
Understanding Irrational Thinking

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Irrational is to say that the thinking does not match the reality, or what is actually there, compared to what is perceived or interpreted in a person's thinking.

(You may find it helpful to read ["Irrational Beliefs vs. Rational Beliefs"](#) before reading further.)

To describe a belief as irrational is to say that:

1. It DISTORTS REALITY (It is a misinterpretation of what is happening).
2. It involves some illogical ways of evaluating yourself, others, and the world around you: CATASTROPHISING, DEMANDING and PEOPLE-RATING.
3. It blocks you from achieving your goals.
4. It creates extreme emotions that persist, and which distress and immobilise.
5. It leads to behaviours that harm yourself, others, and your life in general.

The three levels of thinking

Every individual has a set of general 'rules' - usually subconscious - that determines how they react to life. When an event triggers off a train of thought, what someone consciously thinks depends on the general rules they subconsciously apply to the event.

Let's say that a person holds the rule: "To be worthwhile, I must succeed at everything I do." If they happen to fail an examination, this event - coupled with the underlying rule - will lead them to the conclusion: "I'm not worthwhile." Identifying underlying, general rules involves going beyond the surface INFERENCES to the client's EVALUATIONS or PERSONAL MEANINGS. (*continued below*)

1. Inferences (the things we "infer")

In everyday life, events and circumstances trigger off two levels of thinking: inferring and evaluating.

First, we make guesses or INFERENCES about what is 'going on' - what we think has happened, is happening, or will be happening. Inferences are statements of 'fact' (or at least what we think are the facts. They can be true or false). Inferences that are irrational usually consist of the following 'distortions of reality':

- a. **Black and white thinking** Seeing things in extremes, with no middle ground - good or bad, perfect versus useless, success or failure, right against wrong, moral versus immoral, and so on. Also known as ALL-OR-NOTHING THINKING.
- b. **Filtering:** Seeing all that is wrong with oneself or the world, while ignoring any positives.
- c. **Over-generalisation** Building up one thing about oneself or one's circumstances and ending up thinking that it represents the whole situation. For example: "Everything's going wrong", "Because of this mistake, I'm a total failure". Or, similarly, believing that some thing which has

happened once or twice is happening all the time, or that it will be a never-ending pattern: "I'll always be a failure", "No-one will ever want to love me", and the like.

- d. **Mind-reading** Making guesses about what other people are thinking, such as: "She ignored me on purpose", or "He's mad at me".
- e. **Fortune-telling** Treating beliefs about the future as though they were actual realities rather than mere predictions, or example: "I'll be depressed forever", "Things can only get worse".
- f. **Emotional reasoning** Thinking that because we feel a certain way, this is how it really is: "I feel like a failure, so I must be one", "If I'm angry, you must have done something to make me so", and the like.
- g. **Personalising** Assuming that something is directly connected with oneself, but without evidence: "Everyone is looking at me", "It must have been me that made her feel bad", and so on.

2. Evaluations

As well as making inferences about things that happen, we go beyond the 'facts' to EVALUATE (give a value or qualify) them in terms of what they MEAN TO US. Evaluations/meanings are sometimes conscious, though often are beneath awareness. Irrational evaluations consist of one or more of the following three types:

