

How to Maintain and Enhance Your Rational-Emotive Therapy Gains

ALBERT ELLIS, Ph.D.

Institute for Rational-Emotive Therapy
New York City

If you work at using the principles and practices of rational-emotive therapy (RET), you will be able to change your self-defeating thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and to feel much better than when you started therapy. Good! But you will also, at times, fall back—and sometimes far back. No one is perfect and practically all people take one step backwards to every two or three steps forward. Why? Because that is the nature of humans: to improve, to stop improving at times, and sometimes to backslide. How can you (imperfectly!) slow down your tendency to fall back? How can you maintain and enhance your therapy goals? Here are some methods that we have tested at the Institute for Rational-Emotive Therapy in New York and that many of our clients have found quite effective.

HOW TO MAINTAIN YOUR IMPROVEMENT

1. When you improve and then fall back to old feelings of anxiety, depression, or self-downing, try to remind yourself and pinpoint exactly what thoughts, feelings, and behaviors you once changed to bring about your improvement. If you again feel depressed, think back to how you previously used RET to make yourself undepressed. For example, you may remember that:

a. You stopped telling yourself that you were worthless and that you couldn't ever succeed in getting what you wanted.

b. You did well in a job or in a love affair and proved to yourself that you did have some ability and that you were lovable.

c. You forced yourself to go on interviews instead of avoiding them and thereby helped yourself overcome your anxiety about them.

Remind yourself of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that you have changed and that you have helped yourself by changing.

2. Keep thinking, thinking, and thinking rational Beliefs (rBs) or coping statements, such as: "It's great to succeed but I can fully accept myself as a person and enjoy life considerably even when I fail!" Don't merely parrot these statements but go over them carefully many times and think them through until you really begin to believe and feel that they are true.

3. Keep seeking for, discovering, and disputing and challenging your irrational Beliefs (iBs) with which you are once again upsetting yourself. Take each important irrational Belief—such as, "I have to succeed in order to be a worthwhile person!"—and keep asking yourself: "Why is this belief true?" "Where is the evidence that my worth to myself, and my enjoyment of living, utterly depends on my succeeding at something?" "In what way would I be totally unacceptable as a human if I failed at an important task or test?"

Keep forcefully and persistently disputing your irrational Beliefs whenever you see that you are letting them creep back again. And even when you don't actively hold them, realize that they may arise once more, bring them to your consciousness, and preventively—and vigorously!—dispute them.

4. Keep risking and doing things that you irrationally fear—such as riding in elevators, socializing, job hunting, or creative writing. Once you have partly overcome one of your irrational fears, keep acting against it on a regular basis. If you feel uncomfortable in forcing yourself to do things that you are unrealistically afraid of doing, don't allow yourself to avoid

doing them—and thereby to preserve your discomfort forever! Often, make yourself as uncomfortable as you can be, in order to eradicate your irrational fears and to become unanxious and comfortable later.

5. Try to clearly see that difference between appropriate negative feelings—such as those of sorrow, regret, and frustration, when you do not get some of the important things you want—and inappropriate negative feelings—such as those of depression, anxiety, self-hatred, and self-pity, when you are deprived of desirable goals and plagued with undesirable things. Whenever you feel **overconcerned** (panicked) or **unduly** miserable (depressed) acknowledge that you are having a statistically normal but a psychologically unhealthy feeling and that you are bringing it on yourself with some dogmatic **should**, **ought**, or **must**. Realize that you are invariably capable of changing your inappropriate (or **musturbatory**) feelings back into appropriate (or preferential) ones. Take your depressed feelings and work on them until you **only** feel sorry and regretful. Take your anxious feelings and work on them until you **only** feel concerned and vigilant. Use rational emotive imagery to vividly imagine unpleasant Activating Events even before they happen; let yourself feel inappropriately upset (anxious, depressed, enraged, or self-downing) as you imagine them; then work on your feelings to change them to appropriate emotions (concern, sorrow, annoyance, or regret) as you keep imagining some of the worst things happening. Don't give up until you actually do change your feelings.

6. Avoid self-defeating procrastination. Do unpleasant tasks fast—today! If you still procrastinate, reward yourself with certain things that you enjoy—for example, eating, vacationing, reading, and socializing—only **after** you have performed the tasks that you easily avoid. If this won't work, give yourself a severe penalty—such as talking to a boring person for two hours or burning a hundred dollar bill—every time that you procrastinate.

