

STRUCTURED DISPUTING OF IRRATIONAL BELIEFS

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Until recently, there has been little written in the non textbook REBT literature on disputing irrational beliefs. This is surprising since disputing is such a central part of the REBT process. The notable exceptions to this neglect are DiGiuseppe's (1991) important chapter where he broke down disputing into its component parts and Beal et al's (1996) article applying DiGiuseppe's schema to a single irrational belief.

DiGiuseppe's (1991) Contribution

DiGiuseppe (1991) and his students listened too many of Albert Ellis's therapy tapes and focused on his disputing work with his clients. Their purpose was to develop a comprehensive taxonomy of the different elements of disputing. This taxonomy described the following elements:

i) The target of the dispute

Disputes can be directed at the following targets: demands, awfulising beliefs, low frustration tolerance beliefs and depreciation beliefs (where self, others and life conditions are being depreciated). An important point stressed by DiGiuseppe is that helping clients to construct rational beliefs is

an integral part of the disputing process. In doing so, DiGiuseppe argues that it is important to use the same disputing questions targeted at the alternative rational beliefs. Here the targets of the dispute are preferences, anti-awfulising beliefs, high frustration tolerance beliefs and acceptance beliefs (where self, others and life conditions are being accepted).

ii) The nature of the dispute

DiGiuseppe argued that disputes fall into one of three categories. First, there are empirical disputes which ask clients to put forward evidence attesting to the truth or falsity of the belief. Second, there are logical disputes which ask clients to consider whether the target belief is logical or not. Third, there are heuristic disputes which ask clients to consider the functionality of the target belief. As argued above these different disputes are targeted at both irrational beliefs and newly constructed rational beliefs. As is well accepted in REBT, irrational beliefs are inconsistent with reality, illogical and yield dysfunctional results while rational beliefs are consistent with reality, logical and yield functional results.

iii) Level of abstraction

Both irrational beliefs and rational beliefs can be placed along a specificity-abstractness continuum. DiGiuseppe provides an example where a client was angry at his wife for not behaving as he thinks she "should". and shows that this client could have several beliefs ranging from the very specific: "My wife must make dinner when I want her to make it" to the very abstract: "The world must be the way I want it".

It follows that disputes can be directed at beliefs that range along this

continuum. Therapists can make two major errors here. First, they can direct their disputes at beliefs that are too abstract and second, they can fail to help their clients to dispute core irrational beliefs by disputing only very concrete irrational beliefs.

Disputing Styles

DiGiuseppe (1991) identified four major disputing styles. These are

i) Socratic disputing.

Here therapists dispute their clients' irrational beliefs and help them to test out their newly constructed rational beliefs by asking them questions designed to make them think for themselves about the empirical, logical and heuristic status of both sets of beliefs. When clients provide the incorrect answers to these open-ended questions their Socratic therapists follow up with more open-ended questions and this process continues until the clients are helped to arrive at the correct responses (correct, that is, according to REBT theory).

ii) Didactic disputing.

Didactic disputing involves therapists directly explaining to their clients why their irrational beliefs are inconsistent with reality, illogical and dysfunctional and why their alternative rational beliefs are, by contrast, consistent with reality, logical and functional. When using this disputing style, therapists are advised to check whether or not their clients

understand and agree with the points being made. The purpose of didactic disputing is client learning not just therapist teaching.

iii) Metaphorical disputing. In this style of disputing therapists tell their clients a metaphor which is designed to show clients why their irrational beliefs are irrational and/or why their rational beliefs are rational. As with didactic disputing, when using a metaphorical dispute it is important that the therapist ensures that the client has understood and concurs with the point that the metaphor is designed to make.

iv) Humorous disputing. Ellis and other experienced therapists often show clients that their irrational beliefs are irrational in a very humorous manner. Here they make clear that the target of the humour is the clients' beliefs not the clients themselves.

v) Other styles. There are two styles of disputing that DiGiuseppe (1991) does not discuss. These are self-disclosure and enactive disputing. When therapists question their clients' beliefs using self-disclosure, they draw upon their own personal experiences of thinking irrationally, challenging these irrational beliefs and eventually thinking rationally (Dryden, 1990). In enactive disputing, therapists challenge their clients' irrational beliefs through action. An example of this style of disputing is found when a therapist throws a glass of water over himself in the session to demonstrate that one can act foolishly without being a fool.

