

You Only Have Four Problems:  
The Cure for Anger, Anxiety, Depression & Guilt.  
Vincent E. Parr, Ph.D.

parrinstitute.org

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# **You Only Have Four Problems:**

The Cure for Anger, Anxiety, Depression  
& Guilt

by Vincent E. Parr, Ph.D.



## **DEDICATION**

*To the three women in my life:*

**Luney**, my partner through life, and  
**Nicolette & Jennifer**, daughters who epitomize joy.

*Thanks to you I understood what true beauty and love were. I am very enriched and grateful for your love. Thank you for being exactly who you are. May you be peaceful, happy, and content.*

## PIGRAPH

*“The flower is not concerned about tomorrow. It  
doesn’t plan.*

*It doesn’t worry about death;  
Nor does it make effort to smell beautifully. The  
flower teaches being—Being what one is.” WU  
HSIN*

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## PREFACE

*“The unexamined life is not worth living.”*

SOCRATES

*“Knowledge is learning something every day.*

*Wisdom is letting go of something every day.”*

ZEN PROVERB

In my early years I studied with the world-famous clinical psychologist Dr. Albert Ellis, Ph.D., the creator of Rational Therapy (RT). He later changed RT to Rational Emotive Therapy (RET) and then Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), which is how we refer to it today. Albert Ellis is the grandfather of all the Rational therapies and the Cognitive Behavior Therapies (CBT) in use today.

Dr. Ellis taught me how powerful individual words in our thinking can truly be. He taught me that the way an emotion is created can be broken down into a simple formula, and that there are three types of consequences: emotional, behavioral and physiological. It's the beliefs we hold and tell ourselves over and over—about ourselves, about others, and about the things that happen in the outside world—that determine how we feel.

I have spent more than 50 years helping patients and I have seen first-hand how powerful beliefs are. I've observed 1) how consistently predictable they are, and 2) how we create these

emotions in our minds by the way we think. All emotional and psychological suffering is conceived by four specific thinking habits or thought loops we get trapped in, repeating them over and over in our minds until we are nearly drowning in Anger, Anxiety, Depression and/or Guilt.

You see, everyone thinks they have thousands of different problems. But what I saw clearly over time was that everyone was coming in with only four—four emotional blocks to their personal joy and happiness. People described thousands of different examples of Anger, thousands of examples of Anxiety, and many thousands more of Depression and Guilt.

I capitalize these four words throughout this book because they are more than just negative emotions—they are the four most critical blocks to happiness and contentment in life. Rarely do we have just one or two of these stumbling blocks; everyone has, at some point, encountered all four of these emotional obstacles to our contentment in life. In addition, we all have what I call our personal ‘racket,’ which is defined as our favorite bad feeling. It is not your favorite because you love it so much, but when you upset yourself, it is the one you choose most often. If you enjoy angrily criticizing the drivers on the road around you, Anger is probably your racket!

There is an endless assortment of things that can add to our happiness and joy. However, we all get unhappy—and stay unhappy—in exactly the same way. This fact of the human condition shows how, despite how we may often feel, we are never alone! We have always been and always will be interdependent and interconnected across all varieties of the human family.

These are just a few of the things your therapist doesn't tell you, unless you have a Rational therapist or, even better, a Mindfulness (or Zen) based Rational therapist. Then you have a higher probability of getting effective, efficient, and eloquent treatment. This has been supported by nearly 70 years of research, 75 books, and over 6,000 articles on Rational Emotive Behavior Theory by Dr. Ellis alone. A simple Internet search for REBT or CBT will yield even more results supporting the effectiveness of Rational theory and mindfulness in improving mental health.

The main purpose of this book is to spell out in very simple and straight forward terms how we continue to upset ourselves and how we can effectively and practically eliminate the occurrence of these events. The wordiness has been stripped to a bare minimum to keep the message as direct and accessible as possible. I want to get directly to the heart of disturbance, to address the source of and solution to emotional suffering. Consider this a practical guide to managing these thinking habits rather than a *magnum opus* covering everything there is to know about Rational Theory.

Learning to manage your thoughts, emotions, and beliefs is a gradual process. There is nothing hidden or subconscious or magical about it. The solution is right in front of us and always has been. No matter your age, religion, culture, or creed, these teachings can be effectively applied to any situation at any time by any person. Many have reported noticeable progress within hours of study and application!

Learning how you create unhappiness is more than half the battle to having a mind of peace and joy. I will walk you through the process with thorough explanations, formulas, tools, and

examples you can apply to your everyday life. The cause of and solution to the pain caused by Anger, Anxiety, Depression and Guilt is quite literally in your hands. If you read, practice, and apply these techniques, you will learn to master your emotions and create a mind of peace, contentment, and joy.

As Lao-Tzu so beautifully said: “When you realize there is nothing extra and nothing lacking, the whole world belongs to you.”

*Let's begin.*

## INTRODUCTION

*“If knowledge does not liberate the self from the self,  
then ignorance is better than such knowledge.”*

SANA'I

*“No inside, no outside, no in-between.”*

HSIN HSIN MING (*TRUSTING THE HEARTMIND*) BY SENGTS'AN

We spend a large part of our lives arguing with reality; obsessing on past events, sighing over regrets, grumbling about unmet expectations, and railing against circumstances we perceive to be disagreeable. Yet most of us would agree, if we thought about it, that *arguing with reality is a total waste of our precious time!* No matter how hard we try, truth and reality are immovable things—absolutes—that can't be different. Our opinions, ideas, and beliefs can't alter the inalterable or move the immovable. Yet we waste countless hours of our finite lives debating whether things are fair, whose fault it is that they are the way they are, and why it should be this way and not that way! We create and carry with us the

perpetual notion that we have piles upon piles of problems, large and small, trivial and critical, temporary and permanent.

The truth is that you only have four problems at the root of all your suffering; four devastating emotions you create from your fixed false beliefs, opinions, and ideas about reality and truth. Every painful, stressful, frustrating, or terrifying moment in our

### *Introduction*

lives is caused by how we deal with Anger, how we deal with Anxiety, how we deal with Depression, and how we deal with Guilt. These emotions rob us of our life and block our joy.

The purpose of this book is to help you stop suffering. Not just today and tomorrow but for the rest of your life. It is a guide to not only relieving the emotional disturbances caused by these four blocks, but about how to replace them with what the Buddhists refer to as The Four Immeasurables: 1) loving kindness—active goodwill towards all, 2) compassion toward others and the self, 3) sympathetic & empathetic joy, and 4) equanimity, or even-mindedness and serenity. These ‘sublime attitudes,’ as they are sometimes referred to in Western traditions, are too powerful to be measured. For you materialists out there (and who of us are not, raised in this society?), this means that billions of dollars cannot match, in a lifetime of experiences, these Four Immeasurables!

It sounds like a simple enough concept, doesn’t it? Well, it’s not new, this idea of alleviating emotional pain by replacing negative thoughts with positive ones. It is, however, often oversimplified to the point of being thoroughly ineffective in a practical sense. The actual process of letting go, of routing out these long-held ideas and beliefs is much more complex. The ideas presented here go back to the ancient Greek and Roman stoics and skeptics as well as Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Confucius, Taoist and Buddhist cultures and

philosophy. But don't be discouraged—anyone can learn how! Wisdom endures through the ages.

Unfortunately, so does ignorance and disturbance. Ignorance does not mean stupid or low I.Q.—some of the most stupid-acting people I have ever met have advanced degrees and seem

very smart. As George Carlin said when listening to a guest speaker, "Well, they have a great education, they went to all the great schools, they seem very smart. Aha, they are full of shit!" Ignorance is simply a lack of knowledge, learning, or information. My goal is to help alleviate this ignorance by challenging the ideas and beliefs you hold. As you will see, it is clinging to our opinions, ideas, and beliefs, that cause not only our own suffering but contribute to the suffering of others.

I will not be giving you opinions or a new belief system to grasp onto or define yourself by. What I offer you here is truth, the opposite of opinions, ideas, and beliefs. Truth can be seen directly—our belief is an illusion! However, it can't be dismissed as 'just' an illusion, because it is a *real* illusion in the sense that it can cause suffering. When we believe the illusion or that our opinion and ideas are right and true, this is delusion. Good luck trying to be happy there.

Delusion dooms us to disagree and fight over petty concerns, and to argue over whose beliefs are right—as if we will ever come to a rational compassionate solution under these circumstances.

Throughout the course of human history, most human suffering has been the result of beliefs. This is the world of conflict. Not just between ourselves and our loved ones but with and between nations. All wars, killing, fighting, bigotry, prejudice, hate and loathing are the posturing of the righteousness of our precious belief over someone else's. Enlightenment is the only way to see through delusion, and truth is the path to enlightenment. Truth is what you

will find here and in my online course.

Also, and I think even more importantly, we can begin teaching these to our children as soon as they enter elementary

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#### *Introduction*

school and even before, if the parents have been trained. We can prepare them for a rational, peaceful, purposeful life. An observation by Socrates inscribed over the door of the library of Alexandra says, “*The unexamined life is not worth living.*”

Teaching your children this is the most important thing you can give them. You are giving them the keys to the good life.

In addition to this book, I have also created an online program, The 4 Blocks to Happiness Mastery Course at [theparrinstitute.com](http://theparrinstitute.com). The course is not absolutely necessary for understanding the concepts in this book, but the videos, podcasts, and exercises in it can be extremely helpful in learning and remembering what you read here.

The goal of this book and *The 4 Blocks to Happiness Mastery Course* found on my website at [parrinstitute.org](http://parrinstitute.org) is three-pronged:

- 1: The almost complete elimination of human disturbance
- 2: Personal happiness and contentment
- 3: Enlightenment

Yes, this is a tall order, and you may be skeptical. It is good to be skeptical! I am one of the biggest skeptics there is; I belong to two national skeptic organizations and I sit on the board as vice-president of one, The Institute for Science and Human Values.

So please by all means, be skeptical, doubt, and look for ways to solve our human issues and eliminate suffering. What else are we going to do with our precious time here—watch *Dancing with the*

## CHAPTER 1

# MENTAL CONTAMINATION

*“This is one of many things your therapist doesn’t tell you and they don’t teach you in school—which is most important for your social life, and your emotional well-being.”*

VINCE PARR

Nothing and no one has ever upset you.

Think about that for a second. A very common, restricting, and self-defeating idea is that we get upset because bad things happen—that happiness or unhappiness is externally caused and that we cannot do anything about it. This is not true. Happiness and unhappiness are internally caused, and we can freely choose either one. Your joy and happiness are not dictated by your experiences in life, but by your relationship to those experiences. What you’ll learn in this book is that *events* don’t make you upset—our stress, emotional disturbance and negative feelings are all caused by our own internal mental contamination!

### *The Negative Feedback Superhighway*

There are three reasons why you are the way you are right now. Number one is genetic predisposition. We are predisposed to think,

feel, and react in certain ways. Millions of years of natural selection led to your parents creating you, and with that you became predisposed to all sorts of tendencies like Anxiety, Depression and so on.

