

## APPLYING REBT TO EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

---

*Michaela BUCK*

**Abstract:** *The goal of the present study was to describe the use of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) in the academic area. Fundamental REBT theoretical tenets can help to uncover and explain the causes of problematic students' behavior, while REBT techniques can be used effectively to assisting students to cope with their cognitive, emotive and behavioral dysfunctions. Having explained the general characteristics of REBT, this paper utilizes demonstrations to show the basic principles and techniques of REBT in practice.*

**Keywords:** *Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy, ABCD schema, cognitive, emotive and behavioral techniques*

### Introduction

**Rational-emotive-behavioral therapy** (REBT) was established in 1955 by Albert Ellis (1913–2007), a clinical psychologist in New York, USA. A. Ellis has always maintained his interest in philosophy and enjoyed thinking about how the field of philosophy could be applied to the realm of psychotherapy. He was determined to answer his most puzzling question “How do intelligent human beings, including those with considerable psychological insight, desperately hold onto their irrational ideas?” (Ellis, 1995). He found the answer in the work of the Greek stoic philosopher Epictetus who stressed that people are not disturbed so much by events as by the views they take of them. From this point, A. Ellis began to emphasize the importance that thoughts and cognitions have in creating and maintaining psychological disturbance.

Working with clients, he realized that thoughts, emotions and behaviors are often overlapping processes, and their interaction in human functioning and dysfunctioning is important, as it is important in the practice of psychotherapy. He asserted that by changing one of them, be it thoughts, emotions or behaviors, the change of the two others will follow (Ellis, 1999). It was the beginning of his **Rational-Emotive-Behavioral Therapy**, offering intellectual and emotional insight and action.

As one of the major psychotherapeutic models in the realm of cognitive and behavior therapy, REBT appears to provide an optimal choice for practitioners to consider in helping students. Not only can it shed insights into the causes of their problematic

behavior (Neenan, 2000), its techniques can be used quite effectively in assisting students to cope with their cognitive, emotive and behavioral dysfunctions. With this goal in mind, this article draws attention to the explanation of the basic tenets and techniques of REBT, through the use of an illustration, that can be used to help students.

## **The basics of REBT**

REBT was intended to help people leading happier lives by challenging their irrational thoughts and taking immediate action to remedy them. The backbone of REBT is the ABCD schema, which reflects Ellis' approach to relationship between thinking, feeling and behaviors. The schema assists people to see and understand how their thinking processes affect their emotions (Corry, 2000). The ABCD paradigm appears to provide a heuristic framework in conceptualizing the psychological processing of a person (Ellis, 2000). The "A" represents the *activating event* or *situation* which an individual finds upsetting. The "C" stands for the *emotional and physiological consequences* suffered by a person after "A" has taken place. The key is the "B". While most people believe that "A" causes "C", they learn through REBT that their *belief system* "B", is actually responsible for their feelings "C". The "D" in this ABCD paradigm stands for *disputation*, which is the most important part of the schema from therapeutic perspective (Buck, 2004), because it brings a change. Disputation of irrational beliefs is implemented through cognitive, emotive and behavioral techniques. Distinction between rational and irrational beliefs (E) is not merely semantic. It results into different feelings (F). .

For instance, a student Vladimir is preoccupied by public performance that is perceived as the only content of his life. He has been suffering from an experience of extreme distress in many aspects of his life (C), and therefore he may believe that all symptoms are simply caused by unpleasant events (A). Through REBT he can learn that his irrational beliefs (B) are the actual cause of his emotional distress (C). An example of his irrational beliefs may be negative self – talk such as: "If I do not perform well and gain other people's approval, it will be catastrophic".

To correct irrational aspects that form this schema, the function of disputation (D) will come into play. In helping Vladimir understand the irrational nature of his schema, disputation aims to alter the irrational beliefs through a potent, consistent, and persuasive educational intervention (Ellis, 2000). This intervention highlights a helping process that integrates cognitive, emotive, and behavioral modifications.

## **Applications of REBT to primary and high school students**

Initially, REBT received unfavorable responses, currently it is flourishing (Neenan, 2000). It is practiced by thousands of mental health professionals all over the world in clinical as well as non clinical settings. REBT helps people to overcome their emotional difficulties and achieve their self – enhancing goals. Therefore it is not surprising that REBT major hypotheses also apply to education, and support students' unique potential for growth. School psychologists turned their attention to academic and social behaviors of children, lack of adaptability, and to hyperactive children. REBT helped children to overcome various clinical problems, such as phobias, anxieties, de-

pressions, stage fright. Adolescents were helped with their worries linked with puberty. The approach assisted children and youth in forming a new or modifying an old cognitive structure and offered them enough space for practicing new ways of thinking. The change of cognitions was reflected in growing self-confidence and self-satisfaction, and consequently in better school performance and results (Warner, 1991).

