

## Do Yourself a Favor Learn to Accept Yourself Unconditionally



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

Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) is a philosophy of life used psychotherapeutically. One unique aspect of it as a form of psychotherapy is that it advocates for the development of unconditional self-acceptance. Cultivating unconditional self-acceptance is not an easy task. No other therapy explicitly teaches unconditional self-acceptance. It is a challenging developmental task for a person to achieve because, according to REBT theory, we are born and reared to think irrationally. We quickly and quite "naturally" are inclined to make our self-acceptance contingent upon desired achievements and desired personal characteristics. We quickly put our "self" into fixed categories. Albert Ellis argued it is the human condition to think irrationally. One way we do this is to demand, broadly speaking, that we do well and possess specific desired characteristics (e.g., exceptional intelligence, physical attractiveness, creative talent, athletic ability). By having a demand, we mean we hold a rigid attitude towards achievement and specific desirable characteristics. When we do poorly, especially in important matters, or observe that we do not possess or sufficiently possess specific desirable characteristics we then, as humans, are prone to rate our total self as inferior, inadequate, weak, deficient, bad, or worthless. Thus we have failed to meet our required terms for self-acceptance. We no longer "esteem" ourselves because we have not done as we must to meet some standard that establishes our intrinsic human worth. We then either put ourselves into a separate derogatory category such as the category of worthless or inferior person, or we judge our self to possess lesser relative value than another person. Either psychological stance leads the individual to painful, needless emotional disturbance and suffering and sometimes desperate attempts to remedy their emotional problems.

### **Conditional Self-Acceptance and Its Aftermath**

I believe that cultivating unconditional self-acceptance is the most important developmental task a human being can achieve in the process of self-actualization. It is a precious gift which, by definition, only you can give to yourself. It is the most important developmental task a human being can give to themselves merely because to error is human. Try as we might, and

regardless of who we are and what is at stake, we will sometimes error. Each of us knows this to be the case, but most of us do not operate emotionally as if we genuinely believe this undeniable fact of human existence. We rate our performances and their associated consequences, and we then measure ourselves, our essence, our being and personhood with how well we have performed. This evaluation concludes that we are good, good enough, better than, or best as a person when we do well, or we decide we are bad, insufficient, less than or wholly inferior as a person when we perform poorly. We ride an emotional roller coaster as our human worth is nearly always on the line. We strive to prove ourselves in every moment, day in and day out, anxious to continue to do well or feel shameful, and depressed after a poor performance. We engage in ego-driven competition with ourselves and with others. We also are at risk of living a life someone else wants us to live, perhaps a parent, as we strive to meet others' expectations to conclude we are lovable or adequate as a person. We live our one short and precious life to prove ourselves, rather than to enjoy ourselves.

### **Steps in Cultivating Unconditional Self-Acceptance**

REBT can show you how to liberate yourself from the self-imposed prison of conditional self-acceptance. To cultivate unconditional self-acceptance, you first need to understand the concept and appreciate its utility. Most importantly, you need to know why it is invalid to attempt to estimate human worth and give up the assumption that humans have intrinsic human value. You also preferably should come to understand the multiple arguments why it is valid and possible for a human to cultivate unconditional self-acceptance. Finally, and most importantly, you need to live in harmony with a philosophy of unconditional self-acceptance. By acting and striving for unconditional self-acceptance through shame freeing personally meaningful actions, you deepen conviction and reaffirm in thought, feeling, and deed that what matters in life is what you do not what you are. You value your human doings, not your human being or essence.