- a. **Catastrophising** There are two main forms of catastrophising. 'AWFULISING' is exaggerating the consequences of past, present or future events; seeing something as: awful; terrible; horrible; the worst that could happen. It often leads to 'CAN'T-STAND-IT-ITIS' - the idea that one can't bear (put up with; withstand; overcome) some circumstance or event. Both types serve the purpose of making people feel worse about their problems.
- b. **Demanding (musts and shoulds)** Also known as 'MUSTURBATING', demanding refers to the way people use unconditional shoulds and absolutistic musts - believing that certain things must or must not happen, and that certain conditions (for example success, love, or approval) are absolute necessities. Demanding implies that certain 'LAWS OF THE UNIVERSE' exist and must be adhered to. Demands can be directed either toward oneself or others. This is probably the 'core' of irrational thinking: if we kept all our wants and rule-for-living as preferences, they would cause us little trouble.
- c. **People-rating (putting a label or value on others)** People-rating refers to the process of evaluating one's entire self (or someone else's). In other words, trying to determine the total value of a person or judging their worth. It represents an overgeneralization. The person evaluates a specific trait, behaviour or action according to some standard of desirability or worth. Then they apply the evaluation to their total person - eg. "I did a bad thing, therefore I am a bad person." People-rating can lead to reactions like self-downing, depression, defensiveness, grandiosity, hostility, or overconcern with approval and disapproval.

3. Rules [for LIVING]

Rules, as we saw earlier, are the underlying beliefs that guide how we react to life. What SPECIFIC EVENTS mean to someone (how they evaluate them) depends on the underlying (subconscious or automatic thinking). **[Editor's note: In summary the list below is the Irrational**

Beliefs we tend to hold, and by holding them they create the emotional uproars in our lives.]

Dr. Albert Ellis proposed that a small number of core beliefs underlie most unhelpful emotions and behaviours. Here is a list of such 'RULES FOR LIVING'

- a. I need love and approval from those significant to me - and I must avoid disapproval from any source.
- b. To be worthwhile as a person I must achieve, succeed at whatever I do, and make no mistakes.
- c. People should always do the right thing. When they behave obnoxiously, unfairly or selfishly, they must be blamed and punished.
- d. Things must be the way I want them to be, otherwise life will be intolerable.
- e. My unhappiness is caused by things that are outside my control, so there is little I can do to feel any better.
- f. I must worry about things that could be dangerous, unpleasant or frightening, otherwise they might happen.
- g. I can be happier by avoiding life's difficulties, unpleasantness, and responsibilities.
- h. Everyone needs to depend on someone stronger than themselves.
- i. Events in my past are the cause of my problems - and they continue to influence my feelings and behaviours now.
- j. I should become upset when other people have problems, and feel unhappy when they're sad.
- k. I shouldn't have to feel discomfort and pain - I can't stand them and must avoid them at all costs.
- l. Every problem should have an ideal solution - and it's intolerable when one can't be found.

For more explanation of the above see [The 12 Irrational Beliefs of REBT](#)

Bear in mind, that these rules here all represent absolutes held in the thinking, *that cannot be sustained or fulfilled*. They are a mismatch with reality and what can be delivered to them by reality. This is why when these rules, or inner thinking and beliefs are challenged by reality (what is actual rather than desired or perceived) the person who holds those beliefs, if left undisputed, will become disturbed emotionally, and in their behaviour.

Irrational beliefs

So if you want to help the other person adopt more functional beliefs, help them first realize how extreme and irrational their generalized beliefs are. Then discuss with them how more rational and useful beliefs can be found.

1. The idea that it is a dire necessity for adults to be loved by significant others for almost everything they do--

Instead of their concentrating on their own *self-respect*, on winning approval for practical purposes, and on loving rather than on being loved.

2. The idea that certain acts are awful or wicked, and that people who perform such acts should be severely damned --

Instead of the idea that certain acts are self-defeating or antisocial, and that people who perform such acts are behaving stupidly, ignorantly, or neurotically, and would be better helped to change. People's poor behaviors do not make them rotten individuals.

3. The idea that it is horrible when things are not the way we like them to be--

Instead of the idea that it is too bad, that we would better try to change or control bad conditions so that they become more satisfactory, and, if that is not possible, we had better temporarily accept and gracefully lump their existence.

4. The idea that human misery is invariably externally caused and is forced on us by outside people and events

Instead of the idea that neurosis is largely caused by the view that we take of unfortunate conditions.

