What is Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT)?:

Outlining the Approach by Considering the Four Elements of its Name

Windy Dryden Ph.D

Goldsmiths University of London

Introduction

There have been many approaches to outline the defining features of Rational

Emotive Behaviour Therapy (e.g. Dryden, 2009, Ellis, 1994) but none have done

so just by detailing the four elements that comprise the name of the therapy: i)

rational; ii) emotive iii) behaviour and iv) therapy. In this article I will show how

you can teach trainees about REBT by using this four element approach. As you

read the article, please note that I am addressing trainees and students who do

not know about the approach or are relatively new to it.

Rational

When Albert Ellis established the therapy in the 1950s, he called it "Rational

Therapy" (Ellis, 1958). He did so because he wanted to stress that emotional

problems are based on irrational thinking and that if we are to address these

problems effectively, we need to change such thinking to its rational equivalent. It is interesting to note that while REBT has had two previous names, the term "rational" is common to all three names. It is the constant feature that spans REBT's 50+ year old history. So what do REBT therapists currently mean by the term "rational"? I can best answer this question if I contrast it with the term "irrational"

The terms "rational" and "irrational" in current REBT theory are most commonly used as adjectives in front of the noun "beliefs". Such beliefs can also be thought of as attitudes in that they describe a person's stance or position towards something.

Let me consider the major characteristics of rational beliefs and contrast these with the major characteristics of irrational beliefs. In what follows, I will consider the rational belief in the left hand column and the irrational belief in the right hand column to facilitate the comparison.

A Rational Belief is Flexible or Non-extreme	An Irrational Belief is Rigid or Extreme
1. A rational belief is flexible	**1. An irrational belief is rigid**
Here is an example of a rational belief that is flexible.	Here is an example of an irrational belief that is rigid.
"I want my colleague to like me, but she does not have to do so"	*"My colleague has to like me"*
	To compare this belief with the flexible version in the left-hand column, we need to state it in its full form
	"I want my colleague to like me, therefore she has to do so"
Imagine that you hold such a belief. As you do so you will see that this belief is flexible because while you assert what you want (i.e. *"I want my colleague to like me..."*), you also acknowledge that you do not have to get what you want (i.e. *"...but she does not have to do so"*).	Again imagine that you hold this belief. As you do so you will see that this belief is rigid because while you not only assert what you want (i.e. *"I want my colleague to like me..."*), you also demand that you have to get it (i.e. *"...therefore she has to do so"*)
2. A rational belief is non-extreme	**2. An irrational belief is extreme**
Here is an example of a rational belief that is non-extreme.	Here is an example of an irrational belief that is extreme.
"It is bad if my colleague does not like me, but not the end of the world"	*"It is the end of the world if my colleague does not like me"*
	To compare it to the non-extreme version in the left-hand column we need to state it in its full form
	"It is bad if my colleague does not like me, and

	therefore it is the end of the world"
Again imagine that you hold this belief. As you do so you will see that this belief is non-extreme because while you assert that you find the event negative (i.e. *"It is bad if my colleague does not like me…"*), you also acknowledge that such an evaluation is not extreme because it could always be worse (i.e. *"…but not the end of the world"*).	Again imagine that you hold this belief. As you do so you will see that this belief is extreme because you not only assert that you find the event negative (i.e. *"It is bad if my colleague does not like me…"*), you also claim that it could not be worse (i.e. *"…and therefore it is the end of the world"*).
<u>**A Rational Belief is True**</u>	<u>**An Irrational Belief is False**</u>
Imagine that you hold the following rational belief that I introduced above: "*I want my colleague to like me, but she does not have to do so*". You will note that this belief is made up of two parts: • "*I want my colleague to like me….*" • "*…. but she does not have to do so*"	Now imagine that you hold the following irrational belief that I introduced above: "*My colleague has to like me*". Again this belief is made up of two parts: • "*I want my colleague to like me….*" • "*…. and therefore she has to do so*"
Let's take one part at a time. First, you can prove that you would like your colleague to like you; after you this is your desire. Also, you can probably cite reasons why you want your colleague to like you (e.g. it makes for a good working relationship where you can help each other). So, the first part of your belief is true.	Let's take one part at a time. First, you can again prove that you would like the other person to like you for reasons discussed opposite. So, the first part of your belief is true.
Now let's look at the second part of the rational belief. You can also prove that the other person does not have to like you. To state otherwise would	Now let's look at the second part of the irrational belief. You cannot prove that your colleague has to like you. If that were true, she would have no choice but to like you. This demanding component of your

