

The Mental and Emotional Tool Kit for Life – A Way to Give Psychology Away. Education that Can be Therapeutic. An Ounce of Prevention Worth Many Pounds of Cure

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I taught health education at the high school level for 33 years. It was my job to try to help my students prevent and avoid all those common problems and issues young people so often struggle with. I learned very early that the way we typically teach health education, by dispensing helpful information and advice, was never going to be as effective as I would like it to be. Actually, I learned this much earlier in my own family watching loved ones behave in ways they knew were unhealthy for them even when they knew better, or even after having suffered because they did. I was a volunteer paramedic on our local rescue squad for many of my early years as a teacher. I will always remember responding to an alcohol overdose call and finding a young female student I had in class to be the victim – a student who I knew had aced all our quizzes and tests in our alcohol unit. There was also another young female who I knew had aced our quizzes and tests in the sex education portion of the class, and who went on to be our school's valedictorian, who had an unplanned pregnancy.

What I came to realize early was that the real problems was that too many of my students generated what I like to call a dysfunctional amount of emotion in response to their life events in and outside the classroom. By dysfunctional I mean more than they wanted to have, more than was necessary or helpful for the situations they found themselves in, more than was healthy for them to have, more than they knew what to do with, and a type and amount that worked against them instead of for them as emotion is intended to. Many of the problems and issues young people and adults so often struggle with are literally defined by generating a dysfunctional amount of emotion, i.e. anxiety disorders, anger problems, toxic guilt and shame, depression. Others are caused by doing so, i.e. violence, abuse, arguing. Still others are what people do to attempt to get relief from a dysfunctional amount of emotion, i.e. smoking, drinking, and using drugs, self-harm, suicide. Finally, there are all kinds of problems that arise from engaging in such relief seeking behaviors, i.e. addiction, overdoses, accidents, injury, illness, disability, premature death.

To be sure, it was quite understandable and part of being human that they did generate a dysfunctional amount of emotion, especially given what many of their life events had been. However, this emotion made them more reactive to their life events, and less response-able, or less able to respond in the best possible way. Becoming reactive

made them less likely to consider consequences before acting, made it harder to access and act on that helpful information and advice I gave them or learn from their own or others experiences. It also makes them more likely to violate their own morals and values and regret what they did later. I like to say that a dysfunctional amount of emotion can make an otherwise smart person do stupid things.

Given this realization, I dabbled in many of the current pop psychology approaches of the day in an effort to help my students get a better handle on their emotions. Honestly, it was also a personal quest to discover how to better manage emotions because like so many other new teachers, I had more than I wanted to have, and knew what to do with. Then one day, I was having an unusually emotional day. Some students had really worked me over in class and I decided to complain to their counselor. He did his best Carl Rogers for a while, but then tired of my ranting and said "Look Ray, it's your choice how you want to feel". That wasn't received well at all. It seemed like he was saying it was my fault that I felt the way I did, that there was something wrong with me for feeling the way I was, and that I was making a big deal out of nothing. Its how most people typically react when they first hear such a thing. However, he went on to explain Dr. Albert Ellis' ABC Theory of Emotions and told me there were multiple classes for teachers about Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT) and Education (REBE) offered in the Chicago area by a therapist named Terry London.

I began taking classes with Terry and knew immediately that I had found what I had been looking for, for so long for my students and myself. I even got to meet Dr. Albert Ellis and work with him on some personal issues as a demonstration during a workshop. I began teaching what I was learning to my students. I called my version of REBE the ABC System of Cognitive, Emotional and Behavioral Self-Management and Self-Improvement. An article I wrote about this approach was published as the lead article in the May-June 1997 issue of The Journal of Health Education.

A few months later, two professors from the East Coast published an article in the same journal about health educators becoming mental health educators. I've always suggested that every teacher should be what I call a mental health first responder. In that article, they published a quote from A.G. Miller to the American Psychological

Association in 1969. It was “I can think of nothing that would be more relevant to human welfare or pose a greater challenge to future psychologists than to find a way to give psychology away”. That’s something I believe we miss a golden opportunity to do when we have our young people in schools. I was amazed that I had almost reached the age of 40, had been through 12 years of required schooling, six years of undergrad, and a couple more to get my masters, and no one had ever told me “It’s your choice how you want to feel” – and I was a psych major as an undergrad. Teaching all our young people that “It’s your choice how you want to feel” would be a major ounce of prevention worth many pounds of cure for all those issues and problems they so often struggle with, and continue to into, and throughout adulthood. Rational Emotive Behavioral Education would be the perfect way to give psychology away. REBT is a highly educational form of therapy emphasizing self-help – teaching people to fish so they can eat for a lifetime. One of my favorite quotes from Dr. Ellis is “Therapy should be educational, and education can be very therapeutic”.

