

What is Irrational?

According to Dr. Albert Ellis and REBT, an idea is irrational if:

1. It distorts reality.
2. It is illogical.
3. It prevents you from reaching your goals.
4. It leads to unhealthy emotions.
5. It leads to self-defeating behavior.

During his first years of practicing REBT, Dr. Ellis saw that practically all of his clients held variations of a dozen or so irrational beliefs. Although in his later writings, he was able to condense the original irrational ideas into 3 core beliefs ([The Three Major Musts](#)), it can be helpful to be aware of the original ideas that Dr. Ellis noted and his reasons for labeling them as irrational.

Irrational Idea No. 1: *The idea that it is a dire necessity for an adult human being to be loved or approved by virtually every significant other person in his community.*

- It's impossible to be liked or loved by everybody. No matter how popular you are, there will always be someone who doesn't like you.
- Even if you could get everybody to like or love you, you would never know if they liked you *enough*, or if they *still* liked you.
- Different people have different tastes. Some people might like (for example) your new hairstyle; other people might hate it. Therefore, no matter what you do, some people will admire you, and some people won't.
- Getting people to like you takes time and effort. If you try to get everyone to like you, you won't have any time or energy left over to do the things that you want to do.
- If you demand others' approval, you'll always be doing what they want you to do, instead of doing what you want to do with your time and your life. Your life will no longer be your own.
- If you try too hard to be loved or approved, people will soon tire of your constant sycophancy, and they will not respect you.

- Paying too much attention to how much love and approval you are *receiving*, means you won't pay enough attention to how much love and approval you are *giving*.
- There's no harm in trying to be popular, but it's best not to try *too* hard. In other words, it's self-helping to *want* to be popular, but it's self-defeating to *need* to be popular.
- Having love and approval means you'll find it easier to have friends, to find and keep a job, to find accommodation, etc. But just because other people approve of you doesn't mean that you'll like yourself. It's better to strive for unconditional self-acceptance; i.e., you accept yourself, regardless of what others think of you.
- It's not pleasant when other people don't like you, but it's not **awful**, it's not the end of the world, and it's not fatal.

Irrational Idea No. 2: *The idea that one should be thoroughly competent, adequate, and achieving in all possible respects if one is to consider oneself worthwhile.*

- Nobody can be good at everything. If you're good at (for example) sports, it does not mean that you'll be good at music. Most of us aren't outstandingly good at even *one* thing, let alone *every* thing.
- It's good to be successful when you can. But by trying *too* hard to succeed—especially if you try to succeed at everything—creates unnecessary stressors. In other words, it's self-helping to *want* to succeed, but self-defeating to *need* to succeed.
- To be successful often means you have to compete against others. That means you have to pay too much attention to what other people can do, instead of what *you* can do. You can't control what other people can do, or how well they can do it, so you end up competing against something you have no control over.
- Very often you have little or no control over your own abilities. For example, you can't be a successful musician if you were born tone deaf.
- You don't need to be successful to be worthwhile. Being alive and able to enjoy life makes your life worthwhile. Nothing else matters.
- If you're too busy trying to be successful, you won't have time left over for doing things you enjoy.
- If you're afraid of failing, then you'll be afraid of trying. Your life will be boring because you'll only do things you know you can succeed at, and you'll never get to try new experiences.
- Fear of failing means you won't enjoy what you're doing. It also means you'll worry so much about failing that you won't be able to concentrate fully on what you're doing, and so you will probably make a mistake or fail completely.

- The best way to learn how to do something is to just do it. The way to succeed is to practice, practice, practice and to learn from your mistakes. Mistakes and failure are not **awful**; they are a normal part of learning. Human beings fail and make mistakes all the time. If you make a mistake, it doesn't make you worthless—it proves that you are a normal human being.

Irrational Idea No. 3: *The idea that certain people are bad, wicked, or villainous and that they should be severely blamed and punished for their villainy.*