be to deny that person free choice. So if both parts of this rational belief then we can say that the belief taken as a whole is true.	irrational belief in effects robs your colleague of free choice, which she retains in the face of your demand. Thus, this second part is false. As both parts of a belief have to be true for the belief to be true the we can say that the irrational belief is false. Also, when we consider this irrational belief in its short form (i.e. "*My colleague has to like me"*) then it is clear that it is false since it again attempts to rob your colleague of the freedom not to like you which she does in reality have.
<u>A Rational Belief is Sensible</u> Taking the rational belief: "*I want my colleague to like me, but she does not have to do so"* we can ask the question: does this belief make sense? We can answer that it does since you are explicitly acknowledging that there is no connection between what you want and what you have to get.	**<u>An Irrational Belief is Not Sensible</u>** Taking the full form of your irrational belief: "*I want my colleague to like me, and therefore she has to do so"* we can again ask the question: does this belief makes sense? Here our answer is that it does not because it asserts that there is a connection between what you want and what you have to get. The idea that because you want something you have to get it is, in fact, childish nonsense when coming from an adult.
<u>A Rational Belief is Largely Constructive</u> When you hold a rational belief the consequences of doing so will be largely constructive. For example let's suppose that you hold the following rational belief: "*I want my colleague to like me, but she does not have to do so"* and you bring this belief to a situation where your colleague snaps at you for no good reason. In this situation you will experience three different, but related consequences which I will now illustrate:	**<u>An Irrational Belief is Largely Unconstructive</u>** When you hold an irrational belief the consequences of doing so will be largely unconstructive. For example let's suppose that you hold the following irrational belief: "*My colleague must like me"* and you bring this belief to the situation where your colleague snaps at you for no good reason. In this situation you will experience three different, but related consequences which I will now illustrate. As I do so, compare these consequences to those that stem from your belief if it were rational (see opposite) • <u>Emotional consequence</u>

• <u>Emotional consequence</u> Here you will tend to concerned about your colleague's response, but not anxious about it	Here you will tend to anxious, rather than concerned about your colleague's response
• <u>Behavioural consequence</u> Here you will be likely to enquire of your colleague in an open way if there is anything wrong	• <u>Behavioural consequence</u> Here you will tend not to avoid your colleague or try desperately to get her to like you
• <u>Thinking consequence</u> Here you will tend to think that your colleague is upset with someone or something which could be to do with you, but may well be nothing to do with you	• <u>Thinking consequence</u> Here you will tend to think that your colleague is upset with you rather with someone or something that had nothing to do with you

Emotive

The term "emotive" in REBT means that which is relevant to your emotions. Like every other approach to therapy REBT is based on a model of emotions. Since REBT is a therapeutic approach it is primarily concerned with relieving people's emotional disturbance. However, it also acknowledges that people are bound to have negative emotions when faced with negative life events (henceforth called adversities in this book). To accommodate these two positions REBT

distinguishes between emotions that are negative in tone and have largely unconstructive consequences and emotions that are negative in tone and have largely constructive consequences. The former are known as unhealthy negative emotions (UNEs) and the latter healthy negative emotions (UNEs).

The REBT Model of Emotions

The REBT model of emotion states that the emotions that we experience are based largely on the beliefs that we hold about ourselves, others and the world. More specifically it states that our unhealthy negative emotions about life's adversities are based largely on the irrational beliefs that we hold about these adversities and that if we want to experience healthy negative emotions about the adversities in question we need to change our irrational beliefs to rational beliefs.

This is shown in the following figure in which "A" stands for adversity, "B" for beliefs and "C" for the consequences of these beliefs (in this case the emotional

consequences). This is REBT's famous ABC model which you can find outlined in any REBT textbook (e.g. Dryden & Branch, 2008).