I worked construction a lot as a teenager. I’ve always liked building things. Many others like fixing things. Regardless of what one might want to fix or build, there are always a finite number of tools available to do either. The trick is learning which tool is called for, and getting really good at using them. It’s what separates master mechanics and tradesmen from the rest of us. I always remember struggling with some task I was given on a job site, only to be bailed out by one of the old guys I worked with who told me, “Kid, any job is easy if you use the right tool”. That experience was the origin of formatting REBE into what I call The Mental and Emotional Tool Kit for Life. My experience has been that if we give people the right “tools” and some guided practice in using them, they will do a lot to help themselves, and come away with that important sense of self-efficacy.

In the end, we really can’t and don’t “fix” them. Only they can do that. The best we can do is show them how to do so. In doing that, I’ve always had the motto as a teacher that we need to be “simple enough to be good”. REBT/REBE is just that – simple enough to be good.

If I ran the world, we’d be teaching these “tools” to all new and current teachers, for their own sake. We don’t currently prepare teachers for the challenges of the job of teaching – specifically in how to manage their own thoughts and feelings in the face of the challenges they surely will face when they are in the classroom – some more than others depending on what they teach and where. It’s why so many new teachers are leaving the profession in the first five years. It’s why so many others are overwhelmed by the job, suffer health wise, make mistakes with their most troubled and troublesome students, and look forward to retirement. I would teach them the “tools” first for their own sake. After they learned the value of the “tools” in their own lives, it would be much easier to enlist their help to teach the same tools to their students. They would be the best people to do so, and the better their students learn to self-manage what goes on inside their own heads, the easier a teacher’s job would become, and the more rewarding it would be.

Kids have to be in the right mental and emotional place to be ready, willing and able to learn and be taught. We’ve always had too many who were not in such a place, and didn’t know how to get there. It’s the real reason so many kids don’t learn as well or as much as

they could or we and they would like them to, and too many drop out. We’ve never really done much in education to help them learn how to get into a better place mentally and emotionally. We teach them so much in so many other ways about how life works, and how to use that knowledge to their advantage to make life better for themselves and others. Yet we have always and in many ways continue to neglect to teach them the workings of their own minds and those of others. We neglect to give psychology away.

With all this in mind, allow me to give a brief overview of the “tools”. There is more at the website www.itsjustanevent.com I like to say that if you can read, you can lead yourself and others to a better place mentally and emotionally.

Tool 1- Understanding and Appreciating the Important Role of Emotion in Everyday Life

I like to hyphenate the word e-motion and tell people it’s because e-motion is energy to move. That energy is designed to help us get what we want and need and deal with threats. The more we want something, need it, or at least think we need it, the greater the real or perceived threat will be for not getting it, or losing it. The greater the real or perceived threat, the more energy to move it would make sense to have. The more energy we generate, the more reactive we become. That means we become less likely to consider consequences before acting, are less likely to access or act on helpful advice or information we’ve been given, less likely to learn from experience, and more likely to violate our own morals and values. To do so might make some sense if the threat was great and our lives were on the line. An “anything goes” and “whatever it takes” approach would make sense. Like they say, sometimes “He who hesitates is lost”. However, one of my favorite rules as a teacher was that “There are two ways to make something you don’t like worse – do nothing and overreact”. Too often people do the latter, and do so because they generate more emotion than is necessary or helpful. They do that because they manufacture threats where they don’t exist, or magnify ones that might out of proportion to reality. REBT/REBE does a wonderful job of showing us how we do that, and how to stop doing so.

A basic tenet of psychology is that people start and continue to engage in the behavior they do because it serves a purpose. A dysfunctional amount of emotion is what gives purpose to all kinds of unhealthy, self-defeating and even self-destructive behavior. The more emotion someone generates in response to their real or imagined life events, the more purpose it will serve in starting or continuing to behave in unhelpful ways. They are also more likely to adopt what Rudolph Dreikurs called “mistaken” goals that get them off course from getting what they really want, and make doing so much less likely. As long as behavior continues to serve a purpose, it will be difficult for people to stop engaging in it, i.e. smoking. As long as they continue to generate a dysfunctional amount of emotion, the behavior will continue to serve a purpose. It’s why the “War on Drugs” has not been won. There continues to be a demand for drugs. That demand arises because drugs serve a purpose in peoples lives. They do that at least in part because so many people generate a dysfunctional amount of emotion in their daily lives. As long as this demand continues, there will always be people willing to do anything, even risk their own lives and the lives of others to meet this demand.

It’s easy to see emotions like frustration, irritation, annoyance and

concern, or their stronger kin anger and anxiety as energy to move. It's not as easy to see emotions like regret, remorse and sadness, or their stronger kin like guilt, shame or depression as energy. Anger and anxiety is really our fight or flight response to real or perceived threats. Consider the damage that could be done, especially in the age of modern weapons, were there no check on fight or flight. Regret, remorse, sadness, shame, guilt and depression are the checks. However, it's still true that as one moves from regret and remorse to shame and guilt, or from sadness to depression, one becomes increasingly reactive, and less response-able. Turning to alcohol and drugs, or even suicide are example of reacting to life events rather than responding to them in the best possible way.

I developed a THINK-FEEL-DO Thermostat model. They say a picture is worth a thousand words. I've found the thermostat model to be a helpful visual for myself and others. It allows people to assess where they are emotionally and behaviorally, and why they're there in terms of their cognition. It also helps them see where they might want to be instead, and what it will take cognitively to get there.