- Human beings are not perfect. They don't have total control over all their actions. In the real world, we all make mistakes from time to time and treat others badly because (1) we don't *know* any better; (2) we can't *do* any better; or (3) we're too disturbed. That's just the way we are. Believing that others **must** do the right thing ignores the real world.
- Blaming and punishing someone for a mistake he makes because he doesn't know any better will not make him smarter. Blaming and punishing someone for a mistake he makes because he can't do any better won't help him to do it better next time. And blaming and punishing someone for a mistake he makes because he is disturbed won't make him any less disturbed.
- We all do lots of things everyday. Some of the things we do are "bad," some are "good," and some are neither "good" nor "bad." The "bad" things we do don't make us "bad people;" and the "good" things we do don't make us "good people."
- Blaming and punishing people for their mistakes doesn't stop them from making further mistakes. In fact, they may act worse as a way of getting revenge over their detractors.
- If you tell someone he is a "bad person," he might agree with you and think he really is a "bad person." Then, because he is a "bad person," he will do more "bad" things, because that's what "bad people" do.
- When you blame and punish yourself for your mistakes, you become fearful and depressed. When you blame and punish others for their mistakes, you become angry and bigoted. Then there is a danger that you will blame yourself for feeling afraid, depressed, angry or bigoted and become more upset. And then you blame yourself for feeling more upset and begin to feel even *more* upset, thereby setting up a vicious circle.
- When other people blame you for a mistake you've made, ask yourself if you really did do anything wrong. If so, try not to do it again. If you didn't do anything wrong, you can remind yourself that the other person is mistaken and that they can't help making mistakes.
- It's not the end of the world when others behave badly, selfishly or unfairly. If you can teach them to behave better, then do so. If you can't teach them to do better next time, then you might as well learn to live with their mistakes and tell yourself, "It's too bad that they keep doing bad things, but it's not **awful**!"

- From time to time it will be you who acts badly, selfishly or unfairly. Just like everyone else, there will be times when you make mistakes because you don't know any better, can't do any better or are disturbed. When it happens, you can tell yourself, "Oh well, that's life! I guess I'm as human as everyone else. I'll try not to do it again, but there are no guarantees."

Irrational Idea No. 4: *The idea that it is awful and catastrophic when things are not the way one would very much like them to be.*

- There's no reason why things must be the way you want them to be, no matter how bad or unfair they are now. Unfortunate events and inconveniences happen in this world; that's just the way it is. That doesn't mean you have to be thrilled when unfortunate events occur, but getting upset won't improve matters.
- The more upset you get, the less effective you'll be at changing the things you don't like.
- Just because two-year-olds have a temper tantrum when they don't get their own way, it doesn't mean you have to have one when you don't get yours. If you can change the things you don't like, go ahead and change them. If you can't change them, learn to live with them without crying like a baby.
- You don't get upset because bad things happen; you get upset because you believe they **shouldn't** happen and it's **awful** when they happen.
- When things are not to your liking, and you can't change them, you can tell yourself, "I wish they were different, but it's not the end of the world, and it won't kill me if I have to keep putting up with them." Then try to learn from them, accept them as challenges, and see if there is some way you can use them in your life. If that doesn't work, do your best to ignore them and do something else you enjoy doing.

Irrational Idea No. 5: *The idea that human unhappiness is externally caused and that people have little or no ability to control their sorrows and disturbances.*

- Other people can't harm you unless they beat you up or rob you. But those things don't happen very often. If someone abuses you or calls you names, it's not their words that upset you; it's your words. You might think they're harming you, but really it is what you tell yourself that causes your pain.
- Whenever you say "it hurts me, when people are unfair," or "I can't stand it, when things go wrong," you are saying nonsense. Whatever "it" is, "it" can't hurt you. What you really mean is "I upset myself by telling myself that it is **awful** when people are unfair or when things go wrong."
- Most people believe they can't control their feelings, but they're wrong. Although it's not easy to change the way you feel, it's not impossible.

Irrational Idea No. 6: *The idea that if something is or may be dangerous or fearsome one should be terribly concerned about it and should keep dwelling on the possibility of its occurring.*

- If you can avoid dangerous events, then do so. If you can't avoid them, then worrying about them won't help you to deal with them. In fact, worrying about them will probably make you deal with them less effectively.
- Worrying about dangerous or unpleasant events won't make them go away. Instead, worrying will often make the event more likely. For example, if you're learning to drive a car and you worry about getting into a smash, then you'll get so nervous that you don't drive very well and end up driving into another car. If you were calmer and weren't worried about crashing, you might have driven better and avoided the smash.
- People who worry about things happening expect those things to happen more frequently than people who don't worry about them. For example, people who worry about seeing a spider expect to see spiders more often than people who don't worry about seeing them. This sets up a vicious cycle: First they worry about seeing a spider, then they expect to see one, which makes them worry more.
- There are some things in life that you can't avoid—dying, for example. But worrying about dying won't make you live forever, it will only make living less pleasant. Now, instead of having just one problem—dying—you have two problems: (1) dying; and (2) spending your life worrying about dying.
- Worrying about things often makes them seem worse than they really are.
- It's not the things that could go wrong in your life that cause your worry; it's the belief that it would be **awful** if those things happened. Therefore, to stop worrying about something, convince yourself that it would be unfortunate if it happened, but it would not be **awful**.
- Instead of avoiding things you are afraid of—public speaking, for example—go out of your way to practice doing them. After a while, you'll see there really is no reason to be afraid of them.