A	B	C
Adversity	Irrational Beliefs	Unhealthy Negative Emotions
Adversity	Rational Beliefs	Healthy Negative Emotions

Let me illustrate this model by referring to the example that I introduced earlier in this chapter

A	B	C
Adversity My colleague may not like me	Irrational Belief My colleague must like me	Unhealthy Negative Emotion Anxiety
Adversity My colleague may not like me	Rational Belief I want my colleague to like me, but she does not have to do so	Healthy Negative Emotion Concern

Because life's adversities are negative, it is not appropriate for you to feel good about them or even neutral about them. It is healthy to experience negative emotions, but not problematic ones about such life events. These problematic emotions in REBT are known as unhealthy negative emotions (UNEs) and these are listed in the following table and contrasted with their healthy negative equivalents

Unhealthy Negative Emotions	Healthy Negative Emotions
Anxiety	Concern
Depression	Sadness
Guilt	Remorse
Shame	Disappointment
Unhealthy Anger	Healthy Anger
Hurt	Sorrow
Unhealthy Jealousy	Healthy Jealousy
Unhealthy Envy	Healthy Envy

I want to make two points here;

1. As detailed above, unhealthy negative emotions (UNEs) largely stem from irrational beliefs about life's adversities while healthy negative emotions stem largely from rational beliefs about these same adversities.

2. We do not have commonly agreed words in the English language to describe healthy negative emotions. The terms that I have used in the right hand column of the above table are my own. Feel free to use alternative terns that are more meaningful to you.

Intellectual vs. Emotive Understanding

The other major area where the term "emotive" comes up in REBT is in distinguishing between two different types of understanding: intellectual understanding and emotive understanding (Ellis, 1963). These are particularly

important when a person is trying to change an irrational belief to its rational belief alternative.

Let me illustrate this distinction by using the above example where you currently hold the irrational belief (i.e. "My colleague must like me") and your colleague has snapped at you. Let's suppose that you acknowledge that your irrational belief is irrational (meaning that it is rigid, false, not sensible and largely unconstructive – see above). And let's assume, furthermore, that you acknowledge that your rational alternative belief (i.e. I want my colleague to like me, but she does not have to do so") is rational (meaning that it is flexible, true, sensible and largely constructive. When your understanding of these two points is intellectual in nature, you say things like "Well, I can understand this in my head, but not in my heart" and "I understand it, but I don't feel it". Here, you will still feel anxious about the prospect of your colleague not liking you, you will act in ways that are consistent with your irrational belief (i.e. you will either avoid your colleague or desperately try to get her to like you) and you will tend to think in highly distorted ways about your colleague (e.g. "She is definitely upset with me" and "If I don't win her over immediately, she will never like me again"). In other words, while you understand intellectually the reason why your

irrational belief is irrational belief and why your rational belief is rational, this understand has little or no impact on your emotions, behaviour and subsequent thinking. You still think, act and feel in ways consistent with your irrational belief even though you know it is irrational.

However, when your understanding of these points is emotive in nature, you not only grasp the points intellectually, but you also feel, think and act in ways that are consistent with the rational belief and that are inconsistent with the irrational belief. Thus, you will feel concerned, but not anxious about the prospect of your colleague not liking you, you will act in ways that are consistent with your rational belief (i.e. you will check out with her why she snapped at you) and you will tend to think in realistic ways about your colleague (e.g. "She may or may not be upset with me" and "If she is upset with me, we can talk it though and resolve the issue"). In other words, you understand the reason why your irrational belief is irrational belief and why your rational belief is rational and this understanding has a decided constructive impact on your emotions, behaviour and subsequent thinking. You think, act and feel in ways consistent with your rational belief.

In REBT, we argue that intellectual understanding is a necessary, but insufficient ingredient for constructive psychological change and many of the chapters in this book are devoted to helping you to move from such intellectual understanding to the emotive understanding necessary for such change to occur.

Behaviour

The term "behaviour" in REBT refers to both overt behaviour and to an urge to act that is not translated into overt behaviour. The latter is known as an action tendency. REBT's model of behaviour parallels its model of emotions in arguing that irrational beliefs tend to lead to behaviour that is largely unconstructive in effect and that rational beliefs lead to behaviour that is largely constructive in effect. The former is associated with unhealthy negative emotions (UNEs) and the latter and the latter with healthy negative emotions (HNEs).

This is shown in the following figure in which "A" stands for adversity, "B" for beliefs and "C" for the consequences of these beliefs (in this case the behavioural consequences).