5. The idea that if something is or may be dangerous or fearsome we should be terribly upset and endlessly obsess about it--

Instead of the idea that one would better frankly face it and render it non-dangerous and, when that is not possible, accept the inevitable.

6. The idea that it is easier to avoid than to face life difficulties and self-responsibilities

Instead of the idea that the so-called easy way is usually much harder in the long run.

7. The idea that we absolutely need something other or stronger or greater than ourself on which to rely -

Instead of the idea that it is better to take the risks of thinking and acting less dependently.

8. The idea that we should be thoroughly competent, intelligent, and achieving in all possible respects --

Instead of the idea that we would better do rather than always need to do well, and accept ourself as a quite imperfect creature, who has general human limitations and specific fallibilities.

9. The idea that because something once strongly affected our life, it should indefinitely affect it --

Instead of the idea that we can learn from our past experiences but not be overly-attached to or prejudiced by them.

10. The idea that we must have certain and perfect control over things --

Instead of the idea that the world is full of improbability and chance and that we can still enjoy life despite this.

11. The idea that human happiness can be achieved by inertia and inaction --

Instead of the idea that we tend to be happiest when we are vitally absorbed in creative pursuits, or when we are devoting ourselves to people or projects outside ourselves.

12. The idea that we have virtually no control over our emotions and that we cannot help feeling disturbed about things --

Instead of the idea that we have real control over our destructive emotions if we choose to work at changing the “musturbatory” hypotheses which we often employ to create them.

The “ABC's” are an exercise from [REBT](#), which is a form of cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) that is simple enough and effective enough to be used by anybody and -- it works.

The “ABC's” help us to stop being victimized by our own thinking.

A common example is the issue of someone else's behavior “*making us angry.*” Anger is a common emotion, but very damaging in how it makes you feel (and its impact on how others feel.)

This is a very common way of expressing something and *we hear it often, but in fact it distorts the situation it attempts to describe.* A more accurate description of “someone making me angry” is to say that I feel angry about their behavior. They are not making me anything- they are simply behaving in a way that I am getting angry about. I notice their behavior and then I become angry. The responsibility for the anger is mine, not theirs.

This can sound strange at first, but dealing with problematic anger and frustration this way works. REBT theory says that it is generally irrational and self-defeating to get all worked up about someone else's behavior.

Think about anger for a moment. Someone does something you do not like. You have a “right” not to like it. You have a “right” to share your dislike with them. But where does it follow that since you do not like it, they therefore SHOULD not do it? Do you own them, control them, are they your possession?

You have a very rational preference that they change their behavior and then **you take this preference and escalate it to a DEMAND**, as if you were granted supreme power by someone to rule how people should and should not behave.

In addition, their behavior is governed by how *they* think and feel at that time and is consistent with *their* thoughts. In fact, their behavior at that moment can not be anything different that it is (this is *reality based* thinking.) *You don't like it, and you wish it were different,* but it is consistent with *their* thinking. **You may still be left with a practical problem, “how do I get them to change their behavior?”** But then you become problem solving instead of problem focused.

The result is that you may still feel annoyed or irritated about their behavior, but not angry or enraged. You simply have changed your very irrational DEMAND to a very rational Preference. The less intense emotion will allow you to become much more creative in trying to convey your feelings to the other person with an attempt to get them to change. **Once you downgrade the DEMAND to a simple PREFERENCE, the heat is turned down and you can function again. After all, it's now only a preference!**

[REBT](#) has a simple exercise to help us make this adjustment, called “the ABCs”. It is used to analyze the situation and change our thinking about it so that without trying to change external reality, we can feel better about it.

This doesn't mean that we should never try to change external reality- sometimes it is appropriate- it's when it isn't an appropriate or effective response that we can choose to have a

different response instead in order to feel better. **While the ABCs are for use to help with any emotional upset, anger is the example we'll use here.**

To use this ABC exercise for yourself, just pick any situation where you were angry about someone's behavior and take a look and see what it is you are thinking about it that is *DEMAND-ing and irrational*, and change it into something *more rational- a PREFERENCE*.