7. Show yourself that it is an absorbing **challenge** and something of an **adventure** to maintain your emotional health and to keep yourself

reasonably happy no matter what kind of misfortunes assail you. Make the uprooting of your misery one of the most important things in your life—something you are utterly determined to steadily work at achieving. Fully acknowledge that you almost always have some **choice** about how to think, feel, and behave; and throw yourself actively into making that choice for yourself.

8. Remember—and use—the three main insights of RET that were first outlined in **Reason and Emotion in Psychotherapy** in 1962:

Insight No. 1: You largely **choose** to disturb yourself about the unpleasant events of your life, although you may be encouraged to do so by external happenings and by social learning. You mainly feel the way you think. When obnoxious and frustrating things happen to you at point A (Activating Events), you consciously or unconsciously **select** rational Beliefs (rBs) that lead you to feel sad and regretful and you also **select** irrational Beliefs (iBs) that lead you to feel anxious, depressed, and self-hating.

Insight No. 2: No matter how or when you acquired your irrational Beliefs and your self-sabotaging habits, you now, in the present, **choose** to maintain them—and that is why you are **now** disturbed. Your past history and your present life conditions importantly **affect** you; but they don't **disturb** you. Your present **philosophy** is the main contributor to your **current** disturbance.

Insight No. 3: There is no magical way for you to change your personality and your strong tendencies to needlessly upset yourself. Basic personality change requires persistent **work and practice**—yes, **work and practice**—to enable you to alter your irrational Beliefs, your inappropriate feelings, and your self-destructive behaviors.

9. Steadily—and unfrantically!—look for personal pleasures and enjoyments—such as reading, entertainment, sports, hobbies, art, science, and other vital absorbing interests. Take as your major life goal not only the achievement of emotional health but also that of real enjoyment. Try to become involved in a longterm purpose, goal, or interest in which

you can remain truly absorbed. For a good, happy life will give you something to live for; will distract you from many serious woes; and will encourage you to preserve and to improve your mental health.

10. Try to keep in touch with several other people who know something about RET and who can help go over some of its aspects with you. Tell them about problems that you have difficulty coping with and let them know how you are using RET to overcome these problems. See if they agree with your solutions and can suggest additional and better kinds of RET disputing that you can use to work against your irrational Beliefs.

11. Practice using RET with some of your friends, relatives, and associates who are willing to let you try to help them with it. The more often you use it with others, and are able to see what their iBs are and to try to talk them out of these self-defeating ideas, the more you will be able to understand the main principles of RET and to use them with yourself. When you see other people act irrationally and in a disturbed manner, try to figure out—with or without talking to them about it—what their main irrational Beliefs probably are and how these could be actively and vigorously disputed.

12. When you are in rational-emotive individual or group therapy try to tape record many of your sessions and listen to these carefully when you are in between sessions, so that some of the RET ideas that you learned in therapy sink in. After therapy has ended, keep these tape recordings and play them back to yourself from time to time, to remind you how to deal with some of your old problems or new ones that may arise.

13. Keep reading RET writings and listening to RET audio and audio-visual cassettes. Included in your instructions sheet, which you were given when you started coming for therapy at the Institute, is a list of some of the main books and cassettes giving the principles and practices of RET. Read and listen to several of these—particularly, HUMANISTIC PSYCHOTHERAPY (Ellis); A GUIDE TO PERSONAL HAPPINESS (Ellis and Harper); A NEW

GUIDE TO RATIONAL LIVING (Ellis and Harper); OVERCOMING PROCRASTINATING (Ellis and Knaus); OVERCOMING DEPRESSION (Hauck); and A RATIONAL COUNSELING PRIMER (Young). Keep going back to the RET reading and audio-visual material from time to time, to keep reminding yourself of some of the main rational-emotive findings and philosophies.

HOW TO DEAL WITH BACKSLIDING

1. Accept your backsliding as normal—as something that happens to almost all people who at first improve emotionally and who then fall back. See it as part of your human fallibility. Don't feel ashamed when some of your old symptoms return; and don't think that you have to handle them entirely by yourself and that it is wrong or weak for you to seek some additional sessions of therapy and to talk to your friends about your renewed problems.

