

Using Stoicism to Overcome Adversity



A Short Guide to Rational
Emotive Behavior Therapy

Aaron Olson

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Introduction

If you are distressed by anything external, the pain is not due to the thing itself, but to your estimate of it; and this you have the power to revoke at any moment.
— Marcus Aurelius

According to Albert Ellis, founder of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), we make an error when interpreting our emotions. When we experience intense emotions such as anger, depression, or anxiety, we assume that something outside of ourselves caused our feelings. But, according to Ellis, it is our underlying beliefs about our circumstances that control our emotions. By changing our underlying beliefs, we can change how we feel.

The therapy presented in this book is based on the ancient wisdom of Stoicism and the more contemporary REBT. By putting the advice into practice, you can better control your emotions. By following the simple, common-sense approach to confronting your underlying philosophies, you will begin to get better control of how you feel.

Who Was Albert Ellis?

There is no psychology; there is only biography and autobiography. — Thomas Szasz

Albert Ellis was a psychotherapist who came up with a philosophically based form of psychotherapy called Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT). Ellis' therapy and philosophy were based on his life experiences of overcoming depression and anxiety as a young person. Two major life events had a profound effect on Ellis which informed his therapy and philosophy of life.

As a child, Ellis was sickly. Between the ages of five and seven, he was hospitalized several times. One of the hospitalizations lasted a year in which his parents never visited him. During this time young Ellis learned the harsh reality of life — that wanting something, in this case, parental love, does not make it so. Instead of feeling sorry for himself, Ellis let go of his demand for love from his parents and refused to make himself more miserable than he already was while in the hospital.

A major aspect of REBT is letting go of your sense of entitlement about what you think life should give you. Ellis calls this Unconditional Life Acceptance (ULA). Unconditional life acceptance is the idea that you accept life for what it is, no matter what comes your way. Demanding that life be different from what it is, is often a recipe for depression and self-pity.

Another major life event happened when Ellis was nineteen years old. Ellis was painfully shy with women and yet wanted to talk with women and get a date. He decided to try an experiment to force himself to overcome his shyness. He forced himself to talk to one hundred random women while strolling through the Bronx Botanical Garden.

Ellis recalled his experience in an interview with Myrtle Heery:

I prepared myself philosophically even then — it was before cognitive therapy really — by seeing that nobody took out a stiletto and cut my balls off, nobody vomited and ran away, nobody called the cop. I had a hundred pleasant conversations and the second hundred I got good at and made a few dates. So I used what I later developed into Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy on myself by thinking philosophically differently, that nothing is awful, terrible, it's just a pain in the ass, that's all it is.¹

The experience, of being rejected, helped Ellis come up with another core concept of REBT that he called Unconditional Self-acceptance (USA). This is the idea that we should accept ourselves as worthwhile human beings no matter how short we fall from the standards we set for ourselves. We can reduce anxiety, depression, and anger as a result. By using Unconditional Self-acceptance, we can also stop worrying so much about what other people think.

Take a look at Ellis' use of USA in the same interview with Heery:

I accept that I do stupid, wrong things very frequently because I'm a fallible human and fallible humans do stupid wrong things — and that's bad, it's not good, it's not neutral, it's bad. But I, a human, am too complex to rate. You cannot rate a human as Alfred Korzybski shows. You can only rate what he or she does, so, therefore, I say I did badly and again I hope to change it next time...

Ellis was not afraid to speak out against what he considered foolish practices in his field of psychotherapy. He believed that

¹<http://www.psychotherapy.net/data/uploads/51102f7bd269e.pdf>

psychotherapy should be more of an educational experience, rather than an uncovering of past trauma or unconscious motivations. He said that most therapists were terrified to tell patients what they needed to hear. In an interview with Arthur Freeman, Ellis said:

...most of the psychotherapy, up to this day, is ass-licking. Most psychotherapists lick the ass of their clients and everybody else, because they have a dire need for love...therapists generally try to quiet clients down and help them feel better, and they do that mainly by loving them, caring for them, showing them that they're okay, encouraging them, etc. But they don't basically get them to get better...especially, getting them to the point where they change their basic philosophy of musts, shoulds, oughts, demands, so they stop upsetting themselves theoretically about anything, and the world could literally come to an end and they'd say: "Too damned bad. Now how do I enjoy the last few minutes? Why whine and scream because it's coming to an end and I don't like that."²

²<http://www.psychotherapy.net/data/uploads/51102f7bd269e.pdf>

A Guide to REBT

How We Make Ourselves Miserable

There are three musts that hold us back: I must do well.
You must treat me well. And the world must be easy. —
Albert Ellis

At its core, REBT is the idea we make ourselves miserable, most of the time. We are the cause of our unwanted feelings, and we can change our feelings by changing the underlying philosophy behind our feelings.

