
Coping with Stress

A Thinking Straight Approach to Stress Management

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Stress is an unfortunate part of daily life. Over the years, research has strongly suggested that exposure to stress, especially prolonged exposure, increases the probability of physical and/or psychological problems. In an effort to help people manage stress more effectively, many approaches have been developed including such techniques as relaxation training, for example, learning to breathe in deeply through the nose, exhaling through the mouth, and relaxing all those tense muscles.

In my experience, developing “emotional muscle” is an important way to manage stress more effectively. The approach I use to help people develop and maintain emotional muscle is based on a form of counseling and therapy called Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) developed in 1955 by psychologist Dr. Albert Ellis.

When exposed to stressors like personal or family illness, separation, divorce, financial problems, changes at work, and so on, we may start to feel stressed, out-of-control, and generally powerless. In fact, many times we may be powerless over those external stressors, but then we start to personalize the situations and see ourselves as totally powerless and helpless. The stressors start to seem more and more powerful while we feel increasingly weak, defeated, and often like failures.

When experiencing stress and distress, we may not be able to change the situation associated with the stress, but we can develop emotional muscle for effective stress management by learning to change one very important part of ourselves - our beliefs, attitudes, and self-talk! This is not a new idea, in fact, in the first century a Greek Stoic philosopher Epictetus wrote: “People are disturbed not by things but rather by the views they hold of them.”

Emotional muscle and effective stress management are associated with good thinking habits, and we can develop good thinking habits by learning our ABCs.

“Learn my ABCs! I thought I learned those years ago?”

You learned the ABCs of English that equipped you with the basics for reading, writing, and so on. However, the ABCs of emotional muscle and stress management offer you the tools for a foundation of healthy, effective management of the stressors with which we are all faced. So, what are these ABCs?

Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) presents a straightforward set of ABCs (and DEF and Gs) for coping with stress and managing distress. At point A, or Activator, something happens or we may even anticipate something happening or some adversity. The “A” is the actual stressor, such as a new boss, buying a new house, etc. The Activator is a trigger in the distress reaction but, believe it or not, it’s not the cause of the distress we experience.

Distress such as the feeling anxious, depressed, angry, etc. is largely caused by what happens at point B — the Beliefs, attitudes, thoughts, and self-talk. Following a stressor (Activator), we process the information in our brains. We evaluate, interpret, draw conclusions (which are not always accurate), and create a specific set of beliefs and an outlook about the stressor. If we’re “stressed out,” it is highly likely that our thinking at point B is based on attitudes and beliefs that are unhealthy, distorted, defeating, and even dishonest. In REBT, these are called irrational beliefs, or iBs. If you’re feeling distressed, look for specific forms of irrational thinking, or what Alcoholics Anonymous calls “stinking thinking.” These include:

(1) Demandingness or absolutistic thinking in which humans elevate themselves to a Godlike position and attempt to create new laws of physics about how people (themselves and others), places, and things, absolutely **MUST, OUGHT, SHOULD, AND HAVE TO BE**. For example, “my new boss **MUST** not treat me this way!” Guess what, the world, people, etc. can be any way it or they choose to be.

(2) “I-can’t-stand-it-itis” creates low frustration tolerance, and intense frustration is a significant element of personal distress. The irrational

element here is that just because we don’t like something, we conclude that we absolutely can’t stand it! But, if we really couldn’t stand something, then we would cease to exist. We couldn’t stand it if a two-ton block of steel was dropped on us, but has a death certificate ever read: cause of death - got a new boss at work?

(3) Self-rating and “shoulding” on ourselves creates depression and guilt. When faced with stressors, people often put demands on themselves, such as “I must, should be able to handle this well,” and if the coping is not what they expected from themselves, they immediately begin condemning and judging themselves. They conclude that because they failed to manage this stress effectively, they are **FAILURES** as human beings. When this starts, there is often a vicious cycle that makes dealing with future stressors even less likely. What makes this irrational? As humans, we are all fallible, imperfect creatures. All really *have* sinned, but because we fall short in some areas, does not mean that we are 100% bad, rotten worms.

(4) Awfulizing, terribleizing, and horribleizing causes anxiety and panic reactions when faced with stressors. This distress creator has its basis in the exaggeration of badness. Bad things do happen, but when we awfulize, we exaggerate this badness and conclude incorrectly that the bad event is not just bad, but 101% bad. Certain things may approach 100% bad, but can anything really be totally bad or 101% bad? Being taken hostage would be tragic and really bad. But, what about being taken hostage and tortured? What about being tortured even more slowly and painfully? No matter how bad something is, by definition, it can always be worse. That’s not to minimize the badness of something, but distress occurs and is worsened when we start concluding that it is not only bad but **AWFUL, TERRIBLE, AND HORRIBLE — THE ABSOLUTELY WORSE THING IMAGINABLE!** Much of distress is also related to erroneously anticipating by “what ifing” and concluding that when whatever **DOES** happen, it will be awful! Montaigne is reported to have said, “My life has been filled with

many catastrophes, most of which never came true!”

