

RATIONAL EMOTIVE BEHAVIOR THERAPY (REBT) TODAY

In 1955, Albert Ellis started a revolution in the treatment of emotional problems with the introduction of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT). As REBT's reputation has grown, so has the number of people interested in learning more about it.

People hear about REBT in all kinds of ways -- through college courses, workshops, in newspaper articles, or by word of mouth. Some of the things people hear about REBT are right on the mark. And some of what people hear is -- well, a bit fuzzy. We decided to create this pamphlet to address some of the more common questions, confusions and concerns that have been raised about REBT.

WHAT IS REBT?

REBT is a practical, action-oriented approach to coping with problems and enhancing personal growth. It places a good deal of its focus on the *present*: on currently-held attitudes, painful emotions and maladaptive behaviors that can sabotage a fuller experience of life. REBT also provides people with an individualized set of proven techniques for helping them to solve problems. REBT practitioners work closely with people, seeking to help uncover their individual set of beliefs (attitudes, expectations and personal rules) that frequently lead to emotional distress. REBT then provides a variety of methods to help people reformulate their self-defeating beliefs into more sensible, realistic and helpful ones by employing the powerful REBT technique called "disputing." Ultimately, REBT helps people to develop a philosophy and approach to living that can increase their effectiveness and happiness at work, in parenting and educational settings, in living successfully with others, in making our community and environment healthier, and in enhancing their own health and personal welfare.

BUT DON'T YOU NEED TO UNCOVER THE PAST IN ORDER TO REALLY UNDERSTAND PEOPLE'S PROBLEMS?

Contrary to what some people erroneously believe, REBT does recognize that we may be strongly influenced by events in early life. Much of our philosophy of life -- what we think about ourselves and our values -- is learned from past experiences. But the past is with us in the form of beliefs that we carry in our head *in the present*. REBT hones in on the beliefs that are harmful in our current emotional life and behavior -- whether those beliefs arose in the distant reaches of our youth or within the past few weeks. REBT believes that the "nuttiness" of our past exerts its influence in our current-day thinking patterns and beliefs. Although we cannot change the past, *we can change how we let the past influence the way we are today and the way we want to be tomorrow*. In this sense, REBT is an optimistic approach to living and to solving problems.

I'VE HEARD THAT REBT TRIES TO DO AWAY WITH NEGATIVE EMOTIONS ALTOGETHER BY MAKING PEOPLE THINK LOGICALLY AND OBJECTIVELY. IS THAT TRUE?

This is a fundamental misconception of REBT. Perhaps more so than any other approach, REBT emphasizes *the involvement of emotions in just about every aspect of our thinking and actions*. Early in therapy, clients are encouraged to be in touch with their emotions and to be able to clearly label them. REBT proposes that when our negative emotions become too intense (e.g., rage, panic, or depression), not only do we feel very unhappy, but our ability to manage our lives begins to deteriorate. At these times, the quality of our thinking changes and we begin to take things over-personally, blow things out of perspective, condemn others for their transgressions and generally become less tolerant of life's hassles and hardships. REBT helps restore the emotional balance in an individual's life by providing methods for thinking more realistically and level-headedly about ourselves, other people, and the world.

BUT AREN'T FEELINGS SUCH AS ANGER AND ANXIETY NORMAL AND APPROPRIATE?

Of course! But it is the *quality* of feelings that is important. Experiencing intense *irritation* and *displeasure* when things go wrong can motivate you to change frustrating conditions. Feelings of *rage*, on the other hand, often land you in a smoldering stew, where either you are stymied from taking any action at all, or you act in ways that are impulsive and self-defeating. A bit of anxiety or some degree of concern about facing the boss can add an edge of excitement that sharpens performance; *excessive* anxiety, however, can interfere with thinking and action. While REBT tries to reduce debilitating emotions, this does not mean that it's unhealthy to experience keen feelings of sorrow or displeasure when you experience misfortune.

WITH REBT'S EMPHASIS ON REDUCING EMOTIONAL UPSETS IN THE FACE OF UNFAIRNESS OR MISFORTUNE, DOESN'T IT ENCOURAGE THE PRESERVATION OF THE STATUS QUO? (NOT TO MENTION TAKE AWAY ENERGY TO MAKE THINGS BETTER?)

One of REBT's favorite maxims (first expressed by Reinhold Neibuhr) is: "Grant me the courage to change the things I can change, the serenity to accept those that I cannot change, and the wisdom to know the difference." REBT seeks to *empower* individuals both by helping them more effectively handle their own painful emotions, and by enabling them to change their own behavior and improve their world where possible. When you get *too* upset, it is much more difficult to behave in constructive ways. By gaining better control over upsetting emotions, you become far more able to act assertively to change bad outside circumstances.

WITH ALL THIS EMPHASIS ON "ME," DOESN'T REBT ENCOURAGE SELFISHNESS? DON'T WE ALREADY HAVE TOO MUCH SELFISHNESS IN THIS WORLD?

A very good question. Yes, many people are too selfish for their own and others' good. REBT provides people with the skills and attitudes to become less selfish. Selfishness is often motivated by ego-gratification. Many selfish people tend to be very needy and demanding and are intent on getting what they want at any cost in order to feel good about themselves. REBT helps people to reduce their own neediness and specifically their need to prove themselves to others. To discourage selfishness, REBT teaches what Albert Ellis calls the value of *rational self-acceptance*. According to Ellis, healthy people are usually glad to be alive and accept themselves just *because* they are alive and have some capacity to enjoy themselves. They refuse to measure their intrinsic worth by their extrinsic accomplishments, materialistic possessions and by what others think of them. They choose to accept themselves unconditionally; and then try to completely avoid globally rating themselves - meaning their totality or their "essence." They attempt to *enjoy* rather than *prove* themselves. Thus, rather than acting out of selfishness, they learn to operate from responsible self-interest.