I stay at cheap hotels when I travel. They often have older thermostats where you can turn a needle/lever up to raise the temperature of the room. In the winter I often enter rooms where the heat has been turned off during the day. The rooms are often COLD. I often push the needle up to the top. As the room starts to warm up, it's eventually just COOL. At some point, it will stop feeling cool and start feeling sort of WARM and eventually really WARM. At some point it stops feeling just warm and starts to feel sort of HOT, and eventually really HOT.

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|-------------|
| Really |
| HOT |
| Sort of |
| Really |
| WARM |
| Sort of |
| Sort of |
| COOL |
| Cold |

We can create an analogous thermostat for emotions. Whenever we look at emotions, we want to consider the FID – Frequency, Intensity and Duration – of them. At the bottom of our FEEL thermostat model, we have a high FID of CALM. As we turn our FEEL thermostat up, our FID of CALM decreases and eventually we start to feel a low FID of emotions like FRUSTRATION, IRRITATION, ANNOYANCE, CONCERN, SADNESS or REGRET and REMORSE. Our FID of these emotions can increase, but at some point, we start to feel ANGER, ANXIETY, DEPRESSION, SHAME and GUILT instead, going from a low to high FID. In REBT/REBE these are considered qualitatively different emotions and not just weaker or stronger version of the same thing. The reason has to do with their cognitive origins, which will be explained in Tool 4. The important point is that as our FEEL thermostat goes up, we go from not being motivated to do anything (DO NOTHING) to having energy to move but still being free to RESPOND in the best possible way. However, as our FEEL thermostat goes up further, we start to REACT and eventually are likely to OVERREACT.

| | |
|--|-------------------------------|
| High FID ANGER ANXIETY DEPRESSION SHAME, GUILT Low FID | Overreact REACT |
| High FID FRUSTRATION, IRRITATION, ANNOYANCE CONCERN SADNESS REGRET, REMORSE Low FID | RESPOND |
| High FID CALM Low FID | DO NOTHING |

Our goal should be to teach people how to be more RESPONSE-ABLE. To free them to be more response-able, we need to teach them to generate a more functional amount of emotion – to lower the Frequency, Intensity and Duration of troublesome emotion, to keep their FEEL thermostats down, and turn them down quickly should they go up suddenly. That's what REBT and REBE do so well.

Tool 2- Unconditional Self-Acceptance (USA) and Unconditional Other Acceptance (UOA)

Shame arises when we believe we are not living up to expectations, either others or our own. We all have plenty of expectations placed on us by others from early on in life, and place many more on ourselves. That means plenty of opportunities to feel shame. I would often hear teachers say “The problem with these kids is they have no shame” when talking about their troublesome students. Actually, it's exactly the opposite. They have a lifetime of being told and believing they don't live up to others expectations. I use ESP to describe what troublesome students suffer from; Estrangement, Shame and Powerlessness. Unfortunately, much of what teachers and schools do to intervene with such students just exacerbates their estrangement, shame and powerlessness – which is why they often just get worse instead of better.

Dr. Ellis used to say that shame can be both a primary and secondary disturbance. It is often the primary feeling people seek relief from through alcohol and drug use and abuse, and even suicide. It's a primary reason young people shut down in school and ultimately drop out. By secondary disturbance, Dr. Ellis meant that it causes people to keep what they think and feel a secret, out of fear that if others found out it would reflect badly on them and be one more way they didn't live up to expectations. Keeping secrets can be unhealthy, dangerous or even deadly. It allows someone to rehearse irrational thoughts in their own mind “like a broken record” without the challenge they might otherwise receive if said out loud. This repetition creates cognitive “ruts” in their brains that are a lot like ruts in dirt roads – easy to slip into and hard to get out of once you do. Ruts make irrational thoughts automatic. Dr. David Amen says people have ANT problems – Automatic Negative Thoughts. When thoughts become so automatic simple opinions one has about oneself,

others and life start to feel like “facts”, truths or givens rather than the simple opinions they really are. These “facts” often then become the “irrational logic” of unhealthy, self-defeating and even self-destructive behavior. What people do is unhealthy, self-defeating or self-destructive, and makes their lives worse, but it makes sense to them because of the way they think.

The solution is USA or Unconditional Self-Acceptance. To me it means choosing to see what we think, feel, say or do as part of being human, and understandable given what our life experiences have been. By understandable I mean that if we put others through exactly what we have been through, they’d probably think, feel, say and do much the same, and maybe worse. I often suggest to people that they imagine that if on the day they were born, we took 100 other newborns and from that day forward put each of them through exactly every single life event we have been through. What would we expect them to think and feel at this point in life? My guess is pretty much the same. Whenever we look at anything about human beings, we can get “bell curve” distributions. There are always some who have little of something or do something poorly, and some who have a lot of something or do it very well, and a whole bunch in the middle. Some of those 100 babies might fare quite poorly given their experience, some fare very well, and whole bunch would probably be in the middle somewhere. I often ask “Is it possible that you might have ended up at the top of the curve and just don’t realize how well you are actually faring? I also suggest that we should all come with movies of our lives. Then I ask “If others watched your movie, would they probably see the understandable reasons why you think, feel, say and do what you do now”.