Structured Disputing

What neither DiGiuseppe (1991) nor Beal et al. (1996) have addressed is the issue of bringing structure to the disputing process. This will be the focus for the remainder of this paper. There has been very little discussion in the REBT literature of the importance of structure in disputing irrational beliefs and questioning rational beliefs. Through listening to Ellis's therapy tapes it is not clear that his disputing interventions are guided by any obvious structure. Indeed, he seems to be guided by his clients' responses to his previous disputing intervention when making follow-up interventions. This flexible and relatively unstructured approach is fine in the hands of seasoned REBT therapists, but it is likely that for novice REBT practitioners, lack of structure when disputing will frequently lead to therapist confusion and the breakdown of the disputing process. Consequently, it is advisable for novice REBT therapists to use a structured approach to disputing irrational beliefs and questioning rational beliefs until they have honed their disputing skills to a high level.

In what follows, four approaches to structured disputing will be presented and discussed. In doing so, the focus will be on the nature of the dispute and the target of the dispute. What will be discussed applies to whichever style of disputing is used and it is assumed that disputes are made at the most appropriate level of specificity.

Approach 1: Disputing Focused on Separate Components of a Belief

In disputing that is focused on separate components of a belief, the

therapist focuses on one component of an irrational belief at a time and directs the three main arguments towards that component before moving on to the next component. Following DiGiuseppe, the therapist also directs the same arguments, against components of the client's rational beliefs, again one at a time. There are actually two ways of doing this. In the first version, the therapist moves, to questioning a component of the client's rational belief (e.g. his preference) as soon as she has disputed the relevant component of his irrational belief (i.e. his demand).

In the second version, the therapist disputes all components of the cent's irrational belief (i.e. his demand and its appropriate derivatives) before questioning all the components of the client's rational belief (i.e. his preference a- its appropriate derivatives).

The two versions of this approach will now be illustrated. In the chosen the components of the client's irrational belief are as follows:

Demand: *I must be approved by my girlfriend's parents*

Awfulising belief: *It would be awful if I were not approved by my girlfriend's parents*

LFT belief: *I couldn't stand it if I were not approved by my girlfriend's parents*

Self-depreciation

belief: *If I am not approved by my girlfriend's parents, it means that I*

am an unworthy person

The components of the client's rational belief are as follows:

Preference: *I would like to be approved by my girlfriend's parents, but this is not essential*

Anti-awfulising

belief: *It would be bad if I were not approved by my girlfriend's parents, but it would not be awful*

HFT belief: *It would be difficult for me to tolerate not being approved by my girlfriend's parents, but I could stand it*

Self-acceptance *If I am not approved by my girlfriend's parents, it does not*

belief: *mean that I am unworthy person. It means that I am a fallible human being who is facing a difficult situation.*

In version 1 of this approach the therapist proceeds as follows:

Demand: *I must be approved by my girlfriend's parents*

- empirical dispute

- logical dispute

- heuristic dispute

Preference: *I would like to be approved by my girlfriend's parents, but this is not essential*

- empirical dispute

- logical dispute

- heuristic dispute

Awfulising belief: *It would be awful if I were not approved by my girlfriend's parents*

- empirical dispute

- logical dispute

- heuristic dispute

Anti-awfulising

belief: *It would be bad if I were not approved by my girlfriend's parent's but it would not be awful*

- empirical dispute

- logical dispute

- heuristic dispute

LFT belief: *I couldn't stand it if I were not approved by my girlfriend's parents*

- empirical dispute

- logical dispute

- heuristic dispute

HFT belief: *It would be difficult for me to tolerate not being approved by my girlfriend's parents, but I could stand it*