## **Applications of REBT to university students**

To a great extent, REBT is utilized in helping university students change their irrational beliefs negatively interfering into their academic performance. It is also used to improve their *social skills* (to initiate a discussion with a lecturer, to present a paper, publicly express opinion and disagreement with classmates or lecturers). New rational thoughts will enable students to overcome their anxieties regarding public performance (a student irrationally believes that it would be unbearable if a lecturer and classmates negatively evaluated his paper), lack of self – confidence (a student does not trust herself to pass an exam even though she has studied thoroughly), perfectionism (every real or potential failure is labeled as incompetence).

Many students seem locked into a *pervasive indecisiveness*. To make any choice is viewed as almost impossible. In such a frozen state, educational or occupational information is not heard or integrated, much less pursued (Buckova, 2004). While such a general behavior pattern may be labeled as a clinical problem, it can be addressed in the context of *career counseling*. The selection of studies, a particular job position, or work setting can provide a concrete issue around which a counselor can furnish a student with cognitive – affective exploration and restructuring of their thoughts.

Working with groups with students who are pervasively indecisive can be equally productive as working with individuals. There will be the same focus with an emphasis on peer learning in the process. Because group members are taught to apply procedures such as detecting and disputing irrational beliefs on one another (Ellis, 1995), they help others get practice in applying them. Some active work in change of their irrational thoughts can occur after some common sharing by students of the heavy expectations laid upon them by others. After exploring and tentatively understanding some of the common bases for indecisiveness, students can be asked to define a set of reasonable goals to achieve. These goals are then structured into specific tasks implemented on a weekly basis. The tasks generally involve a range of activities which require change of irrational thoughts, and consequently, emotions and behaviors. The desired outcome is for individuals to gather increased confidence, and thereby to increase their potential for independent decision – making in the overall career development process.

## **University personnel staff**

Persons already employed in the educational system are often concerned with their job satisfaction. Even those who are content with their job selection voice some anxiety over handling specific conflicts with their students, students' parents or with their colleagues, or over handling pressure situations. Irrational thoughts very often interfere into this area.

## Major therapeutic techniques

The goal of the REBT techniques is to assist people to give up their absolute philosophies and adhere to more relative ones. There are three basic areas from which these techniques arise. They focus on cognitive, emotional and behavioral change.

**Cognitive change techniques.** The first way we can help a student to dispute their irrational beliefs is through cognitive techniques. Cognitive approach is represented especially by *Socratic dialogue*, a method widely used in an attempt to challenge irrational beliefs (Buckova, 2004).

Many of irrational thoughts negatively affect the student's self – perception. Such misperceptions often derive from and reflect the lack of self-confidence within the person, reinforcing a sense of low self – esteem. To help Vladimir confront his irrational beliefs, we can question the logic behind these beliefs. A. Ellis (2000) recommends approaching a person from a position of “a proactive and effective educator”. A series of direct and explicit questions focusing on attaching Vladimir's misperceptions may be initiated. *Socratic dialogue* is a method widely used in an attempt to challenge irrational beliefs (Buck, 2004). Examples of such questions helping Vladimir to change his thoughts are: “Why should I become a loser if you do not impress other people? What is the rationale that I must always be approved? Is that good logic? Do I have a proof? Where is that written? Is it a hundred percent true that I am a failure? Will the whole class think about me in this way? Isn't it possible that they will view my opinions differently?” Questions like these help Vladimir become more aware of his irrational thinking.

As he gains more awareness of his irrational beliefs, he can start to work on *cognitive restructuring* (Buck, 1997). It will assist him to realize that he does not have to compel himself into all “shoulds and musts”. Events and experiences can be conceptualized from different perspectives. The old way of thinking and feeling can be replaced by a series of new attitudes and views. Through *cognitive reframing*, irrational beliefs are brought out into the open so that they can be forcefully disputed (Ellis, 1999). Here is an example of cognitive reframing work:

*Belief 1:* If I express my opinion in public or present a paper in the class my classmates and professors will disagree with me and they will think that I am a failure.

*Reframed rationale:* It is possible that I exaggerate. In the past some of them disagreed with me, some of them agreed, the rest was neutral. And even all of them laugh at me does it really mean that I am a failure?

*Belief 2:* If I will not get an “A” at exams, I am a total failure.

*Reframed rationale:* I wish to get an “A” but if I will not succeed it does not mean that I am a failure.

Besides these cognitive techniques, other verbal as well as imagery methods are employed. For instance, *verbal disputing* involves techniques such as *discrimination* between rational and irrational beliefs, *debating* about irrational beliefs, *defining* new beliefs.