One of the first things I always do when working with people is to let them know that I have UOA or Unconditional Other Acceptance. I say something to the effect that “I want you to know something about me and how I look at things. I choose to see whatever others think, feel, say or do as part of being human and understandable given what they’ve been through so far in their lives.” I go on to explain what understandable means as I did above, and encourage them to choose to look at themselves in that way, as I choose to look at myself.

Tool 3 – Developing an Internal Locus of Control

I explain to people that locus of control means where they see their feelings as coming from – what they see as the cause of them. We can have an external or internal locus of control. The vast majority of people walking the planet have an external locus of control. They wrongly see what happens, and what others say or do as the cause of how they feel. Just listen to the way people talk about their feelings and how they come about, i.e. “He really makes me mad”. The problem is that by looking at things this way one needlessly puts oneself at the mercy of others and one’s life events. One gives others power and control over one’s emotional destiny that others really don’t have, and gives away the power and control one does have. It leads to people feeling like victims, and typically feeling worse than they need to or than is helpful, for longer than necessary. More importantly, they miss opportunities to feel better.

I teach a formula for how life unfolds.

EVENT + THOUGHTS = FEELINGS > BEHAVIOR

Whatever happens, or whatever others might think, feel, say or do is just an EVENT in this formula. It’s really what we choose to

think about such EVENTS that really causes how we feel. Thoughts cause feelings, not events. Attitude is always the father of behavior. Finally, a person’s behavior will tend to follow his emotions toward his life event.

Dr. Ellis’ ABC Theory of Emotions says that A is an Activating Event. Activating Events can be real or imagined. B stands for the Beliefs we have about the event, or ourselves, others and life. C stands for Consequences, or what we feel and do as a consequence of what we believe. It’s like that formula we learn in math, $a + b = c$, where a is a constant, and b is a variable. If a stays the same and we change b, c changes. Likewise, if we change our beliefs about an event, ourselves, others or life, our feelings change and our behavior is likely to as well, perhaps for the better, perhaps for the worse, depending on what those new beliefs are.

The reason it’s our CHOICE how want to feel is that there is always more than one way to look at anything. Some ways will make us feel better, others worse. Some ways will make it easier to deal with what happens, others will make it harder.

There are a host of cognitive choices we make all the time, usually without being aware that we are. They include:

- How we LOOK AT things
- What MEANING we attach to what happens
- What we REMEMBER about the past
- What we IMAGINE will happen in the future
- What we FOCUS on
- What we COMPARE things to
- What we EXPECT of ourselves, others and life
- How much IMPORTANCE we attach to what does happen
- What we spend our time THINKING about

I like to use the metaphor of an iceberg. 90% of an iceberg is beneath the surface. Only 10% is above it. I call behavior the tip of the iceberg. For most people, the way they make such cognitive choices is quite automatic from past practice and rehearsal. It’s why people are often unaware that they have such choices. It’s important to raise their level of awareness of these choices. They can be written on a postcard to help us remember.

These CHOICES are the source of our power and control over our emotional destiny. The reason is because no one can really make them for us, unless we let them. People let others do so all the time. That’s part of being human, but with practice, we can learn to stop doing that.

There are a host of quotes that remind us of our power and control. For example, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder”. So is how we feel. It all depends on how we look at things. Abraham Lincoln said “A man is about as happy as he makes up his mind to be”. Shakespeare said “Things are neither good nor bad, but thinking makes them so”. Two thousand years ago Epictetus said, “A man is not disturbed by the events of his life, but by the beliefs he holds of them”. A saying that sums up all of these is “Life is MIND made”.

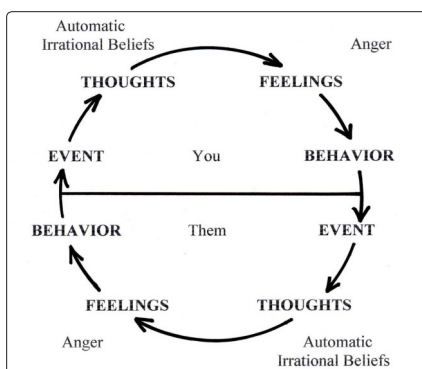
That said, it’s important to strike a balance between “It’s my choice how I want to feel” and “Whatever I think or feel is understandable”. I like to think of an old fashion doctor’s scale, the kind where a nurse slides a weight right or left to strike a balance. When my mother

passed away, it would not be the right time to say “Dad, it’s your choice how you want to look at this/feel”. It would be much better to go with “Dad, whatever you think or feel right now is perfectly understandable and part of being human”. However, if months later my brother calls and says “Dad is really depressed and I’m worried we’re going to lose him too”, it’s time to talk to him about the choices he has, and how he’s making them. However, if he continues to choose to make them in a way that causes him to get depressed, that would be understandable and part of being human. This latter philosophical position is always our default position.