Irrational Idea No. 7: *The idea that it is easier to avoid than to face certain life difficulties and self-responsibilities.*

- The relief you get from avoiding a difficult or unpleasant task is only temporary. You might feel better at the exact moment you avoid it, but later, you may regret your decision and wish you had faced the task when you had the opportunity. For example, you might avoid asking someone for a date, and feel immediately better because you had avoided the risk of rejection, but later you kick yourself for being so cowardly.
- When you tell yourself that a task (homework, for example) is so **awful** that you **must** not do it, you spend hours planning ways to avoid it, and then more

hours thinking of an excuse for not doing it. The longer you put off doing the task, the longer you spend worrying about it. Instead of just getting it over and done with, you prolong your misery.

- The more practice we have at doing something, the easier it becomes. But if you avoid doing difficult tasks, you will never get the practice you need to make the job easier. Difficult tasks will remain difficult, and you'll never get the confidence to do them.
- If you spend your life sitting around doing nothing except very easy tasks, you'll be bored to tears. But if you try new experiences, and work at doing things that are quite difficult, you'll gain a sense of achievement, and lead a much happier life.
- If a job is unnecessary then it makes sense to avoid it. But if the job is going to make your life easier or more pleasant in the long run, then the sooner you do it, the better.
- You were not born lazy. Laziness is nothing but the bad habit of telling yourself things about work which aren't true. Once you start telling yourself that (1) work is not **awful**; (2) there is no reason why you **must** avoid it; and (3) the sooner you get it done the better, you'll see that your laziness disappears.
- There is no need to make life difficult for yourself by working too hard, doing unnecessary work. But if the job is necessary or will make your life better in the long run, then (1) decide when you are going to do it (the sooner the better); (2) do it at the time you say you are going to do it—don't delay it again; (3) if it's a big job, do little bits at a time; and (4) give yourself a reward after you complete each little part of the job.
- Life is for living. If you're tired, take a rest. But don't spend your entire life resting. You only have one lifetime, so do as much as you can with it. Try things that might be difficult or unpleasant at first, and keep doing them until you get good at them and find that you enjoy them.

Irrational Idea No. 8: *The idea that one should be dependent on others and needs someone stronger than oneself on whom to rely.*

- We cannot do everything for ourselves. From time to time we need other people's help to fix our car, treat our illnesses, or build our houses. But the more we can do for ourselves the better. If we become too dependent on others we lose control of our lives and allow others to make our choices and do our thinking. It makes sense to cooperate with one another, but it makes no sense to be totally dependent.
- If you believe you **must** have someone else's help to get by, you will have to give up many things you want to do in life, and go along with things they want you to do. You will make yourself afraid that if you don't do what they want you to do, then next time you need their help, they won't be there for you. After a while, you won't be you any more: you'll be their slave.

- If you depend on others to make you feel safe, you'll end up being less safe because you are less able to look after yourself.
- The more you let others do things for you, the less skilled and the less confident you'll be. The less skilled and the less confident you are, the more you'll depend on others. It becomes a vicious circle.
- You cannot be certain the person or people you rely on will always be around. Therefore the more you can rely on yourself, the better.
- You are the only person who knows what you *really* want in life. If you rely on others to provide you with what you want, you may not get it. But if you rely on yourself, you have a greater chance of getting exactly what you want.
- If at first you don't succeed, try and try again. Even if you never get what you want, it's not **awful** to fail in the attempt.

Irrational Idea No. 9: *The idea that one's past history is an all-important determiner of one's present behavior and that because something once strongly affected one's life, it should indefinitely have a similar effect.*

- Just because something once had a big effect on your life, doesn't mean it will always have that effect. For example, when you were a child, you may have been afraid of adults, and done whatever you could to please them so they would be good to you. But you are no longer a child, so now you don't have to be afraid of other people. You can now decide for yourself what you want out of life and you can, mostly, do whatever you please.
- If a two-year-old doesn't get what he wants, he will often have a temper tantrum until he does get what he wants. This solution works quite well for two-year-olds, but doesn't work so well for adults. Most problems have several solutions, but if you continue to rely on childish solutions, the less likely you will be able to find better, adult solutions.
- Blaming your problems on your childhood is just a poor excuse for not trying to solve your present problems. If you make the effort and really look, you can usually find solutions to the problems you have today.
- It's true that you learned some foolish, self-defeating behaviors as a child, but although it's sometimes difficult to change, it's not impossible.
- In the future, you will look back at today as being part of your past. By changing yourself today, you will be able to have a better future.