2. When you backslide look at your self-defeating behavior as bad and unfortunate; but work very hard at refusing to put yourself down for engaging in this behavior. Use the highly important RET principle of refraining from rating you, your self, or your being but of measuring only your acts, deeds, and traits. You are always a person who acts well or badly—and never a good person nor a bad person. No matter how badly you fall back and bring on your old disturbances again, work at fully accepting yourself with this unfortunate or weak behavior—and then try, and keep trying, to change your behavior.

3. Go back to the ABCs of RET and clearly see what you did to fall back to your old symptoms. At A (Activating Event), you usually experienced some failure or rejection once again. At rB (rational Belief) you probably told yourself that you didn't like failing and didn't want to be rejected. If you only stayed with these rational Beliefs, you would merely feel sorry, regretful, disappointed, or frustrated. But when you felt disturbed again, you probably then went on to some irrational Beliefs (iBs), such as: "I must not fail! It's horrible when I do!" "I have to be accepted, because if I'm not that makes me an unlovable worthless person!" Then, after convincing yourself of these iBs,

you felt, at C (emotional Consequence) once again depressed and self-downing.

4. When you find your irrational Beliefs by which you are once again disturbing yourself, just as you originally used Disputing (D) to challenge and surrender them, do so again—**immediately and persistently**. Thus, you can ask yourself, “Why **must** I not fail? Is it really **horrible** if I do?” And you can answer: “There is no reason why I **must** not fail, though I can think of several reasons why it would be highly undesirable. It’s not **horrible** if I do fail—only distinctly **inconvenient**.” You can also Dispute your other irrational Beliefs by asking yourself, “Where is it written that I **have** to be accepted? How do I become an **unlovable, worthless person** if I am rejected?” And you can answer: “I never **have to be** accepted, though I would very much **prefer** to be. If I am rejected, that makes me, alas, a **person who** is rejected this time by this individual under these conditions, but it hardly makes me an **unlovable, worthless person** who will always be rejected by anyone for whom I really care.”

5. Keep looking for, finding, and actively and vigorously Disputing your irrational Beliefs which you have once again revived and that are now making you feel anxious or depressed once more. Keep doing this, over and over, until you build intellectual and emotional muscle (just as you would build physical muscle by learning how to exercise and then by **continuing** to exercise).

6. Don’t fool yourself into believing that if you merely change your language you will always change your thinking. If you neurotically tell yourself, “I **must** succeed and be approved” and you sanely change this self-statement to, “I **prefer** to succeed and be approved,” you may still really be convinced, “But I really **have to** do well and **have got to be** loved.” Before you stop your Disputing and before you are satisfied with your answers to it (which in RET we call E, or an Effective Philosophy), keep on doing it until you are really convinced of your rational answers and until your feelings of disturbance truly disappear. Then do the same thing many, many times—until your new E (Effective Philosophy) be-

comes hardened and habitual—which it almost always will if you keep working at arriving at it and re-instituting it.

7. Convincing yourself lightly or “intellectually” of your new Effective Philosophy or rational Beliefs often won’t help very much or persist very long. Do so very **strongly and vigorously**, and do so many times. Thus, you can **powerfully** convince yourself, until you really feel it: “I do not **need** what I want! I never **have to** succeed, no matter how greatly I wish to do so!” “I can stand being rejected by someone I care for. It won’t **kill** me—and I still can lead a happy life!” “No human is damnable and worthless—including and especially me!”

HOW TO GENERALIZE FROM WORKING ON ONE EMOTIONAL PROBLEM TO WORKING ON OTHER PROBLEMS

1. Show yourself that your present emotional problem and the ways in which you bring it on are not unique and that virtually all emotional and behavioral difficulties are created by irrational Beliefs (iBs). Whatever your iBs are, moreover, you can overcome them by strongly and persistently disputing and acting against these irrational Beliefs.

2. Recognize that you tend to have three major kinds of irrational Beliefs that lead you to disturb yourself and that the emotional and behavioral problems that you want to relieve fall into one of these three categories:

a. “I **must** do well and **have to** be approved by people whom I find important.” This iB leads you to feel anxious, depressed, and self-hating; and to avoid doing things at which you may fail and avoiding relationships that may not turn out well.

b. “Other people **must** treat me fairly and nicely!” This iB contributes to your feeling angry, furious, violent, and over-rebellious.

c. “The conditions under which I live **must** be comfortable and free from major hassles!” This iB tends to create your feelings of low frustration tolerance and self-pity; and sometimes those of anger and depression.

