness is well worth striving for and so is that of the rest of humanity.

These, it seems to me, are some “legitimate” aspects of ego-rating. Why legitimate? Because they seem to have some “reality”—that is, have some “facts” behind them. And because they appear to help people who subscribe to them to attain their usual basic values of surviving and feeling happy rather than miserable.

## **SELF DEFEATING ASPECTS OF THE HUMAN “EGO” (SELF-RATING)**

At the same time, people subscribe to some “illegitimate” aspects of the human “ego” or of self-rating, such as these:

1. “I not only exist as a unique person, but as a *special* person. I am a *better individual* than other people because of my outstanding traits.”

2. “I have a superhuman rather than merely a human quality. I can do things that other people cannot possibly do and deserve to be deified for doing these things.”

3. “If I do not have outstanding, special, or superhuman characteristics, I am sub-human. Whenever I do not perform notably, I deserve to be devil-ified and damned.”

4. “The universe especially and signally cares about me. It has a personal interest in me and wants to see me do remarkably well and to feel happy.”

5. “I *need* the universe to specially care about me. If it does not, I am a lowly individual, I cannot take care of myself, and must feel desperately miserable.”

6. “Because I exist, I *ab-solutely* have to succeed in life and I *must* obtain love and approval by all the people that I find significant.”

7. “Because I exist, I *must* survive and continue to have a happy existence.”

8. “Because I exist, I *must* exist forever, and have *immortality*.”

9. “I *equal* my traits. If I have significant bad traits, I totally rate as bad; and if I have significant good ones, I rate as

a good person.”

10. “I particularly equal my character traits. If I treat others well and therefore have a ‘good character,’ I am a good person; and if I treat others badly and therefore have a ‘bad character,’ I have the essence of a bad person.”

11. “In order to accept and respect myself, I must prove I have real worth—prove it by having competence, outstandingness, and the approval of others.”

12. “To have a happy existence, I *must* have—absolutely *need*—the things I really want.”

The self-rating aspects of ego, in other words, tend to do you in, to handicap you, to interfere with your satisfactions. They differ enormously from the self-individuating aspects of ego. The latter involve *how* or *how well* you exist. You remain alive as a distinct, different, unique individual because you have various traits and performances and because you enjoy their fruits. But you have “ego” in the sense of self-rating because you magically think in terms of upping or downing, deifying or devilifying yourself *for* how or how well you exist. Ironically, you probably think that rating yourself or your “ego” will help you live as a unique person and enjoy yourself. Well, it usually won’t! For the most part it will let you survive, perhaps—but pretty miserably!

## ADVANTAGES OF “EGO-ISM” OR SELF-RATING

Doesn’t ego-ism, self-rating, or self-esteem have *any* advantages? It certainly does—and therefore, probably, it survives in spite of its disadvantages. What advantages does it have? It tends to motivate you to succeed and to win others’ approval. It gives you an interesting, preoccupying *game* of constantly comparing your deeds and your “self” to those of other people. It often helps you impress others—which has a practical value, in many instances. It may help preserve your life—such as when you strive to make more money, for egoistic reasons, and thus aid your survival by means of this money.

Self-rating serves as a very easy and comfortable position to fall into—humans seem to have a biological tendency to engage in it. It can also give you enormous pleasure when you rate yourself as noble, great, or outstanding. It may motivate you to produce notable works of art, science, or invention. It can enable you to feel superior to others—at times, even to feel god-like.

Egoism obviously has real advantages. To give up self-rating completely would amount to quite a sacrifice. We cannot justifiably say that it brings no gains, produces no social or individual good.

## DISADVANTAGES OF “EGO-ISM” OR SELF-RATING

These are some of the more important reasons why rating yourself as either a good or a bad person has immense dangers and will frequently handicap you:

1. To work well, self-rating requires you to have extraordinary ability and talent, or virtual infallibility. For you then can only elevate your ego when you do well, and concomitantly depress it when you do poorly. What chance do you have of steadily or always doing well?