REBT is based on the philosophy of the Stoics, especially Epictetus, who said: "Men are disturbed not by things, but by the view which they take of them."

For Ellis, achieving tranquility of mind was not about changing what was going on in the external world, but rather, changing our underlying philosophy of life. Events themselves don't cause us to be miserable, it is our beliefs about the events that control our emotions. By changing our underlying beliefs, we can change how we feel.

According to Ellis, we have three basic demands that make us miserable.

They are:

1. I must do everything perfectly.
2. Others must treat me well.
3. Life must be easy and problem-free.

When we make demands of ourselves, other people, or life itself, we cause ourselves to be miserable. We turn our preferences into needs, and demand that they be satisfied! For example, if I told myself while writing this: “I must write the perfect guide on how to use REBT.” How do you think I would feel? Probably very anxious.

According to Ellis, I would be better off if I changed my underlying philosophy and told myself:

I will put forth a solid effort. If other people don't like my guide to REBT, then too bad! I can use the feedback to write a better guide next time.

By transforming my demand into a mere desire, I will have prevented myself from becoming anxious and perhaps more likely to achieve my stated goal.

Demands on Self

When we place impossible demands on ourselves, we become miserable as a result. Demands on ourselves are often inflexible, unrealistic, and overly dependent upon what other people think of us. For example, you might say to yourself:

I must do everything perfectly. If I fail to do things perfectly, then I am a failure.

Or you might say,

I must have approval from others. I must not act in a way that others will disapprove of.

If you hold these beliefs, you will become angry, anxious, or depressed when your demands are not met. In life, you will inevitably

fall short of perfection. By changing your underlying philosophy and disputing your demands, you can change how you feel. For example, ask yourself: “Why **must** I do everything perfectly? Where is it written that I **must** have others’ approval?”

To combat your demands, you could tell yourself instead:

I would prefer that I do everything well, but it isn’t realistic for me to put this demand on myself. I will stop making myself angry, depressed, and anxious with my demands.

Attack your need for approval from others by telling yourself:

I desire for others’ approval of all that I do. But I can stand it, and live a good life, even if others do not approve of all that I do. I will stop making myself miserable, angry, anxious, and depressed due to my obsession with other people’s opinions of me.

Demands on Others

Ellis claimed that when we make demands of others, we place ourselves at the center of the universe and insist that others act in accordance with our will. Placing demands on others may lead to rage, anger, impatience, bitterness, and resentment. For example, you might demand that other people treat you fairly. You may hold the belief:

Other people must treat me fairly, act competently, and not criticize me, otherwise, they are no good human beings and deserve to be punished.

You can dispute what Ellis called your “god-like” demand by telling yourself:

I wish that people would act fairly, especially towards me! But if they don't, then too bad! I do not need to take the criticism of others so seriously. I will stop making myself miserable by demanding that others always act favorably toward me.

Accepting that others act badly does not mean that you condone their behavior. It only means that you stop demanding that people act like angels, especially towards you! It also means that you will refuse to allow other people's bad or unfair behavior to drive you insane!

Demands on Life

When we demand that life be easy, problem-free, or different from what it is, we take our desire for a vacation from life and make it into a need. In the process, we make ourselves miserable. Demanding an easy, problem-free life is a recipe for anger, anxiety, depression, and self-pity.

For example, we may tell ourselves:

Life shouldn't be this hard. Life should be easy and problem-free. I can't stand living the way it is. The government, my job, my boss, my spouse, my child, or my parents should change to make things easier for me.

We can combat our sense of injustice with life by telling ourselves something more helpful such as:

I prefer that life were different and will try to change what is within my control, but I won't make myself more miserable than I already am by demanding that life goes according to my wishes. I have limited control over my job, my boss, my spouse, my child, my parents, and the government. I will try to change what is within my control and let go of the rest. Even though life is unfair and difficult, I can stand it and embrace happiness when it comes my way.

Ellis maintained that if you take a close look, you will find that your feelings of misery stem from your own demands. By changing your demands to preferences, you can change your feelings of anger, anxiety, and depression. You can change anger into mere frustration, anxiety into simple concern, and depression into mere dissatisfaction.

Unconditional Acceptance of Self, Others, and Life

According to Ellis, the second part of getting rid of your misery involves unconditionally accepting yourself, others, and life in general. Why would you want to do this? Because you and everyone else on this planet are fallible, flawed human beings! You will make mistakes, others will treat you badly, and life will be difficult. But that is hardly a reason to despair. Accepting yourself, others, and life for what it is doesn't mean that you desire to be treated badly. It merely requires that you stop overgeneralizing the negative aspects of yourself, others, and life.