### **Defining Unconditional Self-Acceptance**

In REBT to accept something is to (1) acknowledge that it exists, (2) acknowledge that all the conditions are in place for it to exist (3) believe that while it is preferable for this reality not to exist, it does not follow that it must not exist, and (4) resolve to change the existing conditions if they can be changed and adjust constructively and move on if they can't be changed. The cultivation of unconditional self-acceptance involves acknowledging our good and bad performances and our desirable and undesirable personal characteristics. We acknowledge that for whatever reasons, some possibly known and some unknown, all the conditions are in place for us to have performed as we did and to possess the characteristics we currently possess. We also acknowledge that although we do not like how or what we have done or we prefer possession of specific desired characteristics, we do not conclude that these performances and our undesirable characteristics must not exist. Finally, we resolve to change those performances we can improve and dampen down our undesirable characteristics if we possibly can. We commit to developing to the extent humanly possible those desirable characteristics we wish to possess. If we cannot improve our future performances or characteristics, we adjust constructively, move on, and have some degree of happiness despite this unfortunate aspect of life. We choose to accept

ourselves warts and all.

## **The Utility of Unconditional Self-Acceptance**

The utility of unconditional self-acceptance is that we experience healthy, self-helping, and motivating feelings of disappointment when we perform poorly. We might also feel quite sad or remorseful if our failed performances and decisions had significant negative consequences to ourselves or others. We might experience concern for our future performance if we do poorly again and appropriately care about the impact of past negative actions that we are responsible for having done. These feelings are healthy because they serve to keep us aware of things as they are or how they could be in the future. These healthy negative feelings help us experience the inclination to take remedial action if we can, and these healthy negative emotions do not undermine unrelated areas of our life. We can feel disappointed or remorseful about our past actions without seeing all our deeds in a negative light. We feel bad about what we did, not who we are as a person. We are free to make our own decisions as we can accept the responsibility if our self-chosen choices prove to be bad ones leading to negative consequences. We can live life to enjoy ourselves because we are not anxious that our actions and decisions may meet with disapproval from significant others. We stand a better chance of living a personally meaningful life.

## **Unconditional Self-Acceptance Works in the Real World**

One relatively easy argument in favor of unconditional self-acceptance is that it works in the real world because to err is human. Some might say to accept themselves will lead to a loss of motivation or lower one's standards. I counter that even when you unconditionally accept yourself, you will feel concerned about your behavior's consequences. This concern will motivate you to strive to do well because of the resulting rewards contingent on doing well. I also point out that unconditional self-acceptance does not absolve you of responsibility for your misbehavior's real-world practical consequences. Suppose you use poor judgment and drink too much and then consider driving home while under the influence of alcohol, you still preferably should acknowledge that you are responsible for driving impaired and its potential consequences. Your concern will help you avoid such self-defeating behaviors and choices because of the very bad consequences that could occur. Unconditional self-acceptance will likewise not shield a student from the real-world practical consequences of not studying for an exam. Unconditional self-acceptance will help you to have a healthy emotional reaction should you get arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol or failing to prepare for an examination. You still have to face the negative consequences of your poor decision making, but you do so without self-condemning guilt or shame. With unconditional self-acceptance you will feel remorseful for your bad judgement and its consequences, disappointment in your behavior, and concern for the consequences of your behavior for yourself and others. Unconditional self-acceptance will also reduce social inhibition and enable you to take calculated risks. You will be more likely to risk rejection and failure by going outside of your comfort zone. You will choose to accept yourself unconditionally when you are rejected and fail in the calculated risks you take. In short unconditional self-acceptance works. It is emotionally and behaviorally liberating without absolving you of the consequences of your actions.

## **Three Human Characteristics & Valid Reasoning**

Humans have three very unique characteristics. These characteristics are that we are in a constant state of change and possess a high degree of complexity. We also have the natural ability to reason abstractly. The first two qualities of flux and complexity make any global rating of human worth incomplete, impossible, and invalid.