Irrational Idea No. 10: *The idea that one should become quite upset over other people's problems and disturbances.*

- Other people's problems usually have nothing to do with you. There is no reason why you **must** feel upset if someone has a problem.

- We are all different, and other people will often do things that you disagree with. But that doesn't make them criminals. Getting upset or angry won't help you, and it won't change them.
- Even if someone is unfair or rude towards you, it is not the unfairness or the rudeness that upsets you, it is your belief that other people **should** be fair and polite.
- You have a lot of power to change yourself, but you have only a little power to change others. Getting upset does not give you more power to change others, in fact, it often reduces your influence. Some people like seeing you upset so, instead of changing, they may try to upset you more.
- Sometimes people will change because you are angry or upset with them. But is it worth it? Surely there are better, less painful ways to change people than making yourself feel bad.
- Being happy often involves changing the way you think, and changing the things you do. If you're too busy trying to change others, you won't have time left over to change yourself. Getting upset or angry over what other people do is a poor excuse for not solving your own problems and changing your thinking.

Irrational Idea No. 11: *The idea that there is invariably a right, precise, and perfect solution to human problems and that it is catastrophic if this perfect solution is not found.*

- Even if a problem has a perfect solution—which it probably doesn't—there is no reason why that perfect solution **must** be found.
- We have some control over our lives, but we don't have total control. Finding perfect solutions to all your problems is impossible.
- It's not the end of the world if you can't find a perfect solution to your problems. Telling yourself it's **awful** when you can't find a perfect solution will only make you upset and make it harder to find a good solution.
- Most problems have several solutions. But if you keep looking for the "perfect" one, you won't see the other solutions, and therefore, won't be able to solve any of your problems. Or if you do use a less-than-perfect solution, you will make yourself unhappy because you think you **should** have kept looking for the perfect one.
- You will spend so long looking for the perfect solution for one of your problems that you won't have time to solve your other problems.
- When you have a problem, make a list of several solutions. Then, instead of looking for the perfect one, choose the best solution from your list.
- Solutions that seem perfect often have results you don't expect. From time to time you will choose a solution that isn't as good as you thought it would be. Solving problems takes practice. The more practice you have, the better you'll get at solving your problems. But if you keep looking for a perfect solution,

you'll never get to try out the other solutions, and you won't get to practice and improve your problem-solving skills.

Irrational Idea #12: *The idea that you can give people (including yourself) a global rating as a human and that their general worth depends upon the goodness of their performances.*

- Being skilled at one thing (or many things) does not make you a good person. Being incompetent at one thing (or many things) does not make you a bad person. Some people might be better at (for example) sports than you are, but that doesn't make them a better person. They might be smarter than you, better looking, or funnier than you, but they are still not a better person.
- Nobody is good at everything. If you can dance but can't sing, does that make you a better person than someone who can sing but can't dance? Or is the other person better than you? There is no way to judge who is the better person.
- If you do well on a task one day, and poorly on a task the next day, are you a better person on the day when do you well? Hardly. You are still the same person.
- We all change from day to day. For example, if you are usually polite to people, but sometimes rude when you are not feeling well, does that make you a good person (for being polite) or a bad person (for being rude)?
- We don't know everything there is to know about people. We might see someone doing a good deed (for example, saving someone from a burning building) and think they are a "good person." But what we don't know is that (for example) the same person is often cruel to small children. Therefore, the person is not as "good" as we thought.

The Three Majors Musts

We all express ourselves differently, but the irrational beliefs that upset us can be placed under three major headings. Each of these core beliefs contains an absolutistic *must* or demand. These three majors *musts* can be summarized as follows:

I. I must do well and win the approval of others or else I am no good.

A. Summary

1. Inflexible
2. Places unrealistic expectations on oneself
3. Over-concern with others' opinion of oneself
4. Self-worth measured by achievement and popularity
5. Non-self-accepting

B. Sub-beliefs

1. I must have love and approval from everybody.
 - a. I need someone to love me.
 - b. I must not do anything that would cause others to think less of me.
2. I must be competent and successful.
 - a. I must have an important skill or talent.
3. I must successfully avoid unpleasant or undesirable situations.
 - a. Unpleasant and undesirable situations upset me.
 - i. I can't control my emotions in difficult situations.
4. I must avoid dangerous or life-threatening situations.
 - a. If I do encounter such situations, I must worry about them to make them go away.
5. I must think, feel and act the same as I always have.
 - a. My past has such a strong influence on me that I cannot change.
6. I must find order, certainty, and predictability in life.
 - a. If I don't find these things, I cannot feel comfortable or act competently.
7. I must depend on other people because I can't depend on myself.
 - a. I must rely on superstition and religion especially in difficult times.
8. I must understand the secrets of the universe.
 - a. I cannot be happy unless I understand the nature and secrets of the universe.
9. I must rate myself as either "good" and "worthy," or "bad" and "worthless."
 - a. To be "good," and "worthy," I must be competent, successful and popular.
 - b. If I am not competent, successful or popular then I am "bad" and "worthless."
10. I must never feel depressed, anxious or enraged.