2. To have, in common parlance, a “strong” ego or “real” self-esteem really requires you to be above-average or outstanding. Only if you have special talent will you likely accept yourself and rate yourself highly. But, obviously, very few individuals can have unusual, genius-like ability. And will you personally reach that uncommon level? I doubt it!

3. Even if you have enormous talents and abilities, to accept yourself or esteem yourself consistently, in an ego-rating way, you have to display them virtually all the time. Any significant lapse, and you immediately tend to down yourself. And then, when you down yourself, you tend to lapse more—a truly vicious circle!

4. When you insist on gaining “self-esteem,” you basically do so in order to impress others with your great “value” or “worth” as a human. But the need to impress others and to win their approval, and thereby view yourself as a “good person,” leads to an obsession that tends to preempt a large part of your life. You seek status instead of seeking joy. And you seek universal acceptance—which you certainly have virtually no chance of ever getting!

5. Even when you impress others, and supposedly gain “worth” that way, you tend to realize that you do so partly by acting and falsifying your talents. You consequently look upon yourself as a phony. Ironically, then, first you down yourself for not impressing others; but then you also down yourself for phonily impressing them!

6. When you rate yourself and succeed at giving yourself a superior rating, you delude yourself into thinking you have superiority over others. You may indeed have some superior traits; but you devoutly feel that you become a truly superior person—or semi-god. And that de-lusion gives you an artificial or false sense of “self-esteem.”

7. When you insist on rating yourself as good or bad, you tend to focus on your defects, liabilities, and failings, for you feel certain that they make you into an **R.P.**, or rotten person. By focusing on these defects, you accentuate them, often making them worse; interfere with changing them; and acquire a generalized negative view of yourself that frequently ends up in arrant self-deprecation.

8. When you rate your *self*, instead of only evaluating the effectiveness of your thoughts, feelings, and actions, you

have the philosophy that you *must* prove yourself as good; and since there always exists a good chance that you will not, you tend to remain underlyingly or overtly anxious practically all the time. In addition, you may continually verge on depression, despair, and feelings of intense shame, guilt, and worthlessness.

9. When you preoccupyingly rate yourself, even if you succeed in earning a good rating, you do so at the expense of becoming obsessed with success, achievement, attainment, and outstandingness. But this kind of concentration on success deflects you from doing what *you* really desire to do and from the goal of trying to be happy: some of the most successful people actually remain quite miserable.

10. By the same token, in mightily striving for outstandingness, success, and superiority, you rarely stop to ask yourself, “What do I really want—and want for myself?” So you fail to find what you really enjoy in life.

11. Ostensibly, your focusing on achieving greatness and superiority over others and thereby winning a high self-rating serves to help you do better in life. Actually, it helps you focus on your so-called *worth* and *value* rather than on your competency and happiness; and consequently, you fail to achieve many things that you otherwise could. Because you *have* to prove your utter competence, you often tend to make yourself less competent—and sometimes withdraw from competition.

12. Although self-rating occasionally may help you pursue creative activities, it frequently has the opposite result. For example, you may become so hung up on success and superiority that you uncreatively and obsessively-compulsively go for those goals rather than that of creative participation in art, music, science, invention, or other pursuits.

13. When you rate yourself you tend to become self-centered rather than problem-centered. Therefore, you do not try to solve many of the practical and important problems in life but largely focus on your own navel and the pseudoproblem of *proving* yourself instead of *finding* yourself.

14. Self-rating generally helps you feel abnormally self-conscious. Self-consciousness, or the knowledge that you have an ongoing quality and can enjoy or disenjoy yourself, can have great advantages. But extreme self-consciousness, or continually spying on yourself and rating yourself on how well you do takes this good trait to an obnoxious extreme and may interfere seriously with your happiness.