When I first start working with someone, I will promise to teach them how to have REAL power and control in and over their lives. I typically start by explaining what REAL power and control is NOT. It’s not getting angry or physical with others. It’s not doing things others tell you not to. It’s not thinking you can upset others at will. That’s not how life really works. REAL power is being able to choose whether you’re going to get upset or not, and if you do, how upset you’re going to get, and how long you’re going to stay that way. It’s being able to feel good about yourself, the way you’ve always wanted to feel. It’s being able to feel as good as possible regardless of what happens. It’s being able to keep others out of your head, and to start defending yourself against those who have been living in your head for much too long rent free. Most of all, it’s being able to get your life to turn out the way you want it to as much as possible. I also like to promise to teach them how to be smarter than most other people in some simple but important ways. The way to do all these things is to teach them to have an internal locus of control.

Developing an internal locus of control also means learning and constantly reminding oneself of what we do and don’t have control over. I use a diagram I call The Circle of Conflict to teach this. It’s a circle divided into two halves; one labeled YOU and the other SOMEONE ELSE. Whatever someone else says or does is just an EVENT for us. We generate THOUGHTS about that. Those THOUGHTS might cause FEELINGS, like anger for example, and we might say or do something to the other person. What we say or do is just an EVENT for them. They’ll generate THOUGHTS and FEELINGS, like anger, and say or do something back that becomes another EVENT for us. A conflict can escalate quite quickly in this way.

The important question is which half of the circle do we have control over? It’s really only our half. Which half do many people spend most of their time and energy trying to control? The other half. It’s why what we say and do so often doesn’t work or help. The more we try to control what others think, feel, say or do, the more out of control our lives will feel. The more we focus on and try to learn to control what we think, feel, say and do, the more in control we’ll feel.



Developing an internal locus of control also means learning to not take unnecessary responsibility for how others make themselves feel. We’re responsible for what we say and do, but not necessarily for how people make themselves feel about it. Whatever they think or feel will be understandable and part of being human, but it’s their choice how they look at things, and make any of the other cognitive choices we all have. We have no real control over how they make such choices anymore than they have control over how we make them. Therefore, it’s also their choice how they want to feel.

Two of my favorite quotes are from Dr. Victor Frankl and Eleanor Roosevelt. Dr. Frankl said “Everything can be taken from us but the last of human freedoms – to choose one’s own attitude in any given set of circumstances. To choose one’s own way”. The short version is “Our last freedom is our attitude”. Eleanor Roosevelt said “No one can make you feel bad about yourself without your consent”. These are the basis of what I call Mental and Emotional Karate –teaching young people to defend themselves mentally and emotionally against verbal and cyber attacks much like we teach some kids to defend themselves against physical attacks in karate classes. Most bully prevention tries to appeal to young peoples’ humanity while also instituting serious consequences and increasing vigilance and enforcement. Unfortunately, these approaches often don’t stop all the bullying. The goal of Mental and Emotional Karate is to “harden the target” against attacks.

When I was a child, they used to tell us to respond to bullying with “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me”. Kids often responded to name calling with “I know you are, but what am I?” The latter was actually quite effective as long as we stuck with it. However, if we started thinking or saying out loud “How dare you call me that?” we were at their mercy. Nowadays, in appealing to the humanity of young people, we’re telling them “words/names hurt” and “it hurts their feelings”. We’re teaching kids to have an external locus of control and putting them at the mercy of other kids, encouraging them to see themselves as victims and feel like ones. When we were kids, we also were taught “I’m rubber, you’re glue. What you say bounces off me and sticks to you”. An “I’m rubber you’re glue 2.0” might be “YOU can think, feel and say whatever you want to about me. That’s YOUR choice. But it’s MY choice how I look at myself and feel about myself. And you don’t get to make those choices for me, unless I let you and I choose not to”. Teaching kids to have an internal locus of control is the best way to protect them from bullying – to vaccinate them in a sense against the sometimes tragic consequences of being bullied.

Tool 4 – Recognizing Irrational thinking in one self and others

Dr. Ellis identified and named four basic types of irrational thinking. It’s a model that is simple enough to teach anyone. The four types of irrational thinking are Demandingness, Awfulizing, Can’t Stand It-itis, and Labeling and Damning.

There are three basic ways we can look at anything. We could NOT CARE about it. We could WANT, PREFER or DESIRE it. Or, we could think we NEED it, it’s a NECESSITY, and DEMAND it. We all have the right to want whatever we want. The problem according to Ellis is that human beings have a tendency to think they NEED things they simply WANT, to treat their simple PREFERENCES as NECESSITIES, and to DEMAND what we simply DESIRE. Ellis called this creating a PERCEIVED NEED. What it does is make not getting what we want, prefer or desire, or losing it a bigger threat

than it is, or needs to be. This is how people manufacture threats where they don't exist, or magnify ones that do out of proportion to reality. People even go so far as to perceive what they want as being equivalent to air, water or food in their lives. This makes not getting what they want or losing it equivalent in their minds to suffocation, or dying of thirst or hunger. It's how and why people generate more emotion than is helpful or necessary. It's why they get angry instead

of just frustrated, irritated or annoyed. It's why they get depressed instead of just sad. It's why they become anxious instead of just concerned, and why they feel ashamed or guilty instead of simply regret or remorse. It's why they end up REACTING to life events rather than being free and motivated to RESPOND to them in the best possible way.