A	B	C
Adversity	Irrational Beliefs	Unconstructive Behaviour
Adversity	Rational Beliefs	Constructive Behaviour

Let me illustrate this model by referring again to the example that I introduced earlier in this chapter

A	B	C
Adversity My colleague may not like me	**Irrational Belief** My colleague must like me	**Unconstructive Behaviour** Avoidance of colleague Desperate attempts to get colleague to like me
Adversity My colleague may not like me	**Rational Belief** I want my colleague to like me, but she does not have to do so	**Constructive Behaviour** Asking colleague directly if there is anything wrong

In the table below, I outline the major behaviours associated with the eight unhealthy and healthy negative emotions listed above.

Unhealthy Negative Emotion with Associated Unconstructive Behaviours and Action Tendencies	Healthy Negative Emotion with Associated Constructive Behaviours and Action Tendencies
<u>Anxiety</u> • Withdrawing from threat • Avoiding threat • Seeking reassurance even though not reassurable • Seeking safety from threat	<u>Concern</u> • Confronting threat • Seeking reassurance when reassurable
<u>Depression</u> • Prolonged withdrawal from enjoyable activities	<u>Sadness</u> • Engaging with enjoyable activities after a period of mourning or adjustment to the loss
<u>Guilt</u> • Begging for forgiveness	<u>Remorse</u> • Asking, not begging, for forgiveness
<u>Shame</u> • Withdrawing from others • Avoiding eye contact with	<u>Disappointment</u> • Keeping in contact with others • Maintaining eye contact with

others	others
Hurt	**Sorrow**
• **Sulking**	• **Assertion and communicating with others**
Unhealthy anger	**Healthy anger**
• **Aggression (direct and indirect)**	• **Assertion**
Unhealthy jealousy	**Healthy jealousy**
• **Prolonged suspicious questioning of the other person** • **Checking on the other** • **Restricting the other**	• **Brief, open-minded questioning of the other person** • **Not checking on the other** • **Not restricting the other**
Unhealthy envy	**Healthy envy**
• **Spoiling the other's enjoyment of the desired possession**	• **Striving to gain a similar possession for oneself if it is truly what you want**

The behaviours listed are above are what a person does or tends to do when her irrational or rational belief about an adversity has been fully activated. However, the impact of belief on behaviour can be seen in other ways.

Short-term Self-protective Behaviour

In the ABC model that I have presented in this article, an adversity occurs or is deemed to occur at "A", the person holds a belief about this adversity at "B" and experiences emotional, behavioural and thinking consequences of holding this belief at "C". In this model the person's belief (e.g. "My colleague must like me") is specific to the specific adversity that she encounters.

However, beliefs can be held at a more general level (e.g. "People with whom I work must like me") and when a belief is more general in nature, the person has a tendency to bring such a belief with them, as it were, to situations where a relevant adversity may occur. Thus, in our example, if a person holds a general irrational belief (e.g. "People with whom I work must like me"), then the person

will be hypersensitive to the possibility of not being liked by a colleague and act to prevent this adversity actually occurring (e.g. by being extra nice to a person whom she thinks may, but has not yet shown her some disapproval). In this way the person is acting to protect herself in the short-term, but the longer-term effect of this behaviour is unconstructive in a number of ways:

- She does not get to test out her hunch that the person will disapprove of her

- She does not get to deal constructively with such disapproval should it occur and

- She tends to maintain her irrational belief since she is acting in a way that is consistent with it

Over-compensatory Behaviour

When a person holds an irrational belief and particularly one that is general in nature, then she may try to deal with actual or potential adversities by behaving

in a manner that is over-compensatory. By using over-compensatory behaviour the person is trying to prove to herself the opposite of what she actually thinks is the truth about her, the other person or the world. A common example of this occurs when a person privately considers that he would be weak if he can't deal with a challenge, but tries to prove to himself that he is strong by facing an even greater challenge.

Therapy

The word "therapy" comes from the Greek "therapeia" meaning "a service, an attendance" which, in turn, is related to the Greek verb "therapeuo" meaning "I wait upon."

REBT therapists, therefore, can be seen to offer a "service" to people who have problems in a number of areas: i) emotional problems; ii) practical,

dissatisfaction problems and iii) personal development problems (Bard, 1980, Grieger & Boyd, 1980 ; Wessler & Wessler, 1980). A distinctive feature of REBT is that it outlines a logical order for dealing with these problems.