Unconditional Self-Acceptance

When we overgeneralize about our flaws, we make ourselves miserable in the process. By accepting yourself as a worthwhile human being despite your flaws you can decrease your feelings of worthlessness. Ellis says that although you are a flawed human being who makes mistakes, that hardly makes you inhuman.

For example, suppose that you make a mistake or treat someone badly. You could make yourself miserable by holding onto the belief, “I am a terrible human being for acting in such a way.” Instead of berating yourself for your mistake, you could accept your human fallibility, telling yourself:

I am a fallible human being who makes mistakes. Just because I acted badly in the past does not make me a terrible, awful person. I can strive to do better in the future.

Unconditional Other-Acceptance

When other people fail to treat us with respect, do not enjoy our company, or simply ignore us, this can make us angry, anxious, or depressed. In such circumstances, we may tell ourselves, “I can’t stand it when others treat me unfairly!”

The truth said Ellis, is that you can stand it, and even live a happy life even though others behave badly towards you from time to time. Ellis encourages us to accept others as worthwhile human beings even though they behave badly on occasion. Try telling yourself:

Other people will treat me badly from time to time, but that does not make them inhuman. In fact, there are times when I have treated others badly, yet that hardly

makes me inhuman. I can accept other people without condoning their bad behavior.

Unconditional Life-Acceptance

Life doesn't always work out the way that we had planned. But this doesn't mean that life is not worth living! We can still enjoy life even though it has not conformed to our desires. There is no reason, after all, that the universe should cater to our desires. If you find yourself demanding that life be different from what it is, try telling yourself:

There is no reason why life must go only the way I desire it to go. I will work to change what I can, but I will not make myself more miserable when life is difficult. I will stop demanding that the universe caters to my desires. Even when life feels unbearable, I can stand it. I can continue working towards my goals no matter how difficult life is.

Practicing REBT

So far, you have learned about the tools that you will need to dispute your demands and accept that your desires are not the same as needs. Begin the practice of changing your beliefs by acknowledging that which is beyond your control.

Is it worth feeling miserable about something which cannot be changed? If not, then work instead to change that which is within your control, especially your demanding beliefs. Preferences are great, but don't start demanding that you must have everything you desire. You will only make yourself more miserable in the process.

Shame-Attacking Exercises

Ellis suggested that people are miserable, in part, because they take themselves too seriously. We feel shame when we feel as if we acted stupidly, and we evaluate our entire personhood as a result. He had his clients perform “shame-attacking” exercises to help them overcome unwanted feelings of shame. Shame-attacking exercises can help you stop taking yourself too seriously. The exercises may sound ridiculous, but that is partly because they are! Rather than over-intellectualizing your misery, you can start doing something practical. Here are a few exercises you can try:

- Ask someone you don't know: “Excuse me, but I just got out of the mental hospital. Can you tell me what year it is?”
- Ride a crowded elevator standing backward (facing the rear).
- Yell out five successive stops on the bus.
- Wear a ridiculous outfit.
- Express an unusual opinion.

REBT Self-help Form

The following examples may help you identify your unwanted emotions and work to change the underlying beliefs that are driving your feelings of misery.

Describe the Problem

What are you sad, angry, anxious, or upset about?

Examples:

1. I feel anxious at work.
2. I am angry because someone treated me unfairly.
3. Life is so difficult, it makes me miserable and I can't stand it!

Identify Your Unhelpful Beliefs

What are your unhelpful beliefs in this situation?

Examples:

1. I must perform well and gain the approval of others or else I am a worthless person!
2. Other people must treat me fairly or else they are horrible people!
3. Life must go the way I want it to or else the world is a rotten place and life is not worth living.

Dispute Your Unhelpful Beliefs

Ask questions that challenge your unhelpful beliefs.

Examples:

1. Where is it written that I must perform well?
2. Just because I *prefer* to be treated fairly, does that mean I *must* be treated fairly?
3. Life is difficult, but does that mean life is horrible?

Identify Your New Emotions

What are your new emotions? Now that you have identified and challenged your unhelpful beliefs, identify your new helpful emotions.

Examples:

1. Sadness, but not despair.
2. Concern, but not anxiety.
3. Annoyance, but not anger.
4. Disappointment, but not depression.
5. Regret, but not despondency.
6. Frustration, but not furry.

Conclusion

Albert Ellis and the Stoics believed that we can achieve more tranquility in life by mastering our underlying beliefs and philosophies. Achieving tranquility isn't about controlling the external world, but rather, it was about mastering your underlying philosophy of life.

You can refuse to make yourself miserable by attacking your demands on life, yourself, and other people. Does this philosophy ring true for you? If so, let go of your demands and sense of entitlement. In exchange, you may be able to live a happier, more tranquil life.

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³<https://aaronolson.blog/>