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#### *Mental Contamination*

Number two is environmental conditioning. This is the sum of the beliefs you were taught, the books you read, the religion, culture, social influences you were exposed to. This category has a dramatic impact on why you are the way you are, and it cannot be changed because it is your past. You *can* change the environmental conditions in your present life situation, and that may be a good idea, but to be able to do that you must recognize the third and most important reason why you are the way you are right now.

Number three is self-conditioning; that is, the way you talk to yourself, the story in your head. The Buddhists call it the monkey mind. I call it The Narrator or sometimes the 95 Maniacs in your head! No matter what you call it, it represents the 60,000+ sentences that we say in our mind every day. This running monologue we generate is why we are tired at the end of the day. The way we describe ourselves to ourselves, the stories we construct, inform our opinions of ourselves and the world around us.

Some say that the mind is the neglected organ. In our society, we go to the dentist to have perfect teeth, we go to the gym to have a perfect body, but very few people take the time to develop a strong, clear mind. Mankind has landed on the moon, invented self-driving cars (well, almost), and developed computers small enough to fit in the palm of our hand, yet many of us do not have the tools to cultivate an undisturbed mind. This is our purpose here. To train you to refine your mind on a daily basis. A refined mind is a mind of clarity, a mind of happiness.

Mental contamination is when we mistake our opinions, ideas, and beliefs for facts and truth. It's another way of describing egocentric thinking, assigning godlike accuracy to our thoughts.

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*Mental Contamination*

Mental contamination distances us from reality, and without a realistic view of ourselves and our lives we become less capable of making positive change. We alienate others with our stubborn opinions and open ourselves up to clinging to false, outdated, or otherwise damaging beliefs. I am not implying that it is impossible for a belief to be true, but—and this is one of the most important things I will say to you—it is the Beliefs we hold that go *unchallenged* that have the potential for causing us the most harm! Dōgen, a twelfth century Zen monk said: “Never believe what you think!” Yes! This is delusion.

If you were to add up all the words you tell yourself every day, you would probably average between 60,000 and 74,000 sentences you say every day inside your head. The vast amount of these sentences come directly from cognitive habits—thought patterns we’re so used to we don’t even question whether they’re true or not. These patterns can play out in a negative feedback loop, a never-ending cycle of distressing thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and physiological effects. Our self-created conceptions inspire painful emotions that lead to undesirable actions. We then create more conceptions about our negative actions and those actions get our adrenaline pumping. Now we’re thinking more negative thoughts and the loop begins again. The effects of your inner dialogue on your emotions and behavior are almost immeasurable! If you do not learn how to observe this constant dialogue, you can’t change it or the habits it creates. It’s like driving in circles on a highway—you’re dizzy and running out of gas with no relief in sight!

There are two essential keys to getting out of this negative

feedback loop and removing mental contamination. The first is training the Observer and the other is disputing the irrational beliefs we hold. Of course, the fastest and most effective way off the negative feedback superhighway—and onto the path to inner peace and happiness—is to combine both of these techniques.

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#### *Mental Contamination*

Let's look first at how to identify and train the Observer.

#### *The Narrator vs. The Observer*

Understanding and training the mind to be aware is the foundation of meditative practice and most all Eastern/Buddhist philosophical traditions. If I ask you to observe what you are thinking about, *who* or *what* is doing the observing? Your first instinct might be to respond, "Well, it's me of course!" But how are you the person observing you at the same time as you are the person being observed? It blows your mind if you stop to think about it, doesn't it?

Thinking is a fact. It happens. It is what the mind does. The illusion is that there is a 'me' doing the thinking. This has never been proven! No one has ever successfully documented the ghost in the machine—the 'me' in the mind. *The real Wizard of Oz!*

Our five senses are simply gatherers of facts, creating a direct route from external data to our cognitive center in the brain. Eyes see, ears hear, noses smell, tongues taste and nerve endings of skin feel. But these senses can't interpret the data for us; only our brains can do that. The eyeball doesn't tell us that the collection of light waves bouncing off an object into our retinas is a picture of a cow. Our brain must know that 'cow' is a thing, recognize its

likeness, and give it context. It can fill in smells we can't smell (manure), textures we can't feel (hairy), and sounds

we can't hear (mooing). It may even feed us a bit of fear or disgust or nostalgia depending on our opinions and past experiences with cows.

Now Eastern philosophy has, for thousands of years, included a sixth sense—thinking. This sixth sense has nothing to do with the ‘woo-woo’ ESP stuff you see on sensationalist talk shows or late-night TV. The sixth sense is simply the observable, physical activity of the brain—electricity firing neurons and tracing synapses. Through the miracle of electronic imaging we can actually observe this involuntary reaction to incoming data. It's no more profound than the reaction of your salivary glands to incoming food, yet we cling to an entire belief system we build around this physical response! It makes no more sense than turning to your salivary glands for answers and truth. I don't know one person who wouldn't respond to that idea with an emphatic “WTF?!”

Observation and interpretation are accompanied by a constant running dialogue provided by the two parts that make up your thinking mind. The Narrator runs the inner dialogue, and the Observer can observe and change the inner dialogue.

The Narrator is the part of the mind that makes up the ‘ego.’ It is what we think of and identify as our ‘self,’ the author of all we think, feel, and believe. It takes the input you receive through your senses—by itself only impartial bits of abstract information—and assigns meaning based on our beliefs, feelings, and conceptions. It tells us stories that make up our mental formations of who we are and how we relate to the world around us. These stories may be in line with provable facts, but because

they're happening in our head where no one else can check, they may not be. The danger of conception is that it

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#### *Mental Contamination*

need not have any relationship with fact at all. It can devolve into self-delusion without warning and often without any conscious thought.

Imagine you can smell steak grilling. The scent of steak in the air is a fact anyone in the vicinity can confirm. Now, you like steak and think it is delicious. That's not a fact, it's an opinion. Some people don't like steak. But because to you steak means good food and good food is desirable, your Narrator tells you that smell is good and that it represents something delicious, juicy, and satisfying. This, however, is a story that exists only in your head no matter how much you believe it to be true.

Because it equates beliefs with self, the Narrator is very protective of its beliefs and will not hesitate to employ greed, anger, or delusion to keep them intact. It clings to its own interpretation of sensory information as if it were an undeniable fact and becomes irrationally reactive when those beliefs are violated or threatened. It may explain why if you meet a vegan who perceives that same smell of steak as representing something cruel, inhumane, and undesirable, your Narrator tells you their perception is wrong, and maybe even that they are a bad and worthless person. It's easy to see how our conceptions can create emotional distress. Understanding that The Narrator exists only in your head is the key to the first insight. This is where we have the option to choose our path. We can choose to create positive change or continue drowning in our emotional conceptions of unchangeable reality.

One of the foundations of Zen and Buddhist teaching is that clinging is the source of all suffering. Learning to let go of the

Narrator—and of the narration itself—is the main purpose of

meditation. It is a critical component to clearing mental contamination and overcoming the four blocks to happiness.

The Observer, unlike the Narrator, simply observes events, situations, and facts without forming an opinion or conception. It is the part of the mind that watches, asks questions about and can even choose what it's doing. You can train your Observer to notice impermanence (i.e., constant change) at all the five senses, as well as your inner dialogue. This is where you train it to red flag irrational thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. This is popularly called mindfulness in Buddhist and Eastern Principles, while in the west we call it consciousness, attention, and awareness.

How do we shift to the Observer? In order to become or cultivate the Observer, you must shift from being your thoughts to noticing your thoughts—that is, being consciously aware of—your thoughts. You act as a spectator without getting wrapped up in or attached to the thought process. It's as if you are watching a movie. When you are absorbed in the action you are taken right along with the story. However, at any point in the film you can stop and say, "This is just a movie," and just like that you become aware of the movie and distance yourself from the action on the screen. In that same way you become aware of your mental images when you stop yourself and say, "This thought is just a thought. It is not a fact and I can let it go." A thought is just a thought. It has no power except the power you give it!

It's one thing to understand what the Observer is, it's another thing to practice it. One way to train yourself is to imagine you are two people; one of you is watching, one of you is doing. Place your

mind's eye outside of your body and watch yourself from far away. This will begin to give you a level of detachment from being caught up in the emotions of the moment.

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#### *Mental Contamination*

Another important part of the shift to observing is connecting deeply to your breath in every moment. You will never be able to shut off your thoughts completely, but you can reduce the volume and effect of mental chatter by being as aware as possible of your breath, and knowing that a thought is just a thought—you don't have to believe it or cling to it rigidly.

Building new cognitive habits will not happen overnight. Be patient with yourself in this process of creating a more rationally thinking mind, and trust that your physical brain will begin to heal as well.

#### *Thinking Mind vs. Reactive Mind*

Another way to look at being an Observer is to compare a mind that is consciously aware (a thinking mind) to a reactive one. The thinking mind is the problem solver; the reactive mind is the unthinking, emotional reflex, often of a disturbed mind. When we do not take responsibility for our thoughts, feelings and behavior we have a reactive mind instead of an aware mind, and to be reactive is to give up our freedom. The thinking mind is a mind of stillness and a mind that doesn't struggle with the passing show. The show is always passing and we can choose to react to it and be more disturbed or to observe the passing show and know that this will soon pass and thus leading to a mind at peace. As the ancient Greek and Roman Stoics have told us: "*Contentment is our greatest wealth.*"

Most people function in a reactive state all the time—they only use the reactive part of their mind. We train our minds to be reactive from a young age. An event happens, and we react to it. A similar event happens, and we react the same way. This cycle repeats itself until

we become caught in a never-ending rut of

mindless reaction. This mindless reaction is at the root of all Anger, Anxiety, Depression, and Guilt.

In the following chapters I'll discuss how to function with the thinking part of your mind rather than the reactive part. I want you to get to the point where you are conscious of your thoughts, eventually choosing rational thoughts intentionally. This is a much more effective lifestyle than being reactive, and a victim to knee-jerk irrational, egocentric beliefs.

When you train the Observer, you are un-training the reactive mind and choosing something other than reflexive action. You are training yourself to observe and watch the passing show instead of getting wrapped up in acting and reacting. This does not make you a passive or weak person. Rather, when you are an Observer, you are aware of and can choose to take action when you decide it's appropriate rather than simply unconsciously reacting. When you take action, you solve the practical problem without the unnecessary and often harmful emotion. In other words, you take control of your life.

For example, an untrained fighter, when punched, reacts by hitting back. He doesn't strike with accuracy and he is quickly forced into submission. In contrast, a black belt in karate, someone who has trained their body and mind to consciously take effective action, would choose their response carefully. They would observe the action and judge the best way to gain the advantage. This is the difference between responding and reacting.