It is irrational to demand that people behave in the way we want them to! Here is an example using drunk people making a lot of noise late at night as they pass by outside where I live.

- A. (Activating event) Drunk people outside, making some noise.
- B. (irrational Belief (iB) I have about A) They **MUST NOT** make any noise.
- C. (Consequences of having those beliefs about A) When noisy drunk people pass in the street outside late at night and wake me up. I Feel angry. It feels bad. I lie awake feeling angry and upset and don't get back to sleep for a long time.
- D. (Dispute the irrational Beliefs (iB's) in B by turning them into questions and answers) **WHY** shouldn't they make any noise- where is that commandment written in stone? Where is the evidence? Again, who made you Supreme Ruler of the Universe dictating how people Should or Must act?
- E. (Effective new thinking- substitute something rational instead of B) Drunk people are often noisy, but it's no BIG deal. I don't like it, but I can damn deal with what I don't like. Maybe I will touch base with them in the morning (when they are sober).

I will **CHOOSE** to not upset myself about this, and I may even stop even noticing it because I am no longer demanding it be different than it obviously is (Reality Based).

When this happens I will say "Ah, the drunk people who pass in the night" and maybe go back to sleep.

You can make an ABC exercise really short;

- A. (Activating situation) Drunks walking past outside, making some noise.
- B. (irrational Belief (or IB)I have about A) They **SHOULDN'T** make any noise
- C. (Consequences of having those beliefs about A) I feel angry, etc.
- D. (Dispute the irrational Belief/s in B) **WHY** shouldn't they make any noise?
- E. (Effective new thinking) Drunk people do make noise, it's what they're good at- it's like a natural talent for them. *I will CHOOSE to not upset myself about this.*

And you can do this on many situations that bother you and reclaim your peace of mind, **just look for the DEMAND and turn it into a PREFERENCE.**

Here's another one... A. (Activating situation) I tried to do something and failed B. (irrational Belief I have about A) I must always be successful C. (Consequences of believing B) I feel bad, depressed, etc. D. (Dispute the Irrational Belief in B) *Where is it written in stone that I must I always be successful?* E. (Effective new thinking to replace B) I would *prefer* always to be successful but *let's be realistic*- that isn't very likely, is it- I am human and *humans are fallible*, therefore do not succeed in everything they attempt. If success is important, then I will work harder recognizing that failure may occur again.

That's it- that is how to do ABC's. Try this technique with something that is bothering you. Try to keep it as simple as you can while you get used to the ideas involved.

Be aware of "should-ing" and "musturbation" (these simply mean the occurrence of problem-causing "should" and "must" DEMANDS in your thinking).

Here are some things you might think or believe, in which case these could be your "iB"s ([Irrational Beliefs](#)):

- I MUST NOT feel overwhelmed with responsibilities I CAN'T STAND IT when I feel (bored, sad, lonely, whatever)
- People MUST not take me for granted
- Other people SHOULD behave in the way I want
- I SHOULD be able to have a drink I NEED a drink ("NEED" is often interpreted as MUST HAVE- be aware of such invisible MUSTS)
- They MUST see it my way
- I MUST NEVER display weakness
- The sun MUST shine tomorrow
- People who do bad things MUST ALWAYS be punished etc.

Try to find some Activating situations, iB's and Consequences of your own and do this exercise with them. Often it is easier to start with the C- the Consequences of the A and B and work back to see what they were.

Whenever you feel upset it can be a useful exercise to see if an [ABC](#) can be done on the situation and your thinking about it. You never know, you might just feel better. Get into the habit of doing this regularly and you might feel a lot better overall.

And do please note; **this is a tool *not* just a theory.** Success with this (and other) cognitive techniques is dependent on your writing out your own examples and making it part of the way you think.