15. Self-rating encourages a great amount of prejudice. It consists of an overgeneralization: “Because one or more of my traits seem inadequate, I rate as a totally inadequate person.” This means, in effect, that you feel prejudiced against *yourself* for some of your *behavior*. In doing this, you tend also to feel prejudiced against others for their poor behavior—or for what you consider their inferior traits. You thus can make yourself feel bigoted about Blacks, Jews, Catholics, Italians, and various other groups which include some people you do not like.

16. Self-rating leads to necessitizing and compulsiveness. When you believe, “I must down myself when I have a crummy trait or set of performances,” you usually also believe that “I absolutely *have* to have good traits or performances,” and you feel compelled to act in certain “good” ways—even when you have little chance of consistently doing so.

## WHY “EGO-ISM” AND SELF-RATING ARE ILLOGICAL

In these and other ways, attempting to have “ego-strength” or “self-esteem” leads to distinctly poor results: meaning, it interferes with your life and happiness. To make matters even worse, ego-ratings or self-ratings are unsound, in that accurate or “true” self-ratings or global ratings are virtually impossible to make. For a global or total rating of an individual involves the following kinds of contradictions and magical thinking:

1. As a person, you have almost innumerable traits—virtually all of which change from day to day or year to year. How can any single global rating of you, therefore, meaningfully apply to all of you—including your constantly changing traits?

2. You exist as an ongoing *process*—an individual who has a past, present, and future. Any rating of your *you-ness*, therefore, would apply only to “you” at single points in time and hardly to your ongoingness.

3. To give a rating to “you” totally, we would have to rate all of your traits, deeds, acts, and performances, and somehow add or multiply them. But these characteristics are valued differently in different cultures and at different times. And *who* can therefore legitimately rate or weight them, except in a given culture at a given time, and to a very limited degree?

4. If we did get legitimate ratings for every one of your past, present, and future traits, what kind of math would we employ to total them? Can we divide by the number of traits, and get a “valid” global rating? Could we use simple arithmetic? Algebraic ratings? Geometric ratings? Logarithmic ratings? What?

5. To rate “you” totally and accurately, we would have to know *all* your characteristics, or at least the “important” ones, and include them in our total. But how could we ever know them all? All your thoughts? Your emotions? Your “good” and “bad” deeds? Your accomplishments? Your psychological state?

6. To say that you have no value or are worthless involves several unprovable (and unfalsifiable) hypotheses: (1) that

you have, innately, an essence of worthlessness; (2) that you never could possibly have any worth whatsoever; and (3) that you deserve damnation or eternal punishment for having the misfortune of worthlessness. Similarly, to say that you have great worth involves the unprovable hypothesis that (1) you just happen to have superior worth; (2) you will always have it, no matter what you do; and (3) you deserve deification or eternal reward for having this boon of great worth. No scientific methods of confirming or falsifying these hypotheses seem to exist.

7. When you posit global worth or worthlessness, you almost inevitably get yourself into circular thinking. If you *see* yourself as having intrinsic value, you will tend to *see* your traits as good, and will have a halo effect. Then you will falsely conclude that because you have these good characteristics, you have intrinsic value. Similarly, if you see yourself as having worthlessness, you will view your “good” traits as “bad,” and “prove” your hypothesized lack of value.

8. You can pragmatically believe that “I am good because I exist.” But this stands as a tautological, unprovable hypothesis, in the same class with the equally unprovable (and undisprovable) statement, “I am bad because I exist.” *Assuming* that you have intrinsic value because you remain alive may help you feel happier than if you assume the opposite. But philosophically, it remains an untenable proposition. You might just as well say, “I have worth because God loves me,” or “I have no value because God (or the Devil) hates me.” The assumptions cause you to feel and act in certain ways; but they appear essentially unverifiable and unfalsifiable.