Although they would move quickly, in terms of reflexes, they would have consciously chosen to place their kick or punch in

the most effective place for the best and most effect de-

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### *Mental Contamination*

fense. This is non-emotional and non-reactive; it is responsive. Similarly, when you train your mind to think rationally, every time you are confronted with a situation that you would previously have been angry or frustrated or depressed about, you will act with your conscious mind and choose not to be angry but rather to handle the situation in the most effective manner.

When you get a flat tire, you fight with your wife, or the kids are driving you crazy, you can choose not to react to those things. You use the conscious part of your mind, trained with the tools we are about to discuss, and make the conscious choice to avoid feeling disturbed and unhappy.

*“The instantaneous mind is ‘It!’ What is the need to seek somewhere else? The Great Way is right there before your eyes. There is nothing hidden, nothing left out, nothing extra. There is no miracle, no manic, no mystery.”*

VINCE PARR

## CHAPTER 2

# THE THREE INSIGHTS TO A MIND OF PEACE

*“The mind is the root from which all things grow.  
If you can understand the mind, everything else is included.”*

BODHIDHARMA

*“He who is not contented with what he has, would not be  
contented with what he would like to have.”*

SOCRATES

*“Happiness or Unhappiness don’t come from  
outside your body.”*

After I studied REBT and CBT with Dr. Albert Ellis, I went on to see patients for 50+ years, and what I discovered was that no matter what the thousands of presenting problems were, people mainly feel four negative emotions: Anger, Anxiety, Depression, and Guilt. Our perceptions and behaviors vary widely, but the negative emotions connecting the two are common to us all. And even though many different things influence people's happiness, we all create our unhappiness in exactly the same way.

I call these the four blocks to happiness and inner peace because they are the four things that can stop you from feeling good. These are the main causes of your suffering! All emotional upset—what we often refer to as stress or 'disturbance'—is created by these four emotional blocks which can be broken down into four formulas and seven irrational beliefs. Learning

#### *The Three Insights To A Mind Of Peace*

How to get past these blocks to our happiness is a critical step, and once you've mastered this I will show you the science of happiness and well-being as well. This probably sounds like a crazy idea—if everyone wants happiness and it's as simple as a choice, then why don't we choose it? Simply put, it is because we are unaware of how we upset ourselves. Or even that we do!

There are three basic insights into the human condition that help us become more aware of how we upset ourselves. These insights are the fundamental building blocks to a rational mind. Without these insights, it's practically impossible for you to be happy or content in your lifetime.

## *The First Insight*

### **You create and maintain 100% of your thoughts, feelings, and behavior.**

The first insight may seem startlingly simple, but it is a profound statement: this means nothing and no one else can cause your thoughts and feelings. Someone can hurt you physically, but they can't hurt you emotionally because it's not the outside world that causes your emotions. Your beliefs about these events cause your emotions, and no one can make you think a thought. Understanding that you are 100% responsible for 100% of your thoughts, emotions, and behaviors is the first step to freedom.

Most people have only one strategy for happiness—trying to control the conditions of the outside world, whether it's with money, romantic relationships, a drug addiction, politics or religion. This does not work because the only thing we have control over is our thoughts, feelings, and behavior. The outside and inside world is in constant state of flux, flow, and change.

In fact, change is the only constant. We cannot control the outside conditions that are always changing, just as we cannot control other people or situations. The only thing we have a great deal of control over, or as I prefer, 'mastery' over is our internal world.

If you don't take responsibility for controlling your own thoughts, emotions, and behavior, not only do you block out happiness, but you will always look for someone or something to blame; others, your bad luck, or yourself for your problems and feelings. Blaming is disturbance! And it is the executioner of love! No love survives blaming! You may stay in your relationship, but all the love dies primarily because of blaming. You cannot change for the better while

continuing to blame everything and everyone else for how you feel right now. One of my favorite mottos is “*No pissing, moaning, bitching, whining, or complaining!*” Believe me, you will feel better and people will love you more!

### *The Second Insight*

**It is essential to become aware of how you create your emotions.**

The second insight is what the next chapter is all about, the ABCs of emotional disturbance, as created by my mentor Dr. Albert Ellis in the early 1950s. These ABCs are as fundamental as the ABCs you were taught in school, but these will have an even greater impact on you because they determine whether you live a life of peace or of struggle.

Much as the ABCs you learned as a kid help you identify words and sentences; the ABCs of emotions will help you identify irrational beliefs and the stories your Narrator is telling you. You

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### *The Three Insights To A Mind Of Peace*

will begin to understand how those stories, conceptions, and beliefs affect your state of mind and how to red-flag them by listening for key words and phrases.

It's essential that you recognize irrational beliefs before you can begin to dispute them. You can understand how and why you create your emotions and feelings as simply as ABC and knowing the equations for Anger, Anxiety, Depression, and Guilt. That's where the third insight comes into play.

### *The Third Insight*

**It is essential to learn how to dispute and let go of your negative emotions rapidly.**

The third insight is the key to removing the four blocks. The four formulas I present for identifying and disputing Anger, Anxiety, Depression and Guilt will help you learn to challenge the stories your Narrator tells you and rely instead on accepting the information you receive from your Observer.

The formulas for the four blocks will show you how to receive information from your Observer without conceptions and beliefs that lead to emotional disturbance. You will learn tools and techniques that help you turn Anger, Anxiety, Depression and Guilt into peace, acceptance, and contentment. In this way, you can have a life of meaning and minimal struggle even through the tough times. Let's start at the beginning—with our ABCs.

## CHAPTER 3

# THE ABCs OF HOW EMOTIONS ARE CREATED

*"We cannot choose our external circumstances,  
but we can always choose how we respond to them."*

EPICTETUS

*"You are the way you think."*

VINCE PARR

Just like you learned your ABCs in kindergarten as the building blocks for reading and writing, these are the building blocks for understanding your emotions. Once you are comfortable with your ABCs, you will be able to attack and conquer the most complex emotional problems. Knowing your ABCs, actively red-flagging, and consistently disputing them are the keys to mental health and a successful life.

In this model, ‘A’ refers to the **A**ctivating event, which is anything that happens to us—a situation, another person’s behavior, or even our own thoughts. ‘B’ refers to our **B**eliefs, the 60,000+ sentences that we say to ourselves every day, day in and day out. There are two kinds of beliefs, and whichever kind we choose leads to the ‘C’, or **C**onsequence; the emotional, behavioral, and physiological responses to the belief about the activating event. So thus far:

A = Activating Event

B = Belief or Belief System

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*The ABCs of How Emotions are Created*

C = Consequences

In the ABC model, A-to-C thinking refers to how we blame circumstances for our emotions and behaviors. Many of us have fallen into the trap of believing *something* or someone pissed us off, made us sad, scared us, or made us feel worthless. We react negatively based on an irrational belief we’re not even aware of. A-to-C thinking is not rational. It’s reactionary and illogical. Circumstances or other people are *never* to blame for our thoughts, feelings, and actions! They simply are as they are because conditions exist for them to be that way. We can, however, train ourselves to recognize A-to-C thinking so we can challenge it. Let’s look at an example.

Two friends, Dave and Jim are watching a comedian on tv. This comedian makes a joke that could be considered taboo and on a sensitive topic. This joke is the activating event, if the activating event were the direct cause of the emotional consequence, both friends would react the same way to the joke. However, Jim laughs hysterically, but Dave is upset and offended.

Let's look at Dave first. The consequence is he is feeling angry (emotional response), his heart rate is up (physiological response) and he got upset and offended by the joke (behavioral response). It was his belief that the joke was inappropriate that caused the emotional and behavioral response.

A to C thinking is when we believe that the activating event, in this case a joke, caused your emotions and therefore you have no choice but to react with upsetness. Activating events can be anything. Being called a bad name, getting dumped, cut off in traffic, but it's not these events that cause our emotions and behaviors, it's our choices in our head about those events. This is an important distinction.

Jim on the other hand, doesn't necessarily agree with the joke's content, but he believes that a joke is just a joke and that it isn't meant to be taken literally. His more relaxed belief about the bad joke leads him to a different Consequence: laughter.

Acceptance of an activating event does not mean endorsement of poor or inappropriate behavior. We make this distinction because getting upset does not help you change a poor or inappropriate situation.

Non-acceptance that bad things happen leads to a disturbed mind. A disturbed mind cannot solve problems. To be effective, you must first learn to accept that "negative" activating events happen and that there is a choice that you make between the activating event and the way you feel.

In Dave's mind the joke (A) made him respond angrily (C). This is A-to-C thinking. It is incorrect because it wasn't the joke that made Dave mad. Dave was angry because he believes (B) the joke was inappropriate and should not be joked about. This is not fact and it's not reality, it's an opinion.

Jim, on the other hand, is simply stating what happened and what he'd *prefer* to happen. What happened is provable and observable. Anyone could have witnessed the Activating event and observed the result. And it's true that Jim would prefer to discuss the taboo joke calmly with his friend. That is rational because it accepts the reality of the Activating event and does not counter any provable facts. He did not have a negative response (C) because he held only rational beliefs (B) about the Activating event (A).

If the Activating event were the cause of the response, then both men would have responded the same way. But an Activating event is just information gathered by the senses—in this case the sound of words absorbed by Dave's ears. Dave's *interpretation* of the information, the meaning he assigned to the words, caused his response. Dave, like all of us, is responsible for his Beliefs and therefore for the Consequences.

In short, when Dave heard (A) the words that were said, he told himself (B) they should not have been said, and (C) responded angrily. His emotional process, in reality, went from A to B to C. Jim's process also went from A to B to C, so why didn't *he* have a negative emotional response? Jim's response (C) was rational because his Belief was rational! Most of us, without even being aware of it, are more likely to respond like Dave than Jim. But that doesn't mean we have to continue to do so. We can learn to let go of irrational Beliefs, accept Activating events for what they are, and enjoy a life positive Consequences.

### *The ABCs of How Emotions are Created*

Positive Consequences lead to a path of peace, while a negative Consequence will lead you down a path of suffering. The path, or Consequence, is determined by one of two kinds of belief; rational or irrational. A rational belief leads to positive emotions and an irrational belief leads to negative emotions. *There are no negative emotions without irrational beliefs.*

What makes a belief rational vs. irrational? A rational belief is a preference. A belief that, although you might like a different outcome, you accept reality as it is, just as Jim did after his argument with Dave. There is no labeling and it has little or no resistance to reality *as it is*. An irrational belief is a belief that you hold that rejects reality and demands that it be different than how it is. It is also labeling and insisting that reality is wrong and should be different or should not have happened at all. Irrational beliefs are always an indication of egocentric thinking, which we will get into more later.

When these two friends perceived the same activating event (A), Dave had the belief that what was said was wrong and shouldn't have been said. Jim had the belief that what was funny. So who is right and who is wrong? It doesn't matter! I don't bring this up to discuss the debate of political correctness. The point is that no matter what the activating event is, a negative emotion is caused only by rejecting reality, and a positive emotion happens through accepting reality.