Perceived Threat

| | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|--|---------|------------|--------|---------|------------------|---------------|
| NEED NECESSITY DEMAND | LARGE | ANGER | ANXIETY | DEPRESSION | SHAME | GUILT | REALLY LONELY | REACT |
| WANT PREFER DESIRE | MEDIUM | FRUSTRATION IRRITATION ANNOYANCE | CONCERN | SADNESS | REGRET | REMORSE | LONELY | RESPOND |
| DON'T CARE | LITTLE OR NONE | CALM | CALM | CALM | CALM | CALM | CALM | DO NOTHING |

Don't get it - lose it

One of the rules I teach is "The bigger the difference between our expectations and reality, the more emotion we'll generate". By thinking we NEED something we simply WANT, by treating our simple PREFERENCES as NECESSITIES, and by DEMANDING what we simply DESIRE, we artificially create a much bigger gap between our expectations and reality if or when we don't get what we want, prefer or desire. I've read that Shakespeare said "Expectation is the root of all heartache". That sums it up quite well.

People can make demands of themselves, other and life. Which they do affects which feeling they'll generate. ANGER typically arises from making demands of OTHERS. The essence of the demand that gives rise to anger is "They HAVE TO do what I want and be the way I want them to be". ANXIETY essentially comes from making demands of oneself or life before life events, i.e. a test or job interview. The essence of the demand that gives rise to anxiety can sometimes be "I HAVE TO be perfect and do everything perfectly" or "Everything HAS TO go perfectly and the way I want it to". SHAME and GUILT come from making demands of oneself after life events. The essence of the demands is "I SHOULD be doing more/better than I am" and "I SHOULDN'T have done that" or "I SHOULD have done something else instead". DEPRESSION comes from making demands of life. The essences of the demands are "This SHOULDN'T/CAN'T be happening to me. I SHOULDN'T have to deal with this".

A third rule I teach is "When people start to think they NEED what they simple want, and DEMAND what they simple desire, it can make otherwise smart people do stupid things". The reason is simple. What would we be willing to do to get air if we were suffocating? ANYTHING. What if we start to think we NEED someone's love in our lives like we need air, water and food? What would we be willing to do to get their love, or keep from losing it? The same thing. ANYTHING. And that's what can make an otherwise smart person do stupid things.

| Demands of | Feeling |
|------------|--|
| OTHERS | ANGER |
| SELF | ANXIETY (before event) SHAME, GUILT (after event) |
| LIFE | ANXIETY DEPRESSION |

A fourth rule is "Behavior intended to satisfy a perceived need will win out over behavior intended to satisfy a rational preference. A simple example would be wanting to quit smoking. That would be a rational preference in many ways. However, if someone thinks and tells themselves "I NEED a cigarette. I CAN'T go all day without one", his/her odds of quitting are diminished greatly.

There are many things in life that are unpleasant, inconvenient or uncomfortable. The mistake people make is to start to tell themselves that what is happening to them is AWFUL, as in the worst possible thing that could be happening to them at the moment. We all have a right to like or dislike whatever we want to. The mistake people make is to turn their THINK thermostats up to I CAN'T STAND what is happening to me. The implication is that one might die or go crazy because something happens. In this way, they needlessly inflame themselves. It's why Ellis called it I CAN'T STAND IT-ITIS. Both stem from thinking we NEED what we simple WANT, treating our simple PREFERENCES as NECESSITIES, and from DEMANDING what we simply DESIRE. If we didn't get air, water or food, we would die in minutes, days or weeks/months. It truly would be AWFUL and we COULDN'T STAND it. The proof would be that we'd die.

When people are being demanding, they use verbs like NEED, NEED TO, HAVE TO, CAN'T and even SHOULD and SHOULDN'T, instead of verbs like WANT, LIKE, PREFER, RATHER or WISH.

| | |
|------------------------------|--|
| NEED NECESSITY DEMAND | NEED (TO) HAVE TO CAN'T SHOULD SHOULDN'T |
| WANT PREFERENCE DESIRE | WANT LIKE PREFER RATHER WISH |

The fourth type of thinking is called LABELING AND DAMNING.

We all have the right to like or dislike our own or others behavior. The mistake we make is to LABEL AND DAMN the person, either ourselves or others. It's blatant overgeneralization, like calling an apple "bad" simply because it has a bruise, even though the majority of the apple is perfectly fine. It's condemning the DOER instead of the DEED.

Tool 5 – Challenging and correcting irrational thinking

There are a variety of ways to challenge our own and others irrational thinking. One is to simply apply the scientific method to our thoughts and comments. Every thought we have or comment we make is essentially our theory or hypothesis about the way others, we or life is, or should be. The question is whether the evidence of our lives supports or refutes our theories. Does it suggest alternative, better theories. The closer our theories and hypotheses match reality, the less emotion we'll generate needlessly and the better mental health we'll enjoy. The more they diverge from reality, the more emotion we'll generate and the poorer mental health we'll enjoy.

