

Disputing Irrational Thoughts

By Ruth Dailey Knowles

We have the capacity to upset ourselves when we engage in negative self-talk. Further, we tend to pay attention to our faults, blow them out of proportion, and begin the vicious cycle of overgeneralizing one event to our entire lives. We consequently feel dreadful and become depressed and even less functional. The habit of believing an irrational thought and allowing it to affect our feelings and our functioning is a bad habit that can be broken.

PROBLEM: Negative thoughts about the self

INTERVENTION: 'But statement.'

PROCEDURE: When you become aware that you have just had a negative thought about yourself, say "BUT" and add a positive, related thought. For instance: "I am a lousy writer, *but* I am pleased with my creativity." "My nose is crooked *but* I have a pleasant smile." "I just made a mistake, *but* look at all the positive things I have done."

RATIONALE: Ending a statement in a positive way refutes (and takes some of the emotional impact from) the first negative thought. You are dishonest with yourself if you insist on only attending to negative, hence potentially damaging thoughts, while ignoring the strengths you have. As you give at least "equal time" to accurate, positive aspects of yourself, you are consciously refusing to lower your self-esteem.

EVALUATION: As you use thought-control procedures, you will notice that negative thoughts either lose some of their emotional impact, decrease in frequency, and/or positive self-talk increases.

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PROBLEM: Irrational, troublesome, and negative beliefs about the self.

INTERVENTION: Disputing irrational thoughts.

PROCEDURE: Rational emotive therapy (RET), developed by Albert Ellis, looks at how our behavior and feelings come from our rational or irrational interpretation of events*. The ABCD's of RET are illustrated as follows:

A (Activating Event) You forgot a treatment for a patient.

B (Belief System) *Rational:* "I forgot the treatment, so I will stay after work and do it. That is unfortunately inconvenient for the patient and also for me."

Irrational: "I forgot the treatment. This is dreadful. What a terrible nurse I am. What will the patient think? Worse yet, what will the head nurse think when she finds out? I bet I get a notice in my folder. Maybe I'll even get fired and no one will ever hire me again. My nursing career is over..."

C (Consequences) *Rational:* "I'll probably hit some of the rush-hour traffic, since I'll be 15 minutes late getting off duty. That's too bad. I'll bet I don't forget that treatment again!"

Irrational: "I'm in a panic. I can't think straight. My head hurts. I can't let anyone see my shaking hands. What am I going to do?"

As a consequence, you may avoid the patient and the head nurse, not remain functional enough to complete the treatment later, pass it on to the next shift (which accepts it resentfully), and go home ill, depressed and discouraged, with extremely low self-esteem.

D (Dispute) When you catch yourself talking to yourself irrationally, dispute the irrational thought, for example: *Irrational thought.*

"Horrors! This is dreadful."

Dispute. "It's inconvenient, but not dreadful nor the end of the world."

Irrational thought. "What a terrible nurse I am."

Dispute. "Nope, not terrible, just a bit forgetful. What can you do to remember in the future?"

Irrational thought. "Maybe I will even get fired."

Dispute. "Come on now, no one gets fired for forgetting one treatment. You are "catastrophizing" and upsetting yourself. It does not make you (me) a poor nurse, and I will not let irrational beliefs interfere with my functioning."

RATIONALE: The way we interpret events comes from the belief system we learned in childhood and brought with us to adult life, but much of what we learned may have been simply not true nor helpful. When a problematic situation occurs and we choose to believe irrational thoughts about ourselves, we exacerbate the problem, decrease our self-esteem and functioning, and generally make ourselves miserable. But, this belief system was learned and can, through rational disputing, be unlearned. The consequences of the irrational beliefs can be catastrophic, immobilizing, and depressing. The consequences of rational statements are relatively inconsequential. Identifying and actively disputing irrational statements will change the consequences of these irrationalities.

EVALUATION: You will discover, after several disputes of irrational thoughts, that you have the power to decide what you believe, and the conscious choice to decide whether or not to upset yourself over an event. As you become skilled in identifying and disputing your irrational thoughts, you will probably notice that your anxiety, depression, and reactivity are decreased. Taking the place of these feelings may be heightened self-esteem, good thoughts about your ability to change the way you think and feel, and a sense of increased control over yourself and your life.

*Ellis, Albert. A New Guide to Rational Living.