Now when I say acceptance, I am not implying endorsement or resignation. I am not saying you must approve of the activating event in order to be happy, but you do have to be able to accept

that it is inarguably, unalterably happening right now. One of the major keys to happiness is being able to accept all Activating

events—pleasant, neutral and unpleasant—because they are always happening. In the Tao Te Ching, a book written some 3,000 years ago by Lao Tzu, he says, “*Life is 10,000 joys and 10,000 sorrows.*” What happens if you embrace only the 10,000 joys? You will be disturbed at least half of your life—if not more—because in addition to sorrows, there are a lot of neutral things that happen every day that you may not like either.

How do you accept something you don’t agree with? The answer is simple and perfectly logical—*it exists, therefore it has to exist.* A situation exists exactly the way it does because all the conditions (and there are trillions of them) that are necessary for it to exist have occurred. They have already happened. How can it not exist if all the conditions for its existence have occurred!? It’s not possible for it to be different than it is just because you don’t like it. Resisting this reality is what causes every negative emotion and is technically psychosis, the denial of reality. The negative emotion is a cognitive dissonance in the mind that is caused by insisting that reality be different than how it is right now simply because *you want it otherwise!* You’ll see this concept repeated often throughout this book because it is the most critical component of irrational thinking, and the most difficult for most people to accept. We are born into the center of our own universe; it’s shocking to learn reality will continue to be exactly as it is, regardless of how we feel about or react to it. Another saying I love is “*If you accept reality it will continue as it is. If you do not accept reality, it will continue as it is.*”

When you see your true self as being interconnected with totality, or all things, then you’ll see that duality—compartmentalizing people, objects, and events as separate and distinct—does not exist. You

will understand our interconnectedness, that all

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#### *The ABCs of How Emotions are Created*

existence is you and you are all existence—including the things you like and the things you don't like. It takes a new set of eyes to truly see this reality, but once realized, you will experience the enlightenment that has been expressed by the wisdom teachers throughout history. As the Stoics said some 1,000 years after Lao Tzu, "*Amor fati (Love it all)!*" Why? Because this is your life—in its sorrows, its joys and everything between. It cannot be other than it is, at this moment. It will be a false substitute, a 'wishful thinking' version of the life you are actually living! Good luck loving an imposter.

One of the bottom lines in Rational and Zen philosophy states, "*This moment doesn't have an option.*" You can work hard to change the next moment if you choose, but this moment is what it is. This is not only true now but has always been the case. Another says, "*Flowers fall amid our longing; weeds grow despite our loathing.*" The spring flowers will come on their own regardless of our personal wishes. We are not in control here!

Now that we understand how we create emotions through the first three letters of the ABC model, the next chapter will teach you how to find all the irrational beliefs that make up the equations of the four blocks. Then we will add the 'D' and 'E.' The 'D' represents Disputing, Dissolving, and Destroying our irrational beliefs, and 'E' is the Effective, Efficient, and Eloquent new rational belief that comes as a result of disputing.

So the entire ABC model for creating emotions is:

A = Activating Event

B = Belief or Belief System

C = Consequences

D = Disputing

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E = Equanimity or new Effective Belief

Remember, any time you feel a tinge of Anger, Anxiety, Depression or Guilt, always look for what you're telling yourself about the event, for the non-acceptance of reality as it is. In the next chapter you'll find a guide to the irrational beliefs that will help you along the way.

*“Suffering is when we resist the moment.”*

KAMAL RAVIKANT

*“To a mind that is still, the entire universe surrenders.”*

ZHUANGZI





## CHAPTER 4

# THE SEVEN IRRATIONAL BELIEFS

*“Pain in life is not an option. Suffering is.”*

BUDDHA

*“There are 7 irrational beliefs behind all human suffering.”*

VINCE PARR

*“Look past your thoughts, so you may drink the pure nectar of this moment.”*

RUMI

### *Crazy & Disturbed Thinking*

When we hold onto irrational thoughts, our emotional reaction can escalate until it becomes sickness and disturbance in the body and mind. Anger may produce elevated heart rate and high blood pressure. Anxiety can take the form of sweating, dizziness, and blurred vision. Depression is often accompanied by lethargy, sleeplessness, and weight fluctuations. Feelings of Guilt and shame may lead to disordered eating or profound isolation.

We can avoid or remedy these extreme physiological reactions by recalling the three insights to guide our thinking. First acknowledge that you create and maintain all of your emotions. Stop and observe the sensations in your body. If you feel angry — flushed face, fast pulse — first acknowledge that you created the feeling of Anger and only you can change it.

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You are not a prisoner of your feelings; the key to release is in your own mind!

The second insight requires you to understand how you create these beliefs. This insight involves a little investigation on your part. You must ask yourself *why*; “Why do I think, feel or believe this?” Become aware of your thought process, switch from Narrator to Observer, and identify the irrational thinking that’s causing you to feel the negative emotion.

There are 7 irrational beliefs that cause all of human suffering and personal misery:

- 1: ‘It’ Statements
- 2: Awfulizing
- 3: I Can’t Stand It!
- 4: Shoulds, Musts, and Demands (SMDs)
- 5: Rating
- 6: Absolutistic Thinking
- 7: The Idea of Entitlement

What makes a thought, feeling, belief, or behavior irrational? It is irrational when it is unprovable—the opposite of what is provable or real. Events are subject only to the laws of physics and have no inherent meaning except the meaning we give them. If they are occurring, they can’t be other than they are. This simple *if/then* statement is the basis of logical, rational thinking:

- *If* the conditions for a situation exist, *then* the situation must exist.
- *If* the conditions have already happened, *then* the situation cannot be different than it is.

- *If the conditions change, then it may be possible for the situation to change.*
- *If the conditions do not change, then the situation will not change and must continue to exist.*

These statements are rational, provable, and factual, no matter how pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral they may be to us or our loved ones. The events that result from existing conditions are not personal attacks on us, even though they often seem like they are. This is where most of our dissatisfaction and disappointment in life starts—our self-talk, our Narrator’s story. If we do not learn to master our emotions, they’ll gain momentum and keep looping around that Negative Feedback Superhighway until we’re convinced there’s no escape.

This progression is the culprit behind all Anger, Anxiety, Depression and Guilt. While the steps are not always perfectly linear, most people will experience the process in the order I present it here. The point of learning these irrational beliefs is to red-flag them every time you hear them, and to double red-flag them if you hear *yourself* think, say, or write them. Red-flagging means to become consciously aware of the irrational belief, the story our Narrator is telling us. Once you have red-flagged your irrational beliefs, you can dispute them with rational thinking. Therefore, it is important you learn to identify all seven before moving on to disputing. These irrational beliefs, with a consistent effort, can be disputed, dissolved and destroyed, leaving peace and contentment in their absence!

*Disputing* means challenging the irrational beliefs that you hold as a fact in your mind using observation and rational thought rather than conception and emotional belief. Learning to effectively dispute

irrational thoughts, feelings, and beliefs will allow

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you to stay on the path of lasting happiness, personal contentment, and peace.

Another technique in mastering our irrational thoughts is called cognitive stoppage. Cognitive means thinking, and stoppage means to halt; stopping the thought process in its tracks. When focused on with pure awareness, any sensation, physical tension, or reaction that is caused by beliefs and emotions will begin to dissolve. This is the beginning of mastering that self-conditioning, the beliefs we tell ourselves about life that either leads to a path of peace, or a path of suffering. This is change at the cellular level, not just changing a few words around. If you don't control or master your thoughts, they will control and master you!

In the next chapter, we will go deeper into disputing, but for now let's take a closer look at the phrases listed above that represent the irrational beliefs.

*“All that we are is the result of what we have thought. Nothing can harm you more than your unguarded thought.”*

BUDDHA

*“The mad mind does not halt. If it halts, it is enlightenment.” ZEN SAYING*

*“What is most truly valuable is often underrated.”*

AESOP

### *Red-Flagging*

The first step to overcoming the 7 irrational beliefs is red-flagging—noticing and mentally marking when we realize we're having these thoughts. When you are constantly tuned in to red flag phrases you will realize how often people verbalize these damaging

and disturbing thoughts. In over half a century of

clinical practice I have approximated that in our daily conversations, we either hear someone else say these things or we say them ourselves every eight seconds! No wonder being happy, and content is such a difficult task—we’re talking ourselves out of it 7.5 times a minute!

If you want to get some practice red-flagging, just head over to social media. Twitter is a rich source of irrational thinking from all walks of life! If you aren’t sure what to red-flag or if you are deciding whether something is irrational and needs to be red flagged, walk yourself through The 4 Steps to Disputing:

#### STEP 1: OBSERVE

Try to observe yourself objectively, as if you were an outsider watching you. Ask yourself:

*“How am I feeling and acting in this situation?”*

#### STEP 2: THINK S.O.S.

Review your thoughts about Self, thoughts about Others, and about the Situation. Ask yourself:

*“What am I thinking that makes me upset and keeps me acting this way?”*

*“What am I thinking about myself?”*

*“What am I thinking about others?”*

*“What am I thinking about the situation?”*

#### STEP 3: IDENTIFY

Review the 7 irrational beliefs and try to pinpoint where in the process you’re getting stuck. It might help to jot down your thoughts and match them to the red-flagged phrases above.

Ask yourself:

*“Which irrational belief or beliefs am I creating?”*

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*“Are my thoughts rational and provable?”*

*“Which of my thoughts are irrational or unprovable?”*

#### STEP 4: REPLACE

The final step to disputing, dissolving, and destroying your irrational beliefs is to replace them with rational thoughts. Once you identify which irrational beliefs are causing your disturbance, you can dispute those thoughts, but it will be far more difficult if you don't replace them with something more rational. Sure, you could just tell yourself to stop thinking those thoughts but that's rarely successful. It's like telling yourself not to think about pink elephants. You just pictured a pink elephant, right? Now what if you're told to think about your favorite pair of shoes? No more pink elephants!

Replace your red-flagged thoughts with rational thinking.

Ask yourself:

*“What realistic preferences can I substitute for my irrational ‘Shoulds, Musts and Demands?’”*

*“Is my situation 100% awful? Can I stand it, even if I don't like it?”*

*“Does this situation make me or other people bad, horrible, and worthless?”*

*“Will it truly never end or change?”*

This last step is critical. Remember that what makes something irrational is that it is unprovable, so it makes sense to replace an irrational belief with one that is provable.

## *Disputing the Irrational Beliefs*

Disputing means challenging irrational beliefs that you hold as a fact in your mind. When you dispute, you are using your thinking or rational mind rather than falling back on your reactive or irrational mind. You are engaging your inner Observer to observe the facts, identify the story your Narrator is telling you, and dispute the conception that's causing your disturbance. Once you learn how to do this, you'll be able to understand the equations for Anger, Anxiety, Depression, and Guilt and find personal contentment and peace.

