

Feeling Better, Getting Better, Staying Better: Profound Self-Help Therapy for Your Emotions

Albert Ellis

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Few authors can refer with pride to their own work of forty-five years ago. Psychologist Ellis is one such: his Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) dates back to 1955. This book proves that the author is still a force to be reckoned with in the field of psychotherapy and education for mental health.

Outspoken, assured, eager to help, Ellis presents his argument succinctly with brief examples from his practice. When people are disturbed by things that happen, he says, they themselves are largely responsible for the disturbance. People's attitudes toward, or beliefs about, something are more important than the external "causative" event. Loss, failure, and disappointment are examples of hurtful setbacks that can be dealt with better with self-acceptance rather than self-criticism. Indeed, most people tend to fall into negative feelings about themselves in response to hardship—a kind of slippery slope.

This theory dismisses the psychoanalytic emphasis on childhood trauma as a cause of adult problems. It embraces contemporary philosophies like constructivism: people can (and should) create the environment that fosters unconditional self-acceptance. This means that performance is not the criterion for liking oneself; being human is. "I affirm myself as worthwhile" is the antidote (or the vaccine) for "I depress myself."

According to Ellis, the structure of everyday language can add to the difficulty. Like Alfred Korzybski (Science and Sanity) he avoids phrases like "I am anxious" by using verbs like "anxietize." The reader must bear with some verbal acrobatics, but it is not necessary to agree with everything Ellis says, or to adopt his terminology, to benefit from his approach.

REBT has always favored real-life practice or risking beneficial exposure as a method you can use to feel better and get better. In fact, I used it successfully on myself at the age of 19—before I ever thought of becoming a psychotherapist! If you force yourself to change your behaviors, you can sometimes change your feelings quickly and effectively. In addition, you may profoundly change part of your underlying philosophy.

Ellis values practice over insight and teaches cognitive reframing, imaging, desensitization, unconditional positive regard, and the importance of conscious choice. Underlying it all is the sound principle that behavior change often precedes emotional change. One can't get much farther away from Freud than that!

E. JAMES LIEBERMAN (September / October 2001)

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