Another simple strategy is to simply ask "Is that a fact or just an opinion?" When people needlessly disturb themselves, it's typically because they think in terms of, and cling to opinions about themselves, others and life. The more people think in terms of facts, the less emotion they tend to generate and the better mental health they enjoy.

One of the simplest ways to challenge irrational thinking is to ask simple questions. For example:

Why do you NEED that?
 You NEED that, or just want it?
 You'll die if you don't get air, water or food. Are you going to die if you don't get that?

Why do they HAVE TO?
 They HAVE TO, or you just want them to?

Why CAN'T that be happening?
 It CAN'T, or you just don't want it to?

Is it AWFUL, or just unpleasant/inconvenient/uncomfortable?

You CAN'T STAND it, or just don't like it?

You're stupid, or just did a stupid thing?
 They're a jerk, or just did something you didn't like?

These question essentially are pointing out what the cognitive choices are and asking where someone wants to set their THINK thermostat.

| | | | |
|---|---|----------------------|---------------------------------------|
| NEED HAVE TO CAN'T SHOULD SHOULDN'T | AWFUL | CAN'T STAND IT | LABEL AND DAMN THE PERSON |
| WANT LIKE RATHER PREFER WISH | UNPLEASANT INCONVENIENT UNCOMFORTABLE | DON'T LIKE IT | DISLIKE THEIR BEHAVIOR |
| DON'T CARE | DON'T CARE | DON'T CARE | DON'T CARE |

With practice and rehearsal, asking such questions can become like grammar check on a computer in someone's mind – automatic, and serve to keep one's THINK thermostat turned down, or turn it down quickly should it go up. This will keep one's FEEL thermostat down, and in turn free one to RESPOND rather than REACT to life events.

Tool 6 – A step by step approach to everyday problem

In math class, we're taught that if we approach each new problem in the same step-by-step fashion, we're more likely to get the right answer. That's true when dealing with life problems as well. Dr. Ellis created a simple five step process based on his ABC Theory of Emotions.

- A = Activating Event
- B = Beliefs (about the event, others, ourselves or life)
- C = Consequences (feeling, behavior)
- D = Disputing (challenging, questioning)
- E = Effective Coping Statements

We can start with the A or C. The essential question in step A is "What happened?" or "What are you imagining will happen?" The questions for C are "How did you make yourself feel?" and "What (if anything) did you do?" A follow up question can be "Did that make things better or worse?" I also like to ask people "What might have been your mistaken goal?" I often list five common ones and ask them to choose any that sound familiar.

Step B is the important step because thoughts always cause feelings, and attitude is always the father of behavior. The basic questions are "What were you thinking?", "What were you telling yourself?" or "What was going through your head?" at the time. It's not uncommon to get "I don't know". Then we engage in what Ellis called "speculative hypothesizing", or brainstorming for people what they might have been thinking, and checking with them. I like to use the following chart, combining verbs and pronouns, to brainstorm possible irrational beliefs.

| | You, He, She, They | I | It, This |
|-----------------|--------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| How dare.....? | + | | |
| How could.....? | + | + | + |
| Need (to) | + | + | + |
| Have to | + | + | + |
| Can't | + | + | + |
| Should | + | + | + |
| Shouldn't | + | + | + |
| | Anger | Anxiety, Shame, Guilt | Anxiety, Depression |

Then we ask, "Did you possibly hear yourself saying...?" or "Does this sound familiar?" I liken this to providing a "line up" to a witness to a crime. If we ask witnesses to draw a picture of a perpetrator, they typically won't be able to. However, if we present them with a "line up" they often can pick the perpetrator out. This step is essentially Tool 4.

Disputing means questioning and challenging the irrational beliefs we identify. It's essentially Tool 5. There is an art and a science to doing disputing. One part of the art is called "Affirming the Preference". We basically let someone know that they have a right to want, prefer and desire, or like or dislike whatever they want to, but try to help them see they just turned their THINK thermostat up

too far. For example, “I can understand why you would want others to show you respect and you wouldn’t like it if they disrespected you in some way. But, why can’t they talk to you like that? They can’t or you just don’t want them to?”

Disputing is followed by brainstorming Effective Coping Statements – things they could think or say out loud to help them better cope or deal with what happened, and generate a more functional amount of emotion in response to that. It can help to create “coping cards” – an index card with 3-5 coping statement on it.

Tool 7 – Asserting Oneself with I Messages

When people make themselves angry, they often resort to YOU MESSAGES when communicating with others. YOU MESSAGES include putdowns, name calling, orders, threats and demands. These typically do not work well in helping people get what they want, or resolving any conflicts that exist. They instead become events for others to overreact emotionally to, which only escalates any existing conflicts, or creates one where one did not exist.

I MESSAGES simply start with I and give others information, i.e. what we don’t like, what we want, and how we feel. They leave it up to the other person what they want to do about or with that information. This is consistent with having an internal locus of control and recognizing that we never really control what others think, feel, say or do, and the more we try to, the more reason they often have to prove to us that we really don’t.