- empirical dispute
- logical dispute
- heuristic dispute

Self-depreciation

belief: *If I am not approved by my girlfriend's parents, it means that I am an unworthy person*

- empirical dispute
- logical dispute
- heuristic dispute

Self-acceptance

belief: *If I am not approved by my girlfriend's parents, it does not mean that I am an unworthy person. It means that I am a fallible human being who is facing a difficult situation*

- empirical dispute
- logical dispute
- heuristic dispute

Please note it is assumed here (and elsewhere in this paper) that the client understands and agrees with the therapist's argument before the therapist moves onto-the-next-argument. Thus, the therapist ensures that the client understands and agrees with the idea that there is no empirical evidence in

favour of his demand that he must have the approval of his girlfriend's parents, but there is such evidence in favour of his preference (empirical arguments) before disputing this demand logically. Thus, the therapist persists with a line of argument within each element of the above structure before moving onto the next element. However, if a client just cannot resonate with a particular argument after an appropriate period of the therapist's persistence, the therapist is advised to move on as indicated in the structure.

Also please note that it is not being advocated that REBT therapists should adopt the following target order that was presented above i.e. musts, preferences; awfulising, anti-awfulising; LFT, HFT; self-depreciation, self-acceptance or the following argument order that was again used above: empirical, logical, heuristic. The question of order within the structure is a matter for future consideration. However, it is argued that within a structured approach to disputing whichever order is selected should be consistently applied.

In version two of this approach, the therapist targets her disputes against all four components of the client's irrational belief before questioning all four components of his rational beliefs. Thus, the therapist proceeds as follows:

Demand: *I must be approved by my girlfriend's parents*

- empirical dispute
- logical dispute
- heuristic dispute

Awfulising belief: *It would be awful if I were not approved by my girlfriend's parents*

- empirical dispute
- logical dispute
- heuristic dispute

LFT belief: *I couldn't stand it if I were not approved by my girlfriend's parents*

- empirical dispute
- Logical dispute
- heuristic dispute

Self-depreciation

belief: *If I am not approved by my girlfriend's parents, it means that I am an unworthy person*

- empirical dispute
- logical dispute
- heuristic dispute

Preference: *I would like to be approved by my girlfriend's parents, but this is not essential*

- empirical dispute
- logical dispute
- heuristic dispute

Anti-awfulising

belief: *It would be bad if I were not approved by my girlfriend's parents, but it would not be awful*

- empirical dispute
- logical dispute
- heuristic dispute

HFT belief: *It would be difficult for me to tolerate not being approved by my girlfriend's parents, but I could stand it*

- empirical dispute
- logical dispute
- heuristic dispute

Self-acceptance

belief: *If I am not approved by my girlfriend's parents, it does not mean that I am an unworthy person. It means that I am a fallible human being who is facing a difficult situation*

- empirical dispute
- logical dispute
- heuristic dispute

Approach 2: Disputing Focused on Paired Components of Irrational and Rational Beliefs

In this approach the therapist questions paired components of the client's irrational belief and rational belief at the same time. The following structure shows how this step by step approach can be used by clients on their own.

Questioning Demands and Preferences

Step 1: Take your demand and identify the alternative to this belief which is a preference. Write them side by side on a sheet of paper under the following appropriate headings.

Demand

I must be approved by my girlfriend's parents

Preference

I would like to be approved by my girlfriend's parents but this is not essential

Step 2: Ask yourself the following question: "Which belief is true and which is false?"

Step 3: Write down the answer to this question and provide written reasons for your answer

Step 4: Ask yourself the following question: "Which belief is sensible/logical and which doesn't make sense or is illogical?"

Step 5: Write down the answer to this question and provide written reasons for

your answer

Step 6: Ask yourself the following question' "Which belief is helpful / yields healthy results and which is unhelpful / yields unhealthy results?"

Step 7: Write down the answer to this question and provide written reasons for

your answer

Step 8: Ask yourself the following question "Which of the two beliefs do you want to strengthen and act on?"

