



Albert Ellis 1: Rational Emotive Behavioural Therapy

About Albert Ellis

Albert Ellis was born in the United States in 1913. He had a difficult childhood, experiencing parental neglect, poor health, shyness and social avoidance (Sanders, 2002: 37).

Having initially taken a degree in business and then worked in accountancy, he started to train as a psychologist in his late 20s. Once qualified, he worked in private practice and as a clinical psychologist. Despite it being difficult at that time to train in psychoanalysis without being a medical doctor, he achieved this.

Finding himself at odds with current thinking in psychoanalysis, he initially tried to make changes to this but later left it altogether, focusing on his own approach to psychotherapy: rational emotive behavioural therapy (REBT).

Ellis was – along with Carl Rogers and Fritz Perls – one of the three therapists featured in the films entitled *Three Approaches to Psychotherapy* (more commonly known as *The Gloria Films*), produced in 1964 (and released in 1965) by US psychologist and psychotherapist Everett Shostrom.

Philosophy

Ellis was strongly influenced by the Greek Stoic philosophers. One of these, Epictetus, was a Greek-born slave of Rome in the first century. He became a great philosopher and teacher, and was eventually granted his freedom. Although he didn't write down his teachings, others did.

Epictetus is reported as having said: 'Men are disturbed not by things, but by the view which they take of them.' This quote appeared (initially in Greek, then later in Latin) in the *Enchiridion of Epictetus*, a short manual of Stoic ethical advice, which was written by Lucius Flavius Arrianus, a student of Epictetus.

Stoicism suggests that we need to accept that life is neither fair nor easy, and that self-control and mental toughness are needed to overcome irrationality. Stoicism taught the development of self-control and fortitude as a way of overcoming destructive emotions; the philosophy held that becoming a clear and unbiased thinker allowed people to understand universal reason.

For the Stoic philosophers, 'reason' meant not only using logic, but also understanding natural processes. They believed that living according to reason and virtue was living in harmony with the divine order of the universe, in recognition of common reason and everyone's essential value.

Stoicism suggests the following:

- We have little or no control of external events.
- Individuals must take responsibility for their actions.
- By self-discipline and altering our thinking, we can overcome our difficulties.

Drawing upon Stoicism, Ellis focused on the idea that humans have a tendency to think irrationally, based on self-defeating beliefs that lead to problematic cycles of behaviour. He believed that **confronting irrational thinking was the best way of changing beliefs**. Ellis viewed helping people to think more rationally as the best route to improving their emotional and behavioural functioning.

In keeping with this, Ellis – wanting to find a partner – decided to try to tackle his shyness by going to Central Park in New York and making himself talk to 100 women. Although he didn't get a date from this, he became more confident about talking to women and managed to alter what he saw as his irrational fear.

REBT

Ellis developed rational therapy – the earliest form of cognitive-based psychotherapy – in the 1950s. It was later known as ‘rational emotive therapy’ and then – in the 1990s – as REBT. Ellis made these name changes in order to stress the interrelated importance of cognition, emotion and behaviour in his therapeutic approach. The cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) triad of thoughts, feelings and behaviours are clearly recognisable in this.

Indeed, REBT belongs to the behavioural school of therapy and is closely related to CBT. It is an active-directive therapy based on challenging faulty beliefs (replacing irrational thinking with rational thinking) to resolve emotional and behavioural problems.

REBT is based on the principle that it is possible to change patterns of thinking and to look a given situation from different perspectives. Challenging the client’s perception of themselves and their situation is at the core of REBT.

Feltham & Dryden (1993: 154) note that REBT is ‘based on the view that human beings appear to have an innate tendency often to think and act irrationally (for example, believing that the world must be a comfortable place for them)’.

Style of Therapy

Ellis believed that the therapist was primarily a teacher, and so did not put any focus on the therapeutic relationship. REBT is considered highly directional and sometimes confrontational, and is based around the personality of the client. Ellis would interrupt, swear and shout as a way of drawing attention to the client’s irrational thinking.

References

Feltham C and Dryden W (1993) *Dictionary of Counselling*, Whurr Publishers

Sanders P (2002) *First Steps in Counselling: A students’ companion for basic introductory courses*, PCCS Books

Shostrom E (1965) *Three Approaches to Psychotherapy*:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NFT89grAUOI>