ISN'T REBT JUST ABOUT INTELLECTUAL DISPUTING?

REBT does help people by teaching them to recognize and change those aspects of their thinking which are not sensible, accurate or useful. This is probably what is meant by *intellectual* disputing. However, it also uses a host of other emotional and behavioral methods designed to reduce upset feelings and increase personal effectiveness. These include rational-emotive imagery; assertiveness, self nurturance, risk-taking, and other behavioral homework assignments; communication skill training; and "shame-attacking" exercises.

I'VE HEARD THAT REBT IS ONLY REALLY USEFUL WITH VERY INTELLIGENT PEOPLE.

REBT can work very well with very bright people. Good brain power can help certain people analyze more quickly the ways in which their thinking is illogical when they are upset. However, just because you have the potential to quickly see the irrational qualities of your thinking, doesn't mean you will use your potential to help yourself. Many very bright people are more motivated to argue the "rightness" of their beliefs than to consider they might be wrong. Over the years, REBT methods have been adopted for children as young as five or six years old, and even for the learning-impaired. Rational emotive behavior therapists are trained to tailor REBT to meet the wide variety of intellectual, cognitive-developmental and other personal characteristics of clients.

I'VE HEARD THAT REBT THERAPISTS DO A LOT OF CONFRONTING. THIS DOESN'T SOUND VERY EMPATHIC OR SUPPORTIVE.

REBT practitioners are very concerned about establishing a *helpful, supportive, and facilitative alliance with people*. They realize that not all people come to therapy ready for action and change, and that some people - because of their personalities and problems - require a great deal of support and empathy before they are ready to change. At the same time, REBT practitioners tend to take an active role with their clients. They help provide people as quickly as possible with the tools to help them change their beliefs leading to disturbing emotions, thus freeing them to confront their everyday problems with all their resources.

***BY BEING SO ACTIVE, AREN'T REBT THERAPISTS
"CONTROLLING" THE CLIENT?***

REBT practitioners have excellent insight into the nature of problems in living and how to help people free themselves from their emotional misery about them. They are conscious that many clients find it difficult to address the main problems in their lives and their own inner obstacles to happiness. Rational emotive behavior therapists work *collaboratively* with clients to clarify existing problems, and to identify important general problems to work on together. And yes, therapists are active in teaching clients new methods for changing their thinking, feelings and behavior. However, REBT does not control the client. Rather, it *empowers clients to manage their own emotional problems more effectively* and to take control of their own behavior in order to try to obtain more of what they want in life.

***DOES REBT FORCE ITS OWN BELIEFS ABOUT
WHAT'S RATIONAL ON PEOPLE?***

REBT defines rational beliefs as those which help people live satisfying, healthy, and fulfilled lives. Over the years, Albert Ellis has identified a set of rational beliefs or values which promote people's happiness and survival. For example, *rational self-acceptance* -- which involves people giving up the self-rating game -- seems to help people significantly reduce anxiety and increase feelings of self-acceptance. *High frustration tolerance*, which encourages people to accept (not like) life's hardships and other people's imperfections, leads to greater perseverance, patience, and the ability to get along with others. REBT practitioners are careful, however, not to impose "rational" beliefs. REBT accepts that there are also other "non-rational" belief systems that can help people achieve happiness. And further, REBT accepts the value system of the client and works within that framework to facilitate the client's goals.

***BY EMPHASIZING THE INDIVIDUAL'S BELIEFS AND
VALUES AND ELIMINATING "SHOULD," ISN'T REBT
INCOMPATIBLE WITH RELIGIOUS VALUES?***

The field of psychology has discovered that when people impose rigid expectations on themselves, other people, and the world they are likely to experience unnecessary emotional distress. In REBT, these expectations are expressed as absolutistic "houlds," "oughts," and "musts." For example, "I *should* be successful in important things I do at work" can get you into emotional hot water when you make mistakes or fail. *REBT affirms the value of achievement, but helps people give up their demandingness for total success at all times.* REBT advocates instead a more preferential system of values: one that encourages people to work toward their professional goals, but never to condemn and damn themselves when they fail to achieve them. In a similar way, REBT is useful in helping people from diverse religious backgrounds to be more *self-accepting*, as well as more accepting of *other* people who may not share their particular values.

***REBT MAKES SENSE, BUT I CAN'T SEEM TO APPLY IT TO MYSELF -- I UNDERSTAND IT
"INTELLECTUALLY," BUT NOT "EMOTIONALLY."***

When you think about it, what REBT sets out to accomplish sounds pretty ambitious: its goal is no less than changing core irrational beliefs that you've spent your *whole life* rehearsing, living, and "feeling." For many people, it takes some time before the emotional "gut" follows what their head already "knows." Learning new ways of thinking and new beliefs can be compared to a horse-driven carriage that has had the same driver and horse for years. The horse knows where to go without having to be told by the driver. Once you change the driver (new ways of thinking), the horse still goes in the same direction (*old* emotions and behaviors), but the driver has to strain at the reins to produce a change in direction (*new* emotions and behaviors). The positive aspect of the strain you may experience in using REBT is that it shows you are learning new ways of feeling and behaving and that you are taking charge of your own direction in life.

Thanks to Theresa Exner, Ph.D. and Michael Bernard, Ph.D. for their help in compiling this handout.