Step 9: Write down the answer to this question and provide written reasons for

your answer

Questioning Awfulising Beliefs And Anti-Awfulising Beliefs

Step 1" Take your awfulising belief and identify the alternative to this belief which is an anti-awfulising belief. Write them side by side on a sheet of paper under the following appropriate headings.

Awfulising Belief

Anti-awfulising Belief

It would be awful if I were not approved by my girlfriend's parents

It would be bad if I were not approved by my girlfriend's parents,

but it would not be awful

Step 2: Ask yourself the following question: "Which belief is true and which is false?"

Step 3: Write down the answer to this question and provide written reasons for your answer

Step 4: Ask yourself the following question: "Which belief is sensible/logical and which doesn't make sense or is illogical?"

Step 5: Write down the answer to this question and provide written reasons for your answer

Step 6: Ask yourself the following question: "Which belief is helpful/yields healthy results and which is unhelpful yields unhealthy\results?"

Step 7: Write down the answer to this question and provide written reasons for your answer

Step 8: Ask yourself the following question: "Which of the two beliefs do you want to strengthen and act on?"

Step 9: Write down the answer to this question and provide written reasons

for your answer

Questioning LFT Beliefs and HFT Beliefs

Step 1: Take your LFT belief and identify the alternative to this belief which is an HFT belief. Write them side by side on a sheet of paper under the following appropriate headings.

LFT Belief

I couldn't stand it if I were not approved by my girlfriend's parents

HFT Belief

It would be difficult for me to tolerate not being approved my girlfriend's parents, but I could stand it

Step 2: Ask yourself the following question "Which belief is true and which is false?"

Step 3: Write down the answer to this question and provide written reasons for your answer

Step 4: Ask yourself the following question: "Which belief is sensible/logical and which doesn't make sense or is illogical?"

Step 5: Write down the answer to this question and provide written reason for

your answer

Step 6: Ask yourself the following question: "Which belief is helpful healthy results and which is unhelpful/yields unhealthy results?"

Step 7: Write down the answer to this question and provide written reason for your answer

Step 8: Ask yourself the following question: "Which of the two beliefs do you want to strengthen and act on?"

Step 9: Write down the answer to this question and provide written reasons for your answer.

Questioning Self-depreciation Beliefs and Self-acceptance Beliefs

Step 1: Take your self-depreciation belief and identify the alternative to this belief which is a self-acceptance belief. Write them side by side on a sheet of paper under the following appropriate headings.

Self-depreciation Belief

If I am not approved by my girlfriend's parents, it means that I am an unworthy person

Self-acceptance Belief.

If I am not approved by my girlfriend's parents, it does means that I am an unworthy person. It means that I am a fallible human

being who is facing a difficult situation

Step 2: Ask yourself the following question: "Which belief is true and which is false?"

Step 3: Write down the answer to this question and provide written reasons for your answer

Step 4: Ask yourself the following question "Which belief is sensible/logical and which doesn't make sense or is illogical?"

Step 5: Write down the answer to this question and provide written reasons for your answer

Step 6: Ask yourself the following question: "Which belief is helpful/yields healthy results and which is unhelpful/yields unhealthy results?"

Step 7: Write down the answer to this question and provide written reasons for your answer

Step 8: Ask yourself the following question: "Which of the two beliefs do you want to strengthen and act on?"

Step 9: Write down the answer to this question and provide written reasons for your answer

The advantage to this approach to structured disputing is that it helps the client to see the falseness, illogicality and dysfunctionality of an irrational belief target and the truth, logic and functionality of its rational alternative more clearly because these targets are considered together. If evaluating irrational and rational beliefs together is more effective than evaluating them separately (i.e. Approach 2 is more effective than Approach 1), it would also follow that within Approach 1, version 1 would be more effective than version 2. These are, of course, empirical questions that could easily be investigated.

Approach 3: Disputing Focused on Arguments I: One Belief at a Time

In this approach, the focus of the disputing is on the arguments (empirical, logical and heuristic) and this focus guides the process.