Practicing using I MESSAGES can also be a way to correct irrational thinking. Dr. Ellis called it “Putting your behavior where you want your attitude to be”. It’s practicing talking out loud the way you want to think. Forcing ourselves to use verbs like WANT, LIKE, RATHER, PREFER, and WISH can start to cause us to think that way rather than being demanding.

Tool 8 – Recognizing Mistaken Goals in Oneself and Others

Rudolph Dreikurs observed students misbehave in classrooms. He postulated that when they did, they typically had one or more of four “mistaken” goals: Attention, Power (and Control), Revenge, Avoidance of Failure. By “mistaken” he meant that they achieved something by behaving the way they did, but doing so made it less likely they would get what they really want, i.e. to get along with others, to do well in school, to be liked by teachers and other students. When I first learned this model, I recognized immediately that “mistaken” goals were not true only for misbehaving students in classrooms. People of all ages, in all types of situations, often have “mistaken” goals that get them off course for getting what they really want. Over time, having chronic mistaken goals can cause people to lose sight of what they really want.

I see identifying “mistaken” goals as a starting point for ultimately identifying someone’s automatic irrational beliefs. I treat behavior as the proverbial “tip of the iceberg”. Asking “So what’s your mistaken goal?” begins the dive beneath the surface.

Tool 9 – A simple, non-judgmental way to evaluate thoughts, feelings and actions

People have a tendency to have “mistaken” goals that get them off course from getting what they really want. They often lose sight of what they really do want, and generate a secondary disturbance of shame that causes them to keep what they think and feel, or even do

a secret. Their fear is that if others discovered what they think, feel or do, it would reflect poorly on them, and be one more way they didn’t live up to expectations. It’s why I believe it’s important to ask, and encourage others to ask themselves some simple questions.

1. What do you really want?
Some variations of this are “How do you want to feel?” and “What do you want your life to be like?”
2. How’s it working for you to think, feel, say or do what you are now?

Is it helping you get what you really want, or making doing so harder? Does the way you’re choosing to look at things allow you to feel the way you want to? Is the way you make yourself feel and what you do because of that allowing you to get what you really want, or making doing so harder?

3. If you keep thinking, feeling, saying and doing what you are now, will it be easier or harder to get what you really want in the future?
4. If someone else thinks, feels, says or does that, are you likely to get what you really want from them, or with them? Are you likely to feel the way you’d like to with them?

It all comes down to what someone wants in the first place, and whether he/she is moving in that direction, or not. Ellis called these “functional disputes”. In other words, asking “How’s it working for you?”

Tool 10 – Why change is hard, and what it takes to make changes

Many people really want to change the way they think, feel, say or do things, and often try, but fail. Many eventually lose hope and give up trying. I believe it’s important people understand what they are up against when they do want to change. Then they’ll have more realistic expectations and better plan for change, and have Unconditional Self-Acceptance if they struggle and Unconditional Other Acceptance if others in their lives do.

Part of what makes change hard is that behavior starts and continues because it serves a purpose. As long as a behavior serves some purpose, it will be hard to stop engaging in it. It can help to address the purpose being served by a behavior. Unhealthy, self-defeating behaviors often have “mistaken” goals. A common one is getting relief from how someone feels. As long as they generate a dysfunctional amount of emotion, behaving the way they do will continue to serve a purpose and it will be difficult to stop doing so. The solution is learning to reduce the Frequency, Intensity and Duration of troublesome emotions.

Another reason change can be so hard is “ruts” forming in brains. If people drive the same way over and over again across terrain, ruts will get created. These ruts are easy to slip into, hard to stay out of, and hard to get out of once one slips into them. A similar thing occurs in the brain. Every thought, feeling and behavior is ultimately the product of connections created in the brain between neurons or nerve cells. If we have a thought, experience a feeling, or engage in a behavior repeatedly, it creates the equivalent of a “rut” in our brains. We can create cognitive, emotional and behavioral “ruts”. These “ruts” are easy to slip into, hard to stay out of, and hard to get out of once we slip into them, just like real ruts in dirt roads. “Ruts” make thoughts, feelings and behavior automatic. It’s why

simple opinions about others, ourselves or life can start to feel like “facts”. The important point is that once we create such “ruts” in our brains, we can’t get rid of them. We can only make new ones and with practice and rehearsal hope they can compete for use with our old “ruts”. To change we must first choose to think or look at things in a different way, or to behave in a different way. Then we must practice and rehearse that new way of looking at things, or behaving, so that it can become a “rut” as well. However, even if we do create new “ruts”, we can always slip back into our old ones

at any time, and probably will. Recognizing and accepting this can help us have Unconditional Self-Acceptance for our own struggles to change, and Unconditional Other Acceptance for when others do.

Ben Franklin said an ounce of prevent is worth a pound of cure. Teaching all our young people the Mental and Emotional Tool Kit for Life could be a major ounce of prevention worth many pounds of cure. It could be a simple but effective way to finally give psychology away.

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