3. Recognize that when you employ one of these three absolutistic **musts**—or any of the innumerable variations on it that you can easily slide into—you naturally and commonly derive from them other irrational conclusions, such as:

a. "Because I am not doing as well as I **must**, I am an incompetent worthless individual!"

b. "Since I am not being approved by people whom I find important, as I **have to be**, it's awful and terrible!" (Awfulizing).

c. "Because others are not treating me as fairly and as nicely as they **absolutely should** treat me, they are **utterly rotten people** and deserve to be damned!" (Damnation).

d. "Since the conditions under which I live are not that comfortable and since my life has several major hassles, as it **must not have**, I can't stand it! My existence is a horror!" (Can't-stand-it-itis).

e. "Because I have failed and got rejected as I **absolutely ought not** have done, I'll **always fail** and **never** get accepted as I **must be**! My life will be hopeless and joyless forever!" (Overgeneralizing).

4. Work at seeing that these irrational Beliefs are part of your **general repertoire** of thoughts and feelings and that you bring them to many different kinds of situations that are against your desires. Realize that in just about all cases where you feel seriously upset and act in a distinctly self-defeating manner you are consciously or unconsciously sneaking in one or more of these iBs. Consequently, if you get rid of them in one area and are still emotionally disturbed about something else, you can always use the same RET principles to discover your iBs in the new area and to eliminate them there.

5. Repeatedly show yourself that it is almost impossible to disturb yourself and to remain disturbed in any way if you abandon your absolutistic, dogmatic **shoulds**, **oughts**, and **musts** and consistently replace them with flexible and unrigid (though still strong) desires and preferences.

6. Continue to acknowledge that you can change your irrational Beliefs (iBs) by rigorously (not rigidly!) using the scientific method. With scientific thinking, you can show yourself that your irrational Beliefs are only theories or hypotheses—not facts. You can logically and realistically Dispute them in many ways, such as these:

a. You can show yourself that your iBs are self-defeating—that they interfere with your goals and your happiness. For if you firmly convince yourself, "I **must** succeed at important tasks and **have to be** approved by all the significant people in my life," you will of course at times fail and be disappointed—and thereby inevitably make yourself anxious and depressed instead of sorry and frustrated.

b. Your irrational Beliefs do not conform to reality—and especially do not conform to the facts of human fallibility. If you always **had to** succeed, if the universe commanded that you **must** do so, you obviously **would** always succeed. And of course you often don't! If you invariably **had to be** approved by others, you could never be disappointed. But obviously you frequently are! The universe is clearly not arranged so that you will always get what you demand. So although your desires are often realistic, your godlike commands definitely are not!

c. Your irrational Beliefs are illogical, inconsistent, or contradictory. No matter how much you **want to** succeed and to be approved, it never follows that therefore you **must do well** in these (or any other) respects. No matter how desirable justice or politeness is, it never **has to** exist.

Although the scientific method is not infallible or sacred, it efficiently helps you to discover which of your beliefs are irrational and self-defeating and how to use factual evidence and logical thinking to rid yourself of them. If you keep using scientific analysis, you will avoid dogma and set up your hypotheses about you, other people, and the world around you so that you always keep them open to change.

7. Try to set up some main goals and purposes in life—goals that you would like very

much to reach but that you never tell yourself that you absolutely must attain. Keep checking to see how you are coming along with these goals; at times revise them; see how you feel about achieving them; and keep yourself goal-oriented for the rest of your days.

8. If you get bogged down and begin to lead a life that seems too miserable or dull, review the points made in this pamphlet and work at using them. Once again: if you fall back or fail to go forward at the pace you prefer, don't hesitate to return to therapy for some booster sessions or to join one of the Institute's regular therapy

groups.

I gratefully acknowledge the contributions of the following people at the Institute for Rational-Emotive Therapy in New York who read this pamphlet when it was in manuscript and who made valuable comments on it: Raymond DiGiuseppe, Mal Holland, Terry Jordan, Leonor Lega, Naomi McCormick, Harriet Mischel, Beverly Pieren, Susan Presby, Karin Schleider, Janet Wolfe, Joe Yankura, and Thea Zeeve. However, I take all responsibility for the views expressed in the pamphlet.

Additional copies of this pamphlet are available at: 10 copies for \$2.50;
50 copies for \$10.00; 100 copies for \$15.00

from the
INSTITUTE FOR RATIONAL-EMOTIVE THERAPY
45 East 65th Street / New York, N.Y. 10021