Thus, the therapist proceeds as follows:

1. Are the following ideas true or false? Give reasons for your answer:

Demand: *I must be approved by my girlfriend's parents*

Awfulising belief: *It would be awful if I were not approved by my*

girlfriend's parents

LFT belief: *I couldn't stand it if I were not approved by my girlfriend's parents*

Self-depreciation

belief: *If I am not approved by my girlfriend's parents, it means that I am an unworthy person*

Preference: *I would like to be approved by my girlfriend's parents, but this is not essential*

Anti-awfulising

belief: *It would be bad if I were not approved by my girlfriend's parents, but it would not be awful*

HFT belief: *It would be difficult for me to tolerate not being approved by my girlfriend's parents, but I could stand it*

Self-acceptance belief: *If I am not approved by my girlfriend's parents, it does not mean that I am an unworthy person, It means that I am a fallible human being who is facing a difficult situation*

2. Are the following ideas logical or illogical? Give reasons for your answer:

Demand

Awfulising belief

LFT belief

Self-depreciation belief

Preference

Anti-awfulising belief

HFT belief

Self-acceptance belief

3. Are the following ideas helpful or unhelpful? Give reasons for your answer:

Demand

Awfulising belief

LFT belief

Self-depreciation belief

Preference

Anti-awfulising belief

HFT belief

Self-acceptance belief

Approach 4: Disputing Focused on Arguments II: One Paired Set of Components at a Time

Here the focus of the disputing is again on the arguments used, but this time each paired set of components relating to the irrational and rational belief is considered together. The therapist proceeds as follows:

1. Which of the following ideas is true and which is false? Give reasons for your answer

i) Demand

I must be approved by my girlfriend's parents

Preference

I would like to be approved by my girlfriend's parents, but this is not essential

ii) Awfulising belief

Anti-awfulising

It would be awful if I were not approved by my girlfriend's parents *It would be bad if I were not approved by my girlfriend's parents, but it would not be awful*

iii) LFT belief

I couldn't stand it if I were not approved by my girlfriend's parents

HFT belief

It would be difficult for me to tolerate not being approved by my girlfriend's parents, but I could stand it

iv) Self-depreciation belief

If I am not approved by my girlfriend's parents, it means that I am an unworthy person

Self-acceptance belief

If I am not approved by my girlfriend's parents, it does not mean that I am an unworthy person. It means that I am a fallible human being who is facing a difficult situation

2. Which of the following ideas is logical and which is illogical? Give reasons for your answer

i) Demand - Preference

ii) Awfulising belief - Anti-awfulising belief

iii) LFT belief- HFT belief

iv) Self-depreciation belief- Self-acceptance belief

3. Which of the following ideas yields healthy results and which yields unhealthy results? Give reasons for your answer

i) Demand - Preference

ii) Awfulising belief- Anti-awfulising belief

iii) LFT belief- HFT belief

iv) Self-depreciation belief- Self-acceptance belief

As argued above, my hypothesis is that approach four will be more effective than approach three because in the fourth approach the irrational beliefs and their rational alternatives are considered at the same time whereas in the third approach they are considered separately. Again this is a matter for empirical enquiry.

In each of the four approaches to structured disputing discussed in this paper, it has been assumed that all four components of an irrational belief and its rational alternative will be disputed. However, in clinical practice, it may well be the case that the therapist will dispute only the client's demand and one major derivative (e.g. a self-depreciation belief in ego disturbance and an LFT belief in discomfort disturbance) and question only the client's preference and one major derivative. This can be reflected in the structured

approaches to disputing discussed here by omitting the derivatives that are not targeted for disputing.

It was argued earlier in this paper that a structured approach to disputing helps novice REBT therapists to dispute effectively. It is also probably the case that structured disputing also helps clients to practice disputing their irrational beliefs and questioning their rational beliefs on paper between sessions and to internalise the disputing process so that after a while they are able to dispute irrational beliefs in their heads. If this assumption is correct, then it may well be the case that therapists who bring structure to the disputing process in sessions help clients to be structured in their disputing between sessions. Again this awaits empirical enquiry.

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