These forms of irrational thinking are largely responsible for the C in the REBT ABCs of distress management. C represents the Consequences of the irrational thinking. The “C” is really the distress reaction and involves both undesirable emotional consequences, the feelings such as anger, anxiety, etc., and undesirable behavioral consequences, such as trying to cope with the stressor by drinking too much, yelling at friends and family, or even avoiding the stressor such as prematurely quitting a job or staying home in bed instead of going for that workout you had planned.

So far, so good. Now you have new knowledge and information that show that when stressors occur at point A. You experience distress at point C, it is not just the event (A), but more importantly it’s the interpretations, evaluations, and irrational beliefs and thoughts that occur at point B that result in distress reactions. That’s nice to know, but how do we gain that power and ability to manage distress more effectively?

Coping with stress more effectively means going to point D or Debating and Disputing the truthfulness and soundness of the beliefs at point B. It means taking the beliefs, attitudes, thoughts, self-talk, etc., and putting them on trial in a psychological court of law. Believe whatever you want at B, but distress will be managed more effectively when you believe that which is truthful, honest, and rational — in other words, just the facts!

Disputing involves testing the facts. When confronted with stress or stressors and we start having distress reactions, it means, in all likelihood, that irrational, dishonest beliefs, attitudes, and thoughts are active. First step is to detect and identify the specific form of “stinking thinking.” REBT’s direct, straightforward approach makes this easier. For example, if you’re feeling anxious or having panicky feelings, look for awfulizing and “what ifs.” If you’re feeling angry, look for the absolutistic attitudes or demandingness, the musts, oughts, and shoulds. Feeling depressed and guilty, look for global self-rating and “self-directed shoulds.” Finally, feeling intensely frustrated, then look for the “I can’t stand it’s.”

Once detected, the trial starts with the debating and disputing process. If

you’re going to believe something, make sure it is scientifically and realistically sound, that it is logically correct, and that it is helpful in terms of reaching both short-term and long-term goals.

Again, if feeling stressed, anxious, or depressed, the first step is detecting the irrational belief. If feeling anxious about work, it is likely that we are awfulizing, believing that something about work is not only bad, but more than bad — it’s awful, terrible, and 101% bad; the very worse thing imaginable! After applying disputation techniques, we accept that the experience might be bad, but is it really the worse thing that could happen? We might still think it is, but we keep disputing by pointing out that no matter what happened, it could in fact be much worse. Gradually, distress is reduced as realistic, honest beliefs replace the irrational beliefs.

Successful disputing clears the path for the rest of the REBT alphabet: E, F, and G. Disputing the irrational beliefs and proving that the belief creating the distress is unhealthy, defeating, and dishonest, leads to E — the development of rational Effective Beliefs. Effective beliefs include preferring, desiring, wanting attitudes instead of the absolutistic demands (desiring versus requiring), the attitudes of “I can stand it even if I don’t like it,” instead of the “I-can’t-stand-it-it-is (think of the jingle, “I don’t like it that’s O.K., I can stand it anyway”), unconditional self-acceptance (USA) instead of self-rating, and recognition that stressors are indeed bad, but no matter what it can really always be worse but never 101% bad.

Distress management Es lead to new Fs — desirable, appropriate feelings such as concern, annoyance, sadness, regret, mild frustration, and disappointment. REBT is not a positive thinking approach designed to help people “feel good” in the face of stressors. Rather, the goal (which by the way is the G in the REBT ABCDEFG) is to cope as effectively as possible when faced with the stressors. If people reacted with no emotion whatsoever, there would be no motivation to address the problems associated with the distress, or work to minimize the stressors if possible.

So, now you’ve been introduced to another approach to distress management. Is it simple? Maybe. Is it easy? No way. As noted earlier, habits take time to develop, and it takes

time to change bad habits (associated with distress reactions) to good habits of healthy, rational thinking. It takes work and practice, and then more practice, practice, and practice. But, you can do it! And remember, good thinking really does get good results!

About Ed Nottingham:

Ed Nottingham, Ph.D., a licensed psychologist in TN and MS and a Licensed Marital and Family Therapist in TN, is a Diplomate in Behavioral and in Clinical Psychology (American Board of Professional Psychology), a Fellow of the Academy of Clinical Psychology (FAClinP), A Fellow of the American Academy of Behavioral Psychology, a Fellow and Diplomate of the American Board of Medical Psychotherapists, a Fellow of the American Psychological Association (Division of Independent Practice), and is listed in the National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology. He is an Associate Fellow and Approved Supervisor in Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy, and is a Clinical Member of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT). He holds adjunct faculty appointments at the University of Memphis and University of Tennessee Center for the Health Sciences, and is author of *It's Not as Bad as It Seems: A Thinking Straight Approach to Happiness- Revised & Expanded Edition* (2000) published by iUniverse.com, Lincoln, NE.

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