For reasons such as those just outlined, we may make the following conclusions: (1) You do seem to exist, or have aliveness, for a number of years, and you also appear to have consciousness, or awareness of your existence. In this sense, you have a human uniqueness, ongoingness, or, if you will, “ego.” (2) But what you normally call your “self” or your “totality” or your “personality” has a vague, almost indefinable quality; and you cannot legitimately give it a global rating or report card. You may *have* good and bad traits or characteristics that help you or hinder you in your goals of survival and happiness and that enable you to live responsibly or irresponsibly with others. But you or your “self” really “aren’t” good or bad. (3) When you give yourself a global rating, or have “ego” in the usual sense of that term, you may help yourself in various ways; on the whole, however, you tend to do much more harm than good and preoccupy yourself with rather foolish, side-tracking goals. Much of what we call emotional “disturbance” or neurotic “symptoms” directly or indirectly results from globally rating yourself and other humans. (4) Therefore, you’d better resist the tendency to rate your “self” or your “essence” or your “totality” and had better stick with only rating your deeds, traits, acts, characteristics, and performances.

In other words, you had better reduce much of what we normally call your human “ego” and retain those parts of it which can help you experiment with life, choose what you tentatively think you want to do or avoid, and enjoy what you *discover* is “good” for you and for the social group in which you choose to live.

More positively, the two main solutions to the problem of self-rating consist of an elegant and an inelegant answer. The inelegant solution involves your making an arbitrary but practical definition or statement about yourself: “I accept myself as good or evaluate myself as good because I exist.” This proposition, though unabsolute and arguable, will tend to provide you with feelings of self-acceptance or self-confidence and has many advantages and few disadvantages. It will almost always work; and will preclude your having feelings of self-denigration or worthlessness as long as you hold it.

More elegantly, you can accept this proposition: “I do not have intrinsic worth or worthlessness, but merely aliveness. I’d better rate my traits and acts but not my totality or ‘self.’ I fully *accept* myself, in the sense that I know I have aliveness, and I *choose* to survive and live as happily as possible, and with minimum needless pain. I only require this knowledge and this choice—and no other kind of self-rating.”

In other words, you can decide only to rate or measure your *acts* and *performances*—your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors—by viewing them as “good” when they aid your goals and values and as “bad” when they sabotage your individual and social desires and preferences. But you can simultaneously decide not to rate your “self,” “essence,” or “totality” at all. Yes, *at all!*

Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) recommends this second, more elegant solution, because it appears more honest, more practical, and leads to fewer philosophical difficulties than the inelegant one. But if you absolutely insist on a “self”-rating, we recommend that you rate yourself as “good” *merely* because you are alive. That kind of “egoism” will get you into very little trouble!

Burns, D.D. (1993). *Ten Days to Self-Esteem*. New York: Morrow.

Dryden, W. (1994). *Overcoming Guilt!* London: Sheldon Press.

Dryden, W. (Ed.). (1995). *Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy: A Reader*. London: Sage.

Dryden, W., & Gordon, J. (1991). *Think Your Way to Happiness*.

London: Sheldon Press.

Dryden, W. (1995). *Brief Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy*.

London: Wiley.

Ellis, A. (1962). *Reason and Emotion in Psychotherapy*. Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel.

Ellis, A. (1972). *Psychotherapy and the Value of a Human Being*.

New York: Institute for Rational-Emotive Therapy. Reprinted in

Ellis, A. & Dryden, W., *The Essential Albert Ellis*. New York:

Springer, 1990.

Ellis, A. (Speaker). *How to Stubbornly Refuse to Be Ashamed of*

*Anything*. Cassette recording. New York: Institute for Rational-

Emotive Therapy.

Ellis A. (1988). *How to Stubbornly Refuse to Make Yourself Miserable*

*About Anything—Yes, Anything!* Secaucus, N.J.: Lyle Stuart.

Ellis, A. (Speaker). (1989). *Unconditionally Accepting Yourself and*

*Others*. Cassette recording. New York: Institute for Rational-

Emotive Therapy.

Ellis, A. (1994). *Reason and Emotion in Psychotherapy*. Revised and