Albert Ellis Verbatim

Timothy Thomason, Northern Arizona University

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Abstract

This paper presents notes on a speech given by Albert Ellis, the creator of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy, at the Albert Ellis Institute on July 8, 2004.

I was a neglected child, often sick and in the hospital, ten times in one year. I was shy and had difficulty sleeping, and had chronic headaches for about 35 years. At age 40 I went on insulin for diabetes. I decided there was no Santa Clause, no God. I was a "probabilistic atheist;" I thought that there probably is no god. I was a Leninist briefly, but then I took on the sexual revolution instead of becoming a political revolutionary. I founded the Love and Marriage Program, and through that I got into psychotherapy.

I got a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology in 1942 at Columbia. Psychotherapy then was either Freudian or Rogerian. Freud was a vast over-generalizer. He was hung up on sex. He was good on the defenses; people don’t want to face themselves. The unconscious does exist, but repression does not do great harm. I did a liberal version of psychoanalysis for six years, but I figured out it was horseshit. For example, dream interpretation is totally subjective. You can do it from any viewpoint – Freudian, Jungian, etc. Rogers was namby pamby.

Your parents don’t upset you, other people don’t upset you – you upset yourself.

In 1955 I created Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy. I got a lot of unfair criticism. Alcoholics Anonymous reviled me because I didn’t believe in the “higher power” horseshit. I was picketed by anti-abortionists. Fortunately I had HFT – High Frustration
Tolerance. I taught USA – Unconditional Self Acceptance. You can accept yourself as a person although sometimes you do bad things.

Read Korzybski’s *Science and Sanity*. All people generalize, but most people over-generalize and make themselves miserable. They say “I am a failure” but that’s not true because a failure would only and always fail. George W. Bush says the terrorists are evil, not just that they do bad things. Hostility and hatred do no good; suicide bombers are semi-psychotic. Screwballs may build atomic bombs in bathtubs and blow us all up. We need UOA – Unconditional Other Acceptance. If the world doesn’t learn UOA, we will destroy ourselves.

The Buddhists knew this stuff. Buddha said life is suffering. Life is a series of problems, frustrations, etc. You can’t avoid suffering. In my ABC model, the A is some event or adversity, a problem, a hassle, some form of suffering. But problems don’t cause your disturbance. Humans are constructionists; we can choose what to do when adversities happen. REBT says you can force yourself to look at things differently.

You have to be directive and push people to change. You can’t just be caring. Rogers invented unconditional positive regard, but you must tell clients they are screwing themselves. Rogers thought that if you accept clients, they will model you and develop it themselves, but it’s not true. When you accept yourself because your therapist accepts you, you’re still sick. Your self-acceptance is conditional on your therapist accepting you. In REBT you accept the person but not what they do.

Self-esteem is the worst disease in the world. You need unconditional self acceptance, unconditional other acceptance, and unconditional life acceptance. The Dalai Lama has HFT (High Frustration Tolerance) but he has to remind himself daily in
meditation. We need to have long-range hedonism. Depriving yourself of something now requires discipline. I push myself to write, see many clients, go to conferences, etc.

Fritz Perls had serious psychological problems. But he was direct, and pointed out to clients what they do. He had some good shame-attacking exercises.

*Question: What is your opinion of the common elements in all therapies?*

I believe in the common elements. All therapies work in a somewhat similar way but some work better than others.

*Question: Does REBT work with clients with personality disorders?*

Those are difficult customers and will be difficult to change: psychotics, psychopaths, personality disorders (like borderline); but therapy can help some of them.

*Question: What about therapy for child abuse?*

Most abused children are not disturbed as adults, so abuse does not always cause problems. Some bad therapists collude with abused clients. It’s not the abuse that’s the problem, it’s what they told themselves about the abuse. For example, “I’m no good.” You have to change their beliefs. Some things are very bad, but nothing is ever terrible. OK, you were abused, but it could be worse – you could have been killed. Go over it again and again.

*Question: What do you think about therapy for changing sexual orientation?*

Most gay people choose to be gay. Twenty of 100 gays may have a biological tendency to be gay, but the main element is choice. They rigidly decide that they are gay.
All of them can change. If you put a heterosexual person in prison for ten years he may become homosexual. Gays can change but they would have to work their asses off to do it.