**Emotive change techniques.** Second way that we can give a hand to a student to dispute and change their irrational beliefs is through the practice of emotive techniques.

They also support a philosophical change in the views, a change of self – defeating emotions, and practicing of unconditional self – acceptance (Ellis, 2000). This is particularly important for people like Vladimir who suffer from low self-confidence and low self-esteem, because most of their irrational beliefs are linked with feelings of unworthiness. Unconditional self-acceptance can be taught through the following practices:

*Unconditional acceptance.* Vladimir needs to accept the consequences of his endeavors, whatever the results. Whenever he is judged by his professor or classmates, he needs to accept it. Instead of saying: “If I will not get an “A” an exams, I am a total failure”, he could say: “I can accept myself regardless the grade.”

Doubting irrational thoughts can be achieved through *imagery techniques* that abet people to change their dysfunctional emotions (C) to functional ones (F) through imagining negative events (A).

**Behavior change techniques.** The third way to dispute irrational thoughts is through behavioral techniques, whereby a person challenges his or her irrational beliefs by behaving in a way that opposes the belief. In REBT, behavioral techniques serve two purposes (Ellis, 2000). They help people to become accustomed to more effective ways of performing, and they support the person’s cognitive learning, because they enable them to test new rational beliefs through real – life applications. All behavioral techniques go together with cognitive and emotive reframing to promote a holistic change. They need to be applied gradually and persistently, and the objectives need to be clear and specific. There is a wide range of behavioral techniques, however, Ellis (1995) favored the use of *in-vivo desensitization* by which people are fully exposed to situations evoking in them discomfort, and *homework assignments* where people put into practice what they learned during sessions. Other behavioral techniques include *desensitizing anxiety*. More frequent public performance can help Vladimir get used to a more desired circumstance or behavior.

*Shame – attacking exercises.* These exercises involve performing a practice that will evoke disapproval of others. They also offer new philosophies of discomfort tolerance and self – acceptance while doing something “shameful” but not harmful to themselves or others. A. Ellis hypothetically assumed that anxiety makes links with shame, guilt and humiliation. He believed that more people are confronted with irrational beliefs hidden beyond these emotions the more their anxieties become debilitated. For instance Vladimir would be encouraged to ask his professor a very simple question with an obvious answer. This would help him to realize that acting “stupidly” does not mean that he is stupid, and therefore he does not need to feel uneasy. Feelings such as shame, guilt, uneasiness etc. are only his emotions and they do not necessary reflect the truth. Vladimir would be encouraged to try similar exercises in other areas of his life. It would help him realize that even if he does not behave according to expectations of others it is not the end of the world and therefore he can pursue his behavior with self-acceptance.

In this respect, also other emotional techniques such as *self-disclosure* and *humor* are employed to help people not to take themselves too seriously.

It is important to emphasize that psychologists do not have to use major techniques outlined. They are flexible and creative in the methods they employ.

## Conclusion

REBT is a comprehensive system of personality change that incorporates cognitive, emotive and behavioral methods. The relevance and applicability of REBT lies in three components that form human psychology, namely, cognition, emotion, and behavior. The model provides professionals with both the conceptual framework and the applicable intervention tools in working with students. The theoretical foundation of REBT appears to be heuristic in understanding psychological processing of students' with academic and social problems. Following this understanding, a range of cognitive, emotive and behavioral techniques can be applied to help students in dealing with similar psychological difficulties they encounter in their studies and in their everyday lives. However, there is much to be learned about the applications of REBT. The model could facilitate improvements in helping students to reduce emotional disturbances as well as to increase growth in students' intrapersonal and interpersonal lives. Thus the REBT model warrants further research and applied investigation.

## APLIKÁCIE RACIONÁLNO-EMOCIONÁLNO - BEHAVIORÁLNEJ TERAPIE V ŠKOLSKOM A AKADEMICKOM PROSTREDÍ

**Abstrakt:** V príspevku sa zameriavame na využitie Racionálno-emocionálno-behaviorálnej terapie (REBT) v školskom a akademickom prostredí. Teoretické princípy REBT pomáhajú odhaliť a vysvetliť príčiny dysfunkčného správania študentov, zatiaľ čo techniky REBT ponúkajú možnosť efektívnej pomoci študentom pri zvládaní kognitívnych, emotívnych a behaviorálnych problémov. Po objasnení všeobecných charakteristík REBT, príspevok na príkladoch ilustruje základné princípy a techniky REBT, ktoré možno využiť v práci so študentami.

**Kľúčové slová:** Racionálno-emocionálno-behaviorálna terapia, ABCD schéma, kognitívne techniky, emotívne techniky, behaviorálne techniky