For example, let's say a car cuts you off in traffic, and you start feeling angry. First, you recognize that you are beginning to feel Anger. Remind yourself of the first insight and realize that you are creating this Anger. Now look for the A (activating event) and recall the second insight. You can understand how you have created the feeling by examining the story you're telling yourself. What irrational beliefs can you red-flag? You probably say something to yourself along the lines of, "he or 'It' upset me" or, "people should be better drivers (shoulds, rating, entitlement)."

This is when disputing starts: ask yourself why. Why shouldn't he cut you off? Why should people be better drivers? Why should other drivers let you go first? Why should everyone be a good driver, just because you want them to be one? For over one hundred years there have been drivers of all skill levels on the road with all kinds of reasons for the decisions they make (spoiler alert: none of them include your desires and preferences!). When you ask yourself these questions, you are beginning to challenge your irrational beliefs.

*The Seven Irrational Beliefs*

Sometimes it is hard to determine where the unreasonable part of your thinking is. This is because some of the ‘facts’ we consider to be infallible are so ingrained in our thinking that we do not realize that they need to be disputed and questioned. Some questions that are good to use to challenge a thought we hold as a fact came out the work of Dr. Albert Ellis and Byron Katie. You can always use these four questions to challenge your thoughts. They are very powerful in helping you give up your irrational beliefs.

- 1: Is it true? Ask yourself if what you are saying or thinking is an actual fact or if it is a demand that you are assuming things should be a certain way.
- 2: Is it absolutely true?! Is it 100% correct beyond a shadow of a doubt? Are you sure you are 100% correct, and anyone who disagrees with you is 100% wrong? Is there any room for error? Maybe 90% true, or is there any room (1%) that you might be mistaken?
- 3: Well let's assume for the sake of arguing that you ‘are’ 100% correct! How do you think you are going to feel if you keep thinking these thoughts all day long? Happy? At peace?
- 4: How do you think you would feel if these thoughts never entered your mind? Our feelings follow our thinking. If we don't think about it, we feel fine. If we do, we feel upset over and over again!

Let's try applying these challenge questions to the idea that everyone should be a better driver. A lot of people would agree with

this statement, but does that make it an incontestable fact? Let's look at those four questions.

- 1: Is it true that everyone should be a better driver? It would be arguably safer and more pleasant if they were, but the conditions for better drivers—stricter law enforcement, more extensive driver training, tougher licensing requirements—do not exist.
- 2: Is it possible that you are not 100% correct? What does ‘better’ mean anyway? Slower? More cautious? More considerate of your desires? I can think of one counterexample off the top of my head where that statement would not be true: If someone had a pregnant woman about to give birth in the back of their car, it would not be prudent to be a ‘better’ driver. It would be in the best interest of the driver, the woman, and the baby to drive quickly to the nearest hospital and not obey each and every driving rule.
- 3: How will you feel if you keep thinking the other cars on the road should drive differently? You will probably be frustrated and angry on a regular basis.
- 4: Well, then, how do you think you would feel if you never thought about how the other drivers should drive? Probably a lot calmer with little or no anger or anxiety, which would probably make you a better driver.

When you ask yourself these four questions, you can see that this is a statement that can be disputed, and once it is disputed, you will have less disturbed thinking when you are behind the wheel.

Remember, it is the beliefs we hold that go *unquestioned* that cause

us the most harm! Become a master at disputing your held beliefs—the key word here being ‘held.’ You suffer because

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you cling tightly to your beliefs, refusing to let go under any circumstances; this will always eventually lead to emotional disturbance. Hold your beliefs—if any—very lightly with a cupped hand instead of a clenched fist, and always be willing to let go of it in an instant when new evidence emerges to refute it. One of the major reasons I love Zen so much is that it encourages us to have (i.e., hold) no beliefs! This is ultimate freedom. Nothing is holding us back. We do not have to consult some sacred standard or book to see if we are doing ‘right.’

Let’s now look back at those seven irrational beliefs and explore how to prove that they are irrational by disputing them.

#### **1: ‘It’ Statements**

An ‘It’ statement starts with the idea that something or someone beside yourself is responsible for your emotions. “He, she, it, that, they, or you upset me.” It can also be a positive: “You make me happy.” This kind of thinking will only lead to disturbance. Some phrases to be aware of (and to red-flag) are:

- It upset me.
  - He or she pissed me off.
  - That upset me.
  - They made me angry.
  - Those people really annoy me.
  - It’s not me, it’s my nerves.
  - If it wasn’t for them, I would be happy.
  - He or she is driving me into someone else’s arms! •
- You upset me!

When you begin to pay attention to your inner dialog, you'll notice much of your disturbance begins with blaming something or someone for creating a painful, inconvenient, or undesirable

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feeling. If your computer is slow to open your email program when you're in a hurry to leave work you might gripe, "It's annoying how slow this stupid computer is!" On your commute home you might rail at the driver on your bumper, "This guy is such a jerk, he's really ticking me off!" When you arrive home to bikes in the driveway you might grumble, "It's so irritating when the kids don't put their stuff away."

In each of these examples you are handing off the responsibility for your emotions to something outside your control. You are telling yourself something outside of you—your computer, that driver, your children—has the power to force you to respond angrily! We cannot be upset by the outside world. We can only be upset by our conceptions—our thoughts, feelings and beliefs—about it.

If a person or thing could force you to be upset, then that same person or thing would cause everyone to be upset for all time. You may be angry when you get a flat tire, but that's not the flat tire's fault. If flat tires caused disturbance, every flat tire would lead to disturbance for every person! It would be a simple case of cause (flat tire) and effect (angry person).

A familiar example of cause and effect is how gravity works here on Earth. Gravity results in objects falling. Making things fall—all objects, according to the same rules, every single time—is a function of gravity. It is measurable, provable, and predictable;  $g = 32$  feet per second, squared. Does an object fall faster or slower at your house than it does at mine? I didn't think so. Same for you, same for me. None of us has any choice in the matter.

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If disturbance were an inherent function of flat tires, this would also be a predictable, measurable outcome for everyone all the time; flat tire=x degree of y-disturbance/second. Getting angry— all people, to the same degree, at the same rate, all the time— would be the outcome of getting a flat tire. This is silly because we can't even measure disturbance! So, you can't be 'more' upset than I over a flat tire. There would be no variance in how we would feel. It is not cause and effect!

But you might think, "Well, I felt the Anger when the tire went flat, so if the flat tire isn't causing my Anger, then what is?" The answer is simple—it is your conception of what a flat tire means that's causing Anger. You've told yourself a story: that a flat tire means dirtying your clothes, waiting on a tow truck, arriving late to work, and maybe getting yelled at by the boss. But these things are not reality! They haven't happened and may not ever happen. You've assigned meaning to a simple fact. This creates a feedback loop of feeling, thinking, and behaving, and that's how you're creating feelings of Anger. It's not a personal attack by the tire! The tire doesn't care. It doesn't know if it's inflated or deflated—it doesn't even know it's a tire! The only thing that's true is that your tire no longer has air in it. The rest is a story you are telling yourself in your mind, your inner Narrator.

Let's go back to our traffic jam. When you feel your frustration building, look at the people in the cars around you. Are all of them banging on their steering wheel and screaming in Anger? No. Some of them are talking on their cell phones, or singing along to the radio, or listening to their books on tape. So the traffic jam cannot be making you angry, because if traffic jams caused Anger, then

everyone around you or in traffic jams for all time would have to be angry too. You conceive traffic to be

inconvenient and have assigned a negative meaning to it—it is just wasted time and now you're going to be late for dinner. The lady singing along to the radio beside you is not angry because her perception of the situation is different. For her, it's a good time for an impromptu concert!

In short, 'It' did not anger you; 'It' simply exists because all the conditions are there for it to exist. The way you're conceiving 'It' did. It's what you tell yourself about these kinds of situations that create your feelings. Again, this is good news, because while situations will not always be convenient for you, and although there may be nothing you can do about it, you *can* master your *reaction* to these situations.

Let's say you hear someone at work swearing at the copy machine and shouting, "This machine sucks! It makes me so angry!" You can red-flag that irrational belief, noticing that your coworker is blaming something or someone else (in this case, an inanimate object) for their feelings of anger. You can practice disputing 'It' statements by recognizing that the copy machine is not capable of creating Anger in a human. It simply is what it is—working or not—and the human who is angry is the one creating the emotion. You can train yourself to recognize flawed thinking in others' behavior so you can avoid doing it yourself.

When you identify an 'It' statement as your irrational belief, ask yourself why you think 'It' is upsetting you and why it should be any different than it is. Remember that it is the way it is because the conditions exist for it to be that way—if the roller is jammed, *then* the copier doesn't copy. *If* air escapes from a tire, *then* the tire goes flat.

This if/then relationship is based on scientific principles that are true for everyone all the time. It is not affected at all by your beliefs about it. The only way to

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change the outcome is to change the conditions—to alter the ‘if.’ *If* you could fix the copier, *then* the copier *could* work, and wouldn’t that be nice for you? But more often you can’t change the conditions (i.e., make traffic flow more smoothly), so the outcome is a fixed, unchangeable reality. It is more rational and therefore less upsetting to realize that you are creating a conception that is negatively affecting only you and to replace it with acceptance.

The more you train yourself to notice ‘It’ statements the less likely you are to get upset with circumstances beyond your control and instead simply accept them for what they are.

## **2: Awfulizing**

Awfulizing is when we take unpleasantness and make it more unpleasant than it is; we exaggerate the event or situation to an extreme degree. Now, the dictionary defines awful as simply unpleasant, but the way Ellis used it—as the basis for ‘awfulizing’—is closer to what we may call ‘catastrophizing.’ In this sense, indicating the thought that something is not just unpleasant, but so much worse than unpleasant that it can’t be measured. When we awfulize, we are perceiving something as being off the scale of suffering. This belief that anything can be completely 100% negative is irrational and damaging.

These are seven main ways we awfulize:

- Awful
- Horrible
- Terrible
- Dreadful

- Overwhelming
- Disastrous

- Catastrophic

We've all done it. We come down with the flu and groan, "Everything hurts and I'm dying." When you're exhausted you might remark, "I'm about to pass out right here." To many of us this kind of hyperbole seems harmless: just a little creative license to illustrate the severity of our discomfort. There are, however, emotional consequences. Every time you tell yourself, "This is as bad as it gets," you are creating an irrational belief. Can you prove this is the most extreme bout of flu you could ever suffer—worse than Stage 4 pancreatic cancer? It sucks and it feels physically uncomfortable but reinforcing the belief that you could not possibly feel worse than you do right now will create emotional disturbance. It's certainly not going to make you feel any better!

There are three ways to dispute Awfulizing. You don't need all three, one should be enough, but in case one doesn't work for you have options.