C. Emotional Consequences

1. Depression
2. Anxiety and/or panic
3. Self Downing

D. Behavioral Consequences

1. Risk-avoidance
2. Shyness
3. Procrastination
4. Unassertiveness
5. Workaholism

II. Other people must do "the right thing" or else they are no good and deserve to be punished.

A. Summary

1. Inflexible and unrealistic
2. Assumes one's authority over others
3. Assumes a clear-cut difference between right and wrong
4. Assumes one's ability to inerrantly differentiate between right and wrong
5. Places oneself at the center of the universe with others catering to one's needs and wants
6. Leads to conflict with others who also see themselves as the center of the universe
7. Non-accepting of human fallibility

B. Sub-beliefs

1. Everybody should treat everyone else (especially me) in a fair and considerate manner.
 - a. If they act unfairly or inconsiderately, they are no good.
 - b. If they act unfairly or inconsiderately, they deserve to be punished.
 - i. Society or the universe must ensure that they get the punishment they deserve.
2. Other people must not act incompetently or unwisely.
 - a. If they act incompetently or unwisely, they are worthless idiots.

- b. If they act incompetently or unwisely, they should be ashamed of themselves.
 - c. If they act incompetently or unwisely, they should expect none of the good things in life.
- 3. Talented people must use their talent.
 - a. Everyone must reach their potential.
 - b. People who don't live up to their potential have little or no value as human beings.
- 4. Other people must not criticize me.
 - a. If they unjustly criticize me, they are no good and don't deserve anything good to happen to them.

C. Emotional Consequences

- 1. Anger, rage or fury
- 2. Impatience
- 3. Bitterness
- 4. Resentment

D. Behavioral Consequences

- 1. Aggression and violence
- 2. Bigotry and intolerance
- 3. Bullying
- 4. Nagging

III. Life must be easy, without discomfort or inconvenience.

A. Summary

- 1. Inflexible and unrealistic
- 2. Over-estimates one's right to a trouble-free life
- 3. Under-estimates one's ability to cope with adversity
- 4. Non-accepting of life's vagaries

B. Sub-beliefs

- 1. Things must go the way I want them to go.
 - a. I need what I want.
 - i. It's awful if I don't get what I want.

2. I must constantly worry about life's predicaments.
 - a. I must control, avoid or change life's predicaments.
 - b. I must make myself upset over life's predicaments.
 - i. Making myself upset gives me the power to control, avoid or change life's predicaments.
3. I must avoid, rather than face and deal with, life's difficulties and responsibilities.
 - a. I must not be inconvenienced or made uncomfortable.
 - b. I cannot discipline myself.
 - c. I can't stand the present pain that is necessary for future gain.
4. It must be easy to change things that I don't like.
 - a. Difficulties must not exist.
 - b. I am powerless to change my circumstances.
 - i. Any effort to change my circumstances is pointless because it is doomed to fail.
5. Justice, fairness, equality, democracy and other "right" values must prevail.
 - a. I can't stand it when my values are trodden on.
6. All problems must have a perfect solution.
 - a. The perfect solution to all problems must be found.
 - i. It's awful if a perfect solution can't be found to my problems (or those of people I care about).
7. I must not die prematurely.
 - a. I should be able to live forever.
 - b. It's terrible that I will one day die and no longer exist.
 - c. It's terrible that people I love will one day die and no longer exist.
8. My life must have meaning and purpose.
 - a. a. If I can't create meaning or purpose for myself, the universe or something supernatural must provide it for me.
9. I must not experience depression, rage or anxiety.
 - a. I must not have psychological problems.
 - i. I must not be institutionalized.
 - ii. I couldn't stand to be institutionalized.
 - iii. I could never recover if I went "crazy."

C. Emotional Consequences

1. Low frustration tolerance
2. Self-pity
3. Depression
4. Discomfort anxiety

D. Behavioral Consequences

1. Procrastination
2. Shirking
3. Drug and alcohol abuse
4. Overindulgence in "feel good" behaviors (e.g., overeating)