

Concern is Your Friend, Anxiety Your Foe



Warning: This Intermittent Reinforcement email is long, but well worth reading! You can bear the struggle.

In Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), we distinguish between healthy negative emotions and unhealthy negative emotions. Healthy negative emotions include concern, sadness, remorse, disappointment, sorrow, and self-helping anger, self-helping jealousy, and self-helping envy. In this piece, I will discuss the healthy negative feeling of concern. I often say concern is my favorite healthy negative emotion. I say this because concern helps to keep me out of trouble. Concern motivates me to stop doing pleasurable things but, if continued, can be unhealthy (e.g., overeating, spending money, engaging in pleasurable behavior like watching television when I have work to do). Concern also motivates me to redirect my activity when it is my best interest to begin to do certain things. For example, concern gets me to pay my bills on time by getting the check in the mail now rather than tomorrow, to get sufficient exercise and sleep even when I am disinclined to exercise or sleep. Concern also allows me to accept a compromise and realize trying for more can lead to less. Call to mind how trying to make something better can lead to missing the sweet spot and making something worse. Concern helps to prevent self-defeating perfectionistic behavior from occurring.

Take note that in REBT, we want you to feel bad when facing adversity or potential adversity. For example, when you are out of work, we want you to feel bad, not good, but feel bad in a healthy, self-helping way. We do not want you to feel neutral under these conditions as you may very well fail to take action to find work. If you feel indifferent, you may not think creatively about how you could earn an income in some other way which, although not ideal, will allow you to meet your financial challenges. To feel neutral, you would have to convince yourself that the adversity you face is not a threat requiring your attention. To feel neutral, you would have to change what you value or deny reality. To feel indifferent you would not have to care that what you want and value is at risk. I do not think this is good to do or realistic to do. You want, value and care for what you want, value, and care for, and attempting to give up what you wish to have is self-defeating. In my view, psychotherapy and other approaches to self-help preferably will not attempt to convince you to be indifferent to criticism, rejection, loss, failure, threats to your health and

financial security, and other threats to things in your domain of interest and value. Instead, we want you to have a healthy negative emotion about the risk you face and the resources you have at your disposal to meet the particular threat and then go and face your problems. When it comes to threats to your interests, safety, healthy and financial security, comfort, reputation, and standing in the eyes of significant others, concern is the healthy negative feeling to experience. Concern is your friend.

The Characteristics of Concern

Concern is a very protective emotion. It enables you to assess the threat without bias and engage in creative thinking, prepare to address and neutralize the threat if this is possible, and move on and live happily with the uncertainty that often surrounds threats that either cannot be prevented or addressed in an ideal way. Concern can serve as a spark or a catalyst for constructive action or a breaking mechanism when one is engaged in activities that, if not terminated, will undermine one's long-term best interest.

The Characteristics of Anxiety

Anxiety, your foe, often leads to denial, defensive behavior, avoidance, or even self-defeating indulgence aimed at distracting you from the threat that looms ahead. Consider how alcohol, food, drugs, and sex are, at times, used in unhealthy ways to cope with anxiety. Anxiety can lead to myopic thinking that does not help you creatively solve your problems and engage in out of the box thinking. Anxiety in response to anticipated discomfort can undermine your ability to tolerate discomfort and do what is necessary to adapt to a crisis. If you are out of work and need money, you may find it uncomfortable to accept employment which you do not prefer but which is currently available. You may also experience a form of anxiety about your ego where you would esteem yourself less if you accepted employment that is uncomfortable not only because it is unrewarding but also because you consider it is beneath you to do. Discomfort anxiety and ego anxiety are your twin foes. They undermine your ability to adapt to uncomfortable circumstances that carry some sort of threat to you.

Concern enables you to help yourself in constructive ways if this is possible. Concern allows you to get out of your comfort zone and do what you can to address a problem even if those actions are uncomfortable. Concern would enable you to face reality and do what you can do to meet your financial challenges, even when the available types of work are unrewarding. Your feelings of concern would help and allow you to put your ego aside as you accept employment that may very well not carry with it social status. Concern will enable you to weigh your options, make the best of a bad situation, adapt, and prevail. Concern also allows you to acknowledge the threat and possible consequences when it is clear nothing constructive can be done to ward off the threat. Where anxiety leads to rumination, concern frees the mind to think clearly and direct attention beyond the risk when you have devoted sufficient attention to the matter. Concern allows you to live happily, to some degree, even in the face of an ongoing threat or other aversive situation. For example, consider the man who loses his job shortly before the long-awaited wedding day of his daughter. He has his concern for his future and finances, but his mind can still savor the moment and enjoy his daughter's wedding day even if it coincides with the time when the hand of fate has turned against him and caused him to lose his job at a most undesirable time.

Attitudes Underpinning Anxiety

Examples of a few irrational, self-defeating, rigid, and extreme attitudes which underpin anxiety include:

1. Because this is an important matter, I have to do perfectly well. (This leads to performance anxiety)
2. Because your opinion of me is important, I need your approval. If I do not have your approval, I am lesser of a person. (This leads to ego anxiety and nonassertive behavior)
3. You have to treat me as I wish. I cannot bear it if you do not. (This is an attitude that leads to discomfort anxiety.)
4. The world must be comfortable, easy, and secure. I cannot bear the world when it is not comfortable, easy, and secure. (This is an attitude that leads to discomfort anxiety, avoidance behavior, and self-defeating escapism.)