#### OPTION 1: AWFUL AS AN ATTRIBUTE

We often use awful as an attribute. That is, when we ascribe an inherent characteristic to something else that doesn't actually possess it. It's subjective—an opinion. There is nothing that inherently possesses awful, so this is automatically false. For example, if you stood in a modern art museum in front of a Chagall painting and asked the first twenty people what they thought of the painting, some would love it and others would say it was awful. You say to all the second group, "Put your finger on the awfulness in the painting." It can't be done.

All twenty of these people could point to the red, the green, or the blue in the painting and agree that those are indeed red,

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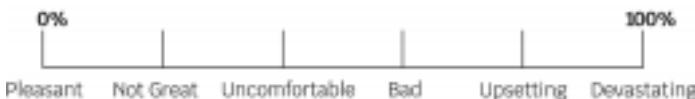
green, and blue, but none of them could show you where the ‘awful’ is. This is because awful doesn’t actually exist in the painting—it is something that exists in the mind! Calling something awful is attributing a characteristic to it that it in itself doesn’t possess.

When you realize you have created the concept of awful in your mind, you can then dispute the irrational belief that you have no choice but to feel disturbed. If you created the disturbance, you can get rid of it!

#### OPTION 2: AWFUL AS AN EXAGGERATION

The second way to dispute awful is to put it on a scale of unpleasantness from 0% to 100%. Zero percent would mean that nothing was unpleasant and 100% would be the worst thing that could ever happen to you or others in this lifetime.

## How Awful Is It?



On a scale of 0% to 100%, where would having an itch that you couldn’t quite reach fall? How about getting a speeding ticket? How about being tortured to death? Some people react to a spot on their shirt or blouse as if it were a first strike nuclear attack! There is a variation in our experiences in life and we will have them all up and down this spectrum. Where does the thing you are calling awful fall? If your boyfriend didn’t call last night, is this really a catastrophe? Where would that fall on the scale? Probably not very high, once you

put it in perspective. Also, visualizing a scale helps us see that things could always be worse. Perhaps you would say that losing a loved one is very close

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to 100% on your scale. But what if you lost 2 loved ones? That would be worse, right? What if the plane crashed going to the Parr family reunion? Surely that would be awful—right? No, it could still always be worse! So nothing can be entirely awful because things could always be worse. Thus, looking at things on a scale of unpleasantness disputes the idea that something can be entirely awful.

When we use ‘awful’ to describe our belief about a situation we don’t like, we are saying it isn’t even on a scale of unpleasantness. It’s off the scale! It’s 110% or 400% which, of course, is impossible. It’s like the coach who tells his team, “We are going to give 110% today!” If 100% means ‘as much as exists,’ where does that extra 10% come from?

I used to say that being tortured to death was probably at 100% on the scale and qualifies as truly Awful. But someone in my audience correctly pointed out that something could always be worse than this. When I asked, “Well, what could be worse?” he said, “That you could be tortured to death slower!” And he was correct! Something could always be worse.

To dispute awful, realize you can never get to 100% unpleasant in reality; something could always be worse. Now, this isn’t meant to invalidate the way you are feeling. Some have said this exercise is also like saying you *shouldn’t* be happy because things could always be better (luckily no rational person would ever ‘should’ on you like that). This exercise is simply a tool to help put your emotions in perspective; to help you snap out of how real and intense it feels.

*The Seven Irrational Beliefs***OPTION 3: AWFUL AS A SHOULD**

The third way to disprove awful is to realize when we are using awful as a Should: to say that it is so unpleasant that it shouldn't exist! For example, "I can take 69% unpleasantness, but 70% is too horrible and it Should not be!" But 70% unpleasantness has always existed and always will (at least in our mind!).

When you call something awful, you are saying that because you don't like it, it shouldn't exist! This is egocentric thinking and leads to suffering, because no matter how much we would like something not to exist (or exist), it exists because all the conditions are there for it to exist. Reality does not adjust itself to our likes and dislikes.

*"Poverty and hardship are created by false thinking."*

BODHIDHARMA

*"With our thoughts, we make the world."*

BUDDHA

**3: I Can't Stand It (ICSI)!**

The third irrational belief says we cannot survive under the current conditions: "I can't stand it!" This belief is a funny one because if you truly couldn't stand something, you would be dead! If you're reading this sentence at this moment in time, it is proof that you have stood everything that has ever happened to you in your entire life. And you will continue to stand everything until the millisecond of your death. If you truly couldn't stand something, you would just keel over!

Other "I can't stand it!" statements to red-flag are:

- It crept up on me (e.g., the irrational response, the feeling, etc.)
- It's driving me crazy.

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- Something just snapped.
- Something came over me.
- Those people are driving me...*up the wall / crazy / bananas / to drink / to the brink, etc.!*
- It fell on me from out of the blue! (e.g., again, the irrational response, feeling, or behavior)
- I can't stand it.
- I've had enough!
- I can't take it anymore!
- It's unacceptable!
- This is the straw that broke the camel's back!

We know "I can't stand it!" is irrational because every time you have said it to yourself you were wrong. You have probably stood every single thing that has ever happened to you in your entire life! "I can't stand it!" has never been true about any thing that has happened to you, and you can't reliably predict if you can't stand something in the future, so that statement can never be correct. You may have stood things poorly in the past, which is what you are here to work on so that you don't keep repeating this pattern of behavior in the future. But let's start with: "You have and will 'stand' everything in your life until your last breath."

Many parents have remarked, halfway through the summer break, "These kids are driving me crazy." I know my own mother said it many times! A new intern at a busy firm might find herself thinking, "I just can't handle this pressure!"

Most listeners will understand you are not driving yourself to the psychiatric ward once the kids are in bed or that you're going to keel over with the next paper added to your inbox, but you've nonetheless formed an irrational belief. You've told

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yourself a person or situation has pushed you to your absolute limit—the end. Goodbye to your life as you know it!

You may say, “I can’t stand cockroaches!” Few people will argue with the sentiment that cockroaches are not desirable houseguests, but even fewer people have died from a nighttime visitation.

“Cockroaches are gross” is a conception, you cannot perceive gross this is a concept, not a universal fact; believe it or not there are people who like and collect cockroaches. That people don’t generally die from seeing or touching a cockroach is a provable fact and, by that standard, Rational. Therefore, the opposite statement, “I cannot continue existing after seeing a cockroach,” is unprovable and irrational. However, you may still not like them. But they are not, alas, the Grim Reaper!

I once heard a colleague confess how irritated he gets when he seems to get stopped by every single red light on his com mute to work. By the fourth or fifth light he’d be fuming and Awfulizing. “This happens every time! I can’t stand it!” he’d yell. He realized this irrational belief was causing him emotional stress and starting his day off on an unnecessarily negative note. One day he imagined literally not surviving a red light—that the glowing red eye glared him to death right there in the intersection. He envisioned his obituary headline ‘Man Loses Life to Killer Stoplight’ and began to laugh. He disputed his “I can’t stand it!” statement with rational, provable evidence: no one’s ever died from waiting at a red light. On the other hand, getting angry about stoplights—which exist and over which we have no

control—could certainly raise your blood pressure to dangerous levels.

To dispute “I can’t stand it!” statements, it is essential to ac knowledge that if a statement is not true or provable, it is by

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definition irrational and will lead to feelings of Anger, Anxiety, Depression and Guilt! It is not true that you are now insane, dying, or about to pop open. These are not provable facts and are therefore irrational.

When you find yourself thinking of any of the red-flagged “I can’t stand it!” statements, recognize that you most certainly *can* stand it. You can say to yourself, “I can and will live through this. This is not a death sentence.” Otherwise you’d already be dead, and the situation or person you believe you cannot stand would be your murderer! The sooner you stop telling yourself you can’t stand it, that you ‘just’ don’t like it, you will realize that you can and will stand everything that happens to you until the millisecond you stop existing, the sooner you will stop being disturbed and start living well.

As Albert Ellis always said:

*“You stand everything until the millisecond of death. The fact that you are saying that you can’t stand it is proof that you ‘are’ standing it! You may be standing it poorly, but you are standing it. If a steamroller rolls over you slowly in first gear, you stand it to the point of death!”*

Big Al always did have a way with words!

#### **4: Shoulds, Musts, Demands (SMDs)**

The fourth irrational belief is that a person, situation, or thing should be different than it is because we don’t like it: “It should be this way,

not that way.” SMD’s (Shoulds, Musts & Demands) are the underlying irrational beliefs behind every negative emotion. You can’t feel bad without a Should, must or demand!

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Dr. Albert Ellis used to say: “When you are upset—*cherche la Should* (look for the Should).” This is what happens when our preferences become demands. What you would like reality to be becomes what you believe reality *ought* to be. In essence we have two philosophies toward life: a ‘desiring philosophy’ which is sane and rational, and a ‘demanding philosophy’ which is crazy and self-defeating. SMDs are the latter.

The 17 major SMDs to red-flag are:

- Should
- Must
- Ought to
- Have to
- Got to
- Supposed to
- Need to
- Expect
- Insist
- Obligation
- Ultimatum
- Fault
- Blame
- Deserve
- Owe (as in “You owe me.”)
- Imperative
- Demand

I strongly recommend putting these 17 Should statements on your refrigerator or bathroom mirror and memorizing them, because this is the main cause of your disturbance and what ruins most of your relationships!

You can sum up emotional disturbance in a nutshell. You can throw away your Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)-IV, V, VI, and all later additions, forget all the labeling and rating of your friends, patients, and yourself, and look for one of all three of these ways of distorted thinking:

- 1: "**I should** be perfectly competent, adequate, achieving, and successful in all possible ways, and isn't it awful if I am not!" This belief can lead to Depression, Guilt, shame, and self-loathing.
- 2: "**You must** treat me kindly, lovingly, considerately, respectfully, and of course put my "needs" first and ahead of yours, and if you don't do this, you are a bitch or a bastard that deserves severe punishment." This, as you can see, leads to Anger, rage, hate, vindictiveness, revenge, murder, and even genocide.
- 3: "**The world must** be fair, just, kind, loving, forgiving, and give me everything I want on a golden platter (screw the silver one), and if it doesn't do this then it is a horrible and terrible place and I might as well kill myself!"

This leads to low frustration tolerance and can cause all of the above emotions and mistreatment of self and others.

You have almost no control over what happens outside of yourself! Dr. Ellis was also famous in saying, "The Universe (or reality)

doesn't give a fuck about you or what happens to you! And if you still believe it does after all you have seen in your life, then you are easily disturb-able!"

You do, however, have a great deal of control over your *reaction* to what happens to you. You can replace irrational thoughts and

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demands with rational thoughts and preferences, which we'll cover in the disputing section a little later.

These SMDs are irrational, widespread and probably so rooted in your thoughts and belief systems that you don't even realize you are thinking them. Start listening for the 17 SMD statements in your thoughts and words. Look for them, stop them, dispute them, let them go, and you will be on your way to rational living and personal happiness.