Disturbance before Dissatisfaction

REBT argues that unless there are good reasons to the contrary, it is best for us to address our emotional problems before our dissatisfaction problems (Dryden, 1985). The reasoning is as follows. If we try and deal with our dissatisfaction before we deal with our emotional disturbance, then our disturbed feelings will get in the way of our efforts to change directly the adversities about which we are dissatisfied.

For example, let's take the example of Paul who is dissatisfied about his wife's spending habits. However, he is also unhealthily angry about her behaviour and every time he talks to her about it he makes himself angry about it, raises his voice to his wife and makes pejorative remarks about her and her spending

behaviour. Now what is the likely impact of Paul's expression of unhealthy anger on his wife? Does it encourage her to stand back and look objectively at her own behaviour? Of course, it doesn't. Paul's angry behaviour is more likely to lead his wife to become unhealthily angry herself and/or to become defensive. In Paul's case, his anger had, in fact, both effects on his wife. Now, let's suppose that Paul <u>first</u> addressed his unhealthy anger and then discussed his dissatisfaction with his wife. His annoyance at her behaviour, but his acceptance of her as a person would help him to view her own behaviour perhaps as a sign of emotional disturbance and his compassion for her would have very different effects on her. She would probably be less defensive and because Paul would not be unhealthily angry, then his wife would also be less likely to be unhealthily angry. With anger out of the picture, the stage would be set for Paul to address the reasons for his dissatisfaction more effectively.

Disturbance before Development

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, I used to go to a number of encounter groups. This was the era of personal growth or development. However, there were a number of casualties of these groups and when these occurred it was because attendees were preoccupied with issues of emotional disturbance and they were being pushed too very hard to go into areas of development that warranted greater resilience.

In general then, it is very difficult for us to develop ourselves when we are emotionally disturbed. To focus on areas of development when someone is emotionally disturbed is akin to encourage that person to climb a very steep hill with very heavy weights attached to their ankles. First, help the person to remove their ankle weights (i.e. address their emotional disturbance) before discussing the best way of climbing the hill!

Dissatisfaction before Development

Abraham Maslow (1968) is perhaps best known for his work on self-actualisation. The relevance of this concept for our present discussion is this. It is very difficult for humans to focus on higher order "needs" when we are preoccupied with issues with respect to lower-order needs. Thus, if a person is faced with a general dissatisfying life experience which cannot be compartmentalised and also wants to explore his writing ambitions, he should address the former first unless this life dissatisfaction will help him write a better book!

While I have outlined REBT's preferred order in dealing with problems, it also values flexibility. Thus, if a person wants to deal with his problems in a different order, he should do so and observe the results. If it works, that is fine. If not then REBT's preferred position may prove to yield better results. The proof of the pudding is in the eating!

Conclusion

While outlining REBT by considering the four elements that comprise its name is not comprehensive, it does introduce trainees and other students relatively unfamiliar with REBT with some of its key elements.

References

Bard, J.A. (1980). *Rational-emotive therapy in practice.* Champaign IL: Research Press.

Dryden, W. (1985). Marital therapy: The rational-emotive approach. In W. Dryden (Ed.), *Marital therapy in Britain. Volume 1: Context and therapeutic approaches*. London: Harper & Row

Dryden, W. (2009). *Rational emotive behaviour therapy: Distinctive features.* London: Routledge.

Dryden, W., & Branch, R. (2008*). The fundamentals of rational emotive behaviour therapy: A training handbook.* 2nd edition. Chichester: Wiley.

Ellis, A. (1958). Rational psychotherapy. *The Journal of General Psychology, 59,* 35-49.

Ellis, A. (1963). Toward a more precise definition of "emotional" and "intellectual" insight. *Psychological Reports, 13,* 125-126.

Ellis, A. (1994). *Reason and emotion in psychotherapy, Revised and updated.* Secaucus, NJ: Carol.

Grieger, R. M. and Boyd, J. (1980). *Rational–emotive therapy: A skills-based approach*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.

Maslow, A. (1968). *Toward a psychology of being*. New York: Van Nostrand.

Wessler, R. A. and Wessler, R. L. (1980). *The principles and practice of rational–emotive therapy*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.