The Process of Disputing Self-Defeating Attitudes

In REBT, I encourage you to initially seek to identify the rigid and extreme attitudes which underpin your anxiety. Once you have made this identification, it is essential to go beyond this and examine these attitudes critically. Ask the question, is this attitude going to help me meet the threat, or will it lead me to avoid it in a self-defeating way? Also ask, is this attitude true or false, that is, does the evidence support it or fail to support it? Then conclude by asking, is this attitude logical? Asking such critical questions is what I refer to as disputing your self-defeating attitudes.

To experience healthy concern, you need to go beyond merely questioning your attitudes. You need to spend time creating new philosophical attitudes that will serve to generate concern and allow you to think, feel, and behave in more adaptive ways and face the threats to your well-being. You could ask yourself what attitude would be true, logical, and, most importantly, allow me better to face the threat with the healthy feeling of concern? What attitude would a rational friend hold, which would enable them to face danger and live happily with any uncertainty surrounding the threat?

These are important questions to reflect upon if you wish to transform your unhealthy, self-defeating anxiety into healthy, self-helping concern. The more you practice identifying, disputing, and creating new self-helping concern focused attitudes, the better you will get at self-help. To help you go from anxiety creating attitudes to concern focused attitudes, below, you will find four healthy alternatives to the four unhealthy attitudes found above. Take note of how the four below attitudes will lead to either self-helping behavior, creative problem-solving, or living well with any associated uncertainty surrounding the threat without rumination. Take note that the below attitudes are true and logical, which means there is evidence that supports them, and they are internally consistent and follow the rules of sound reasoning.

1. Because this is an important matter, I want to do very well. However, even when an issue is important to me, and poor performance has significant

practical consequences, it does not mean I absolutely have to do well and avoid those unfortunate consequences. I will strive to do my very best to do well and focus on doing well rather than the consequences of not doing well. If I perform poorly, I will choose to accept myself and face the consequences when and if they come about in my life.

2. Because your opinion of me is important, I want your approval, and my concern will help me gain this desired approval. Even when your approval is important to me, I do not need your approval. Winning your approval or losing it never changes my human worth unless I resort to defining myself as less worthy as a human because I do not have your approval. Such a definition would be arbitrary and not derived from evidence. There is no benefit in holding such a self-defeating, arbitrarily derived definition of myself. I will choose to accept myself unconditionally rather than to define myself as worthy if I meet certain conditions. Then I will rate what I do to learn what serves to achieve my goals.

3. I want you to treat me as I wish, but sadly and unfortunately, you do not have to treat me as I wish. I tend to experience an uncomfortable state when you treat me poorly, but that state is not unbearable. I can bear it, and it is worth bearing as to how you treat me is not under my control. My attitude towards your mistreatment is within my power of choice, and I will think in a healthy way towards your misbehavior.

4. I wish the world was always a comfortable, easy, and secure place to live in, but it does not have to be so. If the world is not comfortable, easy, and secure, it is not unbearable. I can face the challenges of the world and bear them, and it is worth doing as it is my responsibility to care for myself and those I wish to love and protect.

Humans Can Think in Self-Defeating and Self-Helping Ways

Humans quite naturally think in ways which are crooked and false to the facts. The result is that this crooked thinking leads to self-defeating feelings of anxiety, which does not help us cope with adversity. REBT is an organized system of ideas, a philosophy if you will, and a self-help oriented psychotherapy. Learn it to help you transform anxiety in response to problems of daily living into mobilizing feelings of concern. We all retain the ability to cultivate the rational thinking that will lead to concern, which will give us the best chance to protect our interests and lead a meaningful and happy life in the face of ongoing threats to our well-being. REBT's adaptive attitudes do require study, work, and practice. However, concern is a self-helping negative emotion which is so much easier to live with, and therefore I encourage you to do the following:

1. Attend my weekly **Saturday Zoom Rational Emotive Behavioral Conversation Hour** to observe my work with a volunteer. You will learn how to help yourself by watching the conversation I hold to show the volunteer how to use REBT's ideas on their problem. If you would like to be the volunteer I converse with, email me at **REBTDoctor@gmail.com**.
2. Listen to the many audios found on this website to learn, relearn, and master the core concepts and strategies of this liberating self-help philosophy.
3. Read **books on REBT by leading authors** like Dr. Ellis and Dr. Dryden.

4. When you are experiencing an unhealthy negative emotion write down the letters ABCDE and do an ABC analysis of your upset. Recall that A denotes your adversity, B denotes your Basic Attitudes towards the adversity, and C denotes your consequential self-defeating emotions and behavior occurring in response to adversity. Remember your consequential emotions largely stem from your basic attitudes. At part D dispute your self-defeating rigid and extreme attitudes. At part E create and write new self-helping, flexible attitudes which will serve as your Effective New Philosophy.

4. Look for opportunities to implement the ideas of unconditional self, other, and life acceptance, which are foundational to this philosophy.

5. Going beyond modeling this philosophy through implementation to gently and flexibly sharing and teaching it to interested friends, family, and colleagues who struggle to cope with their life problems.

Bottom line: REBT is a sensible approach to life's problems that teaches you how to have healthy negative feelings of concern when you face threats to your well-being. REBT teaches you how to cultivate healthy, flexible attitudes that help you get more of what you want and less of what you do not wish for in the real world. Concern is your friend, anxiety your foe.

REBT Works When You Work It!

Walter J. Matweychuk, Ph.D.
Clinical Psychologist
212-750-2826
1528 Walnut Street, Suite 1702
Philadelphia, PA 19102

REBTDoctor.com
DrM@alumni.upenn.edu



Contact Me