The easiest way to dispute SMDs is to realize that what exists, exists. What doesn't exist, doesn't exist. This leads us to the only Rational should: "Everything that *happens* today *should* happen!" The key word in this sentence is 'happens,' not 'should.' If it happens, then it must exist. Since something *does* exist, it *should* exist because all the conditions occurred for it to do so. Everything that happens is the result of past events that created current conditions. Each millisecond is composed of trillions of conditions. You don't have a time machine to change all the preceding events, so how can you expect to change the ones that are happening now? If the conditions exist for an event to occur, then the event must occur.

When you are sitting in traffic, thinking, "There shouldn't be so much traffic," you can take a breath, be aware of the key words 'should or shouldn't,' and consciously note that this statement is irrational.

Reality shows us traffic exists—you can see it, you can hear it, and you can't move your car because of it! It exists because all the necessary conditions to create a traffic jam have already occurred and are still occurring—a lot of cars on the road, roads that are not wide enough, everyone getting out of work at the same time, etc. How could you have clear sailing under these conditions? Not without a flying car you couldn't!

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Since the conditions for traffic exist, traffic *does* exist, it *should* exist, and *will* exist for as long as the conditions remain. It can not be otherwise regardless of whether it is pleasant or unpleasant for you or me.

Once you have become aware of your irrational, demanding philosophy (SMDs) you can replace it with a rational, desiring philosophy. Some desiring or preference words to replace your demanding words are:

- It would be better...
- I would like...
- I would prefer...
- It would be nice...
- We could...

Let's put these desiring words into our three examples from before. If we replace these with a rational, desiring philosophy toward life, these statements become:

1: "**It would be better** if I were more competent, adequate, achieving, and successful in most ways!" You are accepting what is true and making a rational, provable statement about what would be better for you.

2: "**I would like** you to treat me kindly, lovingly, considerately,

and courteously.” This is rational. The desire for kind treatment exists in you, therefore it is true.

3: “**It would be nice** if the world were fair, just, kind, loving, and easy.” This is a rational statement, and leads to tolerance of ourselves, others, and the world in general and helps us behave in those ways. As a bonus, we usually feel better too!

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Do you see how much softer and more pleasant these words sound when compared to demands? A Should can be replaced with ‘I would prefer,’ or ‘it would be better.’ This we can prove or disprove. This is what makes it rational and scientific. It would be better if you didn’t cheat on me (at least for me), but there’s no law of the Universe that says you shouldn’t do it! If there were such a law, then no one could ever cheat on any one, because physical laws of the Universe must be obeyed and wouldn’t allow it. It is when our preferences become demands that we are saying a Should and becoming upset.

Let’s say you look in the mirror and tell yourself, “I should go to the gym,” or “I should not have eaten that cake.” But you didn’t go to the gym and you did eat the cake. That’s reality. But by practicing disputing, you can train yourself to hear those irrational beliefs (the ‘Shoulds’), stop, and change them to preferences; “It would be better for my health if I went to the gym a few days a week,” or “I’d like to practice healthier eating habits.” These are true statements that don’t contradict reality.

Zen has a great statement I love: “No snowflake ever falls in the wrong place.” How could it? Events have already happened that created conditions for each and every snowflake to fall exactly where it does. In the past hours rain clouds piled up and the temperature dropped. The pressure changed and water droplets

were released, freezing as they hit cold air. The laws of physics determined the velocity, drift, and landing zone of each flake. That snowflake doesn't care in the least that it landed on top of the other four inches of flakes you are unhappily wiping off your windshield. It is exactly where events and conditions dictated. In all of history, no snowflake, no grain of sand on the beach, no atom in the vastness of space *has ever been in the*

*wrong place.* Each one exists because all of the conditions happened for it to exist, right where it is.

When you find yourself 'Shoulding,' recognize first that the situation exists because all the conditions are there for it to exist. It can't be any other way! Then you can replace it with softer language and acceptance. "It would be lovely if I were the only person on this road but that's not the reality of rush hour in the city!"

*"He who is not contented with what he has  
would not be contented with what he would like to have."*

SOCRATES

*"Everything that happens today should happen!"*

ALBERT ELLIS

## 5: Rating

The fifth irrational belief is the concept that someone or something is good or bad, better or worse, right or wrong. "I'm worthless and I'll never amount to anything!" We are rating when we arbitrarily judge and define something, someone, or ourselves with a label—good or bad, right or wrong, worthwhile or worthless—and decide, in that moment the entire worth of that person. This may be directed inward at ourselves or outward at someone or something else.

Some phrases to red-flag are:

- I'm the best or worst...*athlete / husband / artist, etc.* •
- He is always...*late / loud / rude, etc.*
- You're a bad...*student / child / lover / friend, etc.* •
- I am worthless and no damn good!
- I am great and wonderful.

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Rating—in either a positive or negative way—leads to disturbance, so red-flag both kinds of rating. Watch for ‘-er’ words. When we use -er words like better, smarter, funnier, prettier, hotter, cooler, richer, dumber, etc., to describe ourselves or others, we are nearly always rating. Rating is a major cause of all kinds of human suffering, even leading to wars and conflicts between loved ones and nations. This is no small matter.

When you apply any kind of label to a person, you are essentially deciding their entire worth. When you say someone or something *is* bad, you are assigning them the exact same qualities as the word. Bad, by definition, can contain no good or it wouldn't be bad, and good can contain no bad or it wouldn't be good. But people do both good and bad things, so if a person is entirely bad, they can contain no good. Someone who contains no good would *only* be capable of bad things forever! They would be incapable of petting a dog on the head or sending their mom a Mother's Day card, because that which *is* bad can only *do* bad. Good could *only* do good. They could never spit on the sidewalk, forget their anniversary, or ever have one bad thought. This doesn't mean we allow ourselves to accept poor or destructive actions, but it is more rational and correct to rate the action separate from the person. It may be beneficial to rate your behavior but never yourself.

This belief is the most difficult to dispute because it requires you to give up the pervasive concept of self and self-esteem that has been ingrained in you since childhood. We hear and are taught from day one in our culture, society, and religion that self-esteem and self-worth are necessary, that We are a good person or a bad person depending on whether we do the things our particular society or culture tells us to do. If we do not do

what religion and society says, then we are awful and terrible! And we are not only awful in this life, but we will also burn in hell in some sort of afterlife—forever! How can anyone be happy with that hanging over their whole life? We are perpetuating ideas that will never lead to contentment.

Many people claim you can't find happiness without self-worth. I will go so far as to say that you will never obtain true happiness and contentment with a concept of self-worth! But why do we treat self-esteem as a desirable trait, something we must accumulate and accommodate as we grow up? If our thinking creates a conception of self-esteem as 'good,' then in order to be good we must rate ourselves as good at all times, regardless of our thoughts, feelings and behaviors. I have done a lot of work in prisons and will tell you for certain that most of the sociopaths and criminals I worked with possessed an overabundance of self-esteem. The desire for self-esteem, at its pinnacle, tops out with sociopathy. Is that what we want our children to emulate? How much self-rating will yield 'enough' self-esteem?

The same goes for physical appearance. I feel so sorry for the young girls that grow up in our society today. They are taught that they should not only strive to be beautiful, but that it is directly related to their self-worth. As a result, we have a society full of plastic surgery

addicts and formerly healthy teenagers who are slowly starving themselves to death because of eating disorders. Even as adults we rate ourselves as “thinner than her, but not as thin as she is” or “more handsome than my brother, but not as handsome as my best friend.”

For example, a student facing a big exam or trying out for the varsity football team believes that if he doesn’t make an A on the exam or secure a place on the first string, he is a failure.

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And since failure is bad, he must be a bad person. What he has been taught by his parents, his school environment, and what he sees on TV assigns meaning to his failure—that *doing* bad means *being* bad.

So, how do we dispute rating? Giving up the concept of self is the first step. Along with Rational Theory, I find the Buddhist Philosophy can help us to not cling so tightly to a concept of self. Many people mistakenly believe that the Buddha said that there was no self. This is not what he taught. He said that no matter where you look, you cannot *find* a self. Many people will point to their body and say, “Here I am.” But that is the body. Where is the ‘I,’ the self that we are so protective of and have to please and get more and more stuff for? Go to your nearest medical center and tell them you want an MRI so you can find yourself. You may soon hear them calling the Psych Department. All of science, philosophy, or religion throughout human existence has never been able to find it, but feel free to give it a shot! How can you rate something you can never find? You can’t! If you find yourself, you will be famous—the first person in human history to have ever done it. You will be the next Albert Einstein! Many religions claim that they not only know that you have a self, soul, I, or me, but they even know what happens to it after you die! Wow, what power! George Carlin called this “major bullshit!”

The second part is to understand rating as a product of your own conception, a story your Narrator tells you about the information it receives. Joseph Goldstein, an excellent Vipassana Meditation teacher, explained it in the following manner: When you go out at night, and the moon is not out, look up at the stars and pick out the Big Dipper. Most everyone can do this.

Now ask yourself; “Is there really a Big Dipper in the sky? Can I reach up, grab the ‘handle’ and scoop out a bit of space?” Of course not! We have assigned a shape, label and meaning to an arrangement of pinpoints of light completely unrelated cooking tools! Would it be a Big Dipper to primitive man? To a raccoon? They are stars—no more, no less. They exist, and they exist in those positions regardless of what we think, feel, or believe. But we teach and have been taught to call it the Big Dipper, which makes some sense to anyone who’s seen a ladle or dipper, so we believe it. Once you understand the concept of the Big-Dipper that-isn’t, try looking in the sky and *not* seeing the Big Dipper. Once this concept has formed, it is hard not to see it. The same with the concept of self. Once this concept has formed, it is very hard to let it go, but is very much worth the effort. On the other side is *Satori*, or enlightenment. This is major work and necessary for long term joy and happiness.

In the same way, we look in the mirror, and having already formed a conception of sour elf we say, “Oh, there I am!” However, the reflection in the mirror is not *you*—it’s just an image reflected in the glass. It can do nothing on its own and has no meaning of its own. It is not us. Our thoughts, feelings and behaviors shift from moment to moment, always acting and reacting differently. Our cells are constantly changing, dying, and multiplying. We are literally a different being every second, and when we rate ourselves (or others)

we are placing a sweeping total evaluation on the entirety of our existence. How can you rate an ever-changing system? I may be good now, but am I still good 15 minutes from now? Are those newly created cells still good, or did the good disappear with the ones that died over that time period? Are my current thoughts and behaviors

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bad? Does that mean my thoughts and behaviors for the rest of my life will be bad?

How would you be different if you never rated yourself? Imagine looking in the mirror and only seeing whether your hair is out of place or your outfit matches, instead of tearing yourself to pieces over a birthmark or a grey hair or a few extra pounds. Rating is inherently damaging to your mental health. Even if you look in the mirror and think, “Wow what great shape I am in!” you are hurting yourself, because what happens in fifteen years, when you don’t look the same? Are you somehow inferior to your younger self? Rating positively or negatively is still negative!

Another excellent perspective on the negative effects of self-worth comes directly from Albert Ellis’s book, *A Guide to Rational Living*:

*“Above all, don’t confuse getting love with having personal worth. If you rate yourself as having intrinsic worth or value as a human, you’d better claim to have it by virtue of your mere existence, your aliveness, and not because of anything you do to earn it. No matter how much others approve of you, or how much they may value you for their own benefit, they can only give you, as Robert S. Hartman noted, extrinsic value, or worth to them. They cannot, by loving you, give you intrinsic value”*

*or self-worth. If intrinsic value exists at all (which we seriously doubt, since it seems an indefinable Kantian thing-in-itself), you get it because you choose, you decide to have it. It exists because of your own definition. You are good or deserving because you*

*think you are and not because anyone awards you this kind of an inherent value.”*

The third step in disputing rating is to stop evaluating *people* and only rate *behavior*. This applies to rating yourself as well. Stop calling people bad and simply realize their behavior might be bad or unpleasant to you at that moment, but the person's entire 'ever-changing system' is not bad. If a child draws on walls or pulls his sister's hair, he is not a bad child. His behavior was bad and unpleasant, so as a parent you would try to alter his behavior, but his essence is not bad. If someone cuts you off as you drive down the road, it is their actions that you don't like, not the person. They may be exhibiting asshole-type behavior at that moment, but that person does not exist solely and unfailingly as an asshole.

When you recognize that we are all changing every moment for our entire lives, it is easier to understand why rating a person is irrational. If we are not the same from one millisecond to the next, how can you apply a permanent judgment of self-worth? It is more reasonable to say, "I did not accomplish the things I wanted to today," than to say, "I'm lazy." If you tell yourself you exist as simply and wholly lazy, you're saying you will never accomplish anything. All it takes is one day of checking things off your to-do list to prove you are not, by definition, lazy.

Our varsity football player can dispute self-rating that his failure to earn a first-string position means he is a failure and a bad person. If

he were to apply rational thinking, he might say to himself, “I don’t like failing, but ‘I,’ my essence, is not a failure. I am changing all the time!” Because his cells, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are always changing, it is rational to think that he can perform better if the conditions exist for him to do so—if

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he trains harder, practices more often and eliminates distractions. But even if he does succeed, that doesn’t mean he’s a better person. It’s just as irrational to apply positive self-rating; “I’m a great guy because I scored two touchdowns!” It would be more rational to think, “I performed better tonight and man, that feels pretty good!” (I would prefer this person commit to Auburn University, but that’s another topic for another time!)

If you find your irrational belief falls into the ‘rating’ category, determine who you’re rating. Is it you or someone else? What are you or they doing? Why is that behavior or trait upsetting to you? Recognize that it is not the person being rated causing your disturbance, but the meaning you’ve assigned to the behavior or trait. The person—you or another—is simply who they are at that moment in time and can’t be any different in that moment. “As it is, not as I want it to be.”

Once you stop this kind of self-defeating defining, you will tend to lose your desperate needs for others’ approval. You can accept that you need never rate yourself—the entire sum of your ever-changing system—and that you can choose a life of awareness and acceptance, just because you decide to do so. Recognize that you only think you need their acceptance, not because of the practical advantages it may bring, but because you foolishly define your worth as a human being in terms of receiving it.

Conversely, as you reduce the need for the approval of others,

you will find you reduce the need to rate yourself as a person. You may continue to rate many of your traits, but you will create unconditional self-acceptance regardless of those traits.

When you truly stop evaluating yourself and others, you will eliminate the concept of personal worth or of human worth. This sounds negative but it is in reality very positive. Keep in mind, it's just as self-defeating to rate yourself as good and wonderful and deserving as it is to tell yourself that you're bad, awful, worthless and non-deserving. There is no universal scale of best to worst for us to be rated on. There is no Yelp! review system for humans, much as we may sometimes wish there were. You are you. They are them. Don't compare or rate. Just be better in the ways you can, in your behavior and actions. Let the rest go.

If you give up all rating and just learn to enjoy the present flow of all of life as it is—likes, dislikes, and everything between—you can *Amor fati*, love it all, simply because it is your life. Wouldn't it be great if this were taught in our school systems? No more popular kids vs. the 'losers,' no more bullies vs. teachers' pets. Everyone is unconditionally accepted just as they are!

The Golden Rule of Rational Living and the four blocks is this:

**Never, never, ever, put yourself down  
about anything!**

*"Every situation—nay, every moment—is of infinite worth; for it is  
the representative of a whole eternity."*

JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE

## 6: Absolutistic Statements

The sixth irrational belief is absolutistic statements. Like Awfulizing,

absolutistic thinking is another way of exaggerating the circumstance to unnecessary extremes. When something is absolute, it means there are no exceptions under *any* circumstance.

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stances, ever. “I’ll never find love,” “I always screw up,” are just a few examples.

Some phrases to red-flag are:

- Always and Never
- Good and Bad
- Right and Wrong
- Good and Evil
- Praise and Blame
- Gain and Loss
- Pleasure and Pain

These are examples of extremes in our thinking that are almost always incorrect. The universe does not exist in black and white, but in millions of glorious hues and shades in between! There are many positions between the absolutes. We often identify ourselves with; pro-life or pro-choice, pro or anti-gun laws, one religion or another, Democrat or Republican, pro- or anti-LGBTQ+ rights, for or against legalizing marijuana, etc. These are black and white labels for tiny, defined sets of absolutes. Always & never thinking says you either fit into the box (always agree) or you don’t (never agree). What one person believes is right another will view as wrong, and we can fight about it forever, can’t we?

So, which is it? Neither! Thinking makes it so, as Shakespeare told us in Hamlet (Act II, scene 2) almost 600 years ago! *“Nothing is either good or bad but thinking makes it so.”* The actual truth is that

both extremes exist—they simply are. This is seeing totality—and you can embrace this fact or continue fighting. You choose. And how will this affect your personal happiness? Do you really have any control over this?

In absolutistic thinking the conditions are permanent and complete. This is true of scientific laws and very little else. It is certainly not true of our circumstances for three main reasons we've already discussed;

- 1: Events only happen as a result of a specific set of conditions.
- 2: Our emotions are created by our beliefs about events not the events themselves.
- 3: We are an ever-changing system, never the same at any two moments in time.

Therefore, if we are always changing, our conceptions, thoughts, and events will change, too. When our conception of events changes, so too do our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Just because you're feeling distraught about your job options today doesn't mean you'll always feel this way, or that you are a failure and you'll never get a job. It could change today, or tomorrow, or 50 years from now, but it won't last forever. In fact it never stays fixed at all. All of life is in a constant state of flux, flow, and change. This is reality as it is; our thoughts about reality are never reality.

It may help to understand that your brain has evolved over millions of years to anticipate patterns in an attempt to protect you from pain. If a certain set of conditions preceded a painful event in the past, your Narrator will associate that event if it notices indications of that circumstance again. Because we often see what we're looking for, your Narrator may tell you those conditions exist where

they actually don't. You end up in a negative feedback loop where the pattern repeats itself until you begin to believe that it will always be that way. The only way out of that loop is by engaging the Observer. Look at the

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facts. The only thing you know for sure is that you don't have a job right now. Your conception of what it means to be jobless—that you're a loser, a failure, a no-talent slug—is a story you are choosing to tell yourself. You are assigning irrational meaning to a provable fact, but you can choose not to! Humans can't tell the future so you can't possibly know if you'll have a job in the future—neither does anyone else! What you can know is that sitting on your couch binge-watching TV isn't as helpful as distributing resumes. That's a fact, too.

Is it true that you'll never find love? You don't know! It happens when you least expect it. One of my colleagues had a Grandfather in a nursing home who was romantically involved with two women he called his two wives—and he was 106 years old! Is it true that you'll never be successful? Well that's up to you! For most of our life, our outcomes are largely the result of our actions, timing, and being in the place most optimum for change to occur.

The last step to disputing an absolutistic statement requires acceptance of the facts you've observed. Be willing to release your belief about the present circumstance and accept that the conditions are the way that they are and that they are changing. Resisting this moment won't change anything because it's already happened. For example, snap your finger — can you get it back? The best definition of mental health I have ever heard is 'infinite flexibility in a world of constant change.' Conversely, disturbance can be characterized as 'rigidity in a world of constant change.'

When you let go of the extreme, that a situation or circumstance is

permanent and absolute, it begins to feel less urgent, less hopeless. You can choose to observe the facts, note how things

change from moment to moment, and realize that a shift away from absolutistic thinking, however minor, is a step toward peace and contentment.

*“The moment is the sole reality.”*

KARL JASPERS

*“People say that what we’re all seeking is a meaning for life. I don’t think that’s what we’re really seeking. I think that what we’re seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.”*

JOSEPH CAMPBELL

## 7: The Idea of Entitlement

The seventh irrational belief concerns delusions of being deserving or undeserving: “I deserve to be respected!” This irrational belief has two sides: one extreme is believing that we are more deserving or better than anyone else and that we automatically deserve things to go our way. The flip side to this is feeling undeserving—that because of our mistakes in the past, we are not worthy of happiness or joy. Guilt, self-blame, and Depression soon follow.

Some phrases to red-flag are:

- I don’t deserve this...*gift / compliment / award, etc.* • I deserve the diamond tennis bracelet (an actual quote from a client!).
- You worked hard and you deserve it.
- They deserved the punishment they got.
- I am entitled to better treatment.
- I deserve respect.

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- I am entitled to...*a better neighborhood / the best food / higher education / prompt service / affordable medical treatment / etc.*, because of my...*title / position / family / ancestry / race / religion / wealth / caste, etc.*

Entitlement begins with egocentric thinking—that yours is the only perception that matters. This idea of entitlement is to me one of the ugliest ideas about the human condition. This ‘my way or the highway’ belief system is the basis of nearly all human cruelty, racism, bigotry, wars, murder, and genocide. “My Aryan race is exclusively entitled to a privileged existence (the finest art, luxurious living conditions, bountiful food, the rarest delicacies)” is the essence of the entitled thought that created the Holocaust.

When you believe you are entitled, you are saying you’re special. Everything should always go your way, you should have everything you want, and anything you dislike should cease to exist immediately if not sooner. Yet from experience we know things don’t always go our way, we don’t have everything we want, and we can’t avoid things we dislike, let alone erase their existence. Expecting any other outcome is a clear recipe for emotional distress. A sense of entitlement can make you blind to reality. You become so confident and absorbed in your story—of which you are the perfect and infallible star—that you lose touch with what’s really going on around you.

If you find yourself clinging to feelings of entitlement, first pause to zoom out and look at the big picture. There are more than 7 billion individual humans on this planet who are all the star of their own unique story, some more than 100 years long. This planet is only one celestial body among trillions of stars, galaxies, and planets;

the potential for life scattered across