### **The Flux Factor**

As an organism in flux, any individual's rating is obsolete and incomplete the moment rendered. Consider this. Imagine going to buy an expensive truffle mushroom at the market. You place it on the scale to determine its weight and price. Imagine that while weighing it, the mushroom was growing before your eyes and at a rather rapid rate. The mushroom's price could not be determined because the moment it is placed on the scale to be weighed, its weight would increase. Humans are like this imaginary mushroom. We are moving targets as organisms in a state of flux. A fair valuation of our worth based on our characteristics or behavior is indeterminable because our future growth and change are unknown at present. If we have performed well till now, there is the chance we will evolve, someday lose our abilities due to aging and stop doing them well. Professional athletes lose their ability to perform well because they age and at some point they have to retire. They cannot maintain their professional performance well into the future because of the changes within that slowly take place. It is valid to say they play well at one time in their career, and due to aging, they stop playing up to professional standards and retire. The good news is that change works in many different directions. We may perform poorly through portion of life, but our experience sometimes enables us to perform better in the future. Our future performances cannot be precisely evaluated today because we get better at some things, especially those things we regularly practice. The only logical way to address the measurement of human worth given the flux characteristic is to do all evaluations of one's doing at the end of life. At that point, nothing more can occur. At that point a loved could put one's human worth score on the deceased's tombstone. It might read, "Here lies a man whose human worth was measured to be 79, just missing his defined cutoff for human adequacy set at 80. Poor soul." Complete birth to death comprehensive evaluations of human doings and characteristics are both impossible and of little practical value. Such global ratings of a person would not aid the deceased. The flux factor makes global ratings of human worth invalid.

### **The Complexity Factor**

Humans are living organisms of a high degree of complexity. We have an uncountable number of physical and psychological characteristics and traits. We make an inestimable number of decisions and behaviors, thoughts, and feelings throughout a lifetime, making any rating of an individual as a person incomplete, the moment it is rendered. We cannot capture all that can be rated about a human in a present rating, and we cannot know how things will change in the future. We develop new desirable characteristics and polish undesirable ones. We can learn and use them to acquire new skills. We cannot see into the future and do not know how proficient we may get at some activity. We change and have the potential to change quite significantly. The complexity factor makes global ratings of human worth invalid.

## **Language Traps and Anti-Empirical Abstractions**

Humans have an extraordinary tool in language. We use words, phrases, and sentences to think, pursue our goals, and solve the never-ending flow of problems we encounter. We use the language tool every day, nearly all day. Our language has its limitations, which leads us to think imprecisely. During the thought process, we abstract some of the information we have obtained through our senses. We summarize what we take in through in our senses. We use our abstractions and summaries to reach conclusions, many of which help and are relatively accurate, but some are too narrow or too broad in scope. Our senses see living organisms moving through space with four legs. We agree to call one a dog, another a cat due to the qualities we abstract from our senses and associate with each organism. We see our baby walking on all fours across the living room floor, but we do not think of our baby as a dog or a cat. We generalize, and we discriminate.

We also see that we fail nearly every time we try to hit a baseball with a bat. We abstract from these performances that we are a failure. We could discriminate that we hit baseballs with bats poorly while we knock down bowling pins with a bowling ball rather well. Unfortunately, we tend not to think easily and consistently in this more precise way unless trained by REBT to do so. Our language encourages us to take shortcuts at the risk of overgeneralizing. We observe that we very often spell words correctly and win spelling contests we enter. We conclude we are successful and that we are a winner.

Representing our human worth by abstracting it from our actions is invalid as it is arbitrary. It is invalid to conclude you are a failure when you fail. Many people do this from time to time and feel emotional disturbance as a result. Can we indeed be a "failure," or is this false to the facts? What are the facts? You fail to hit baseballs, but you also spell words correctly. What are you? You are an alive person who is neither a success nor a failure. Which abstraction is valid, a winner or a loser? Both concepts leave out other behaviors you can do well and do poorly. Concluding you are a success, or a failure is a subjective conclusion that is definitional. You are arbitrarily defining human worth, but there is no intrinsic worth found within humans. All definitions of the goodness or badness of a human as a human are arbitrary. A person's extrinsic value is not their intrinsic worth. A scientist who develops a vaccine has done something that favorably impacts many people. He will be thought of by many people as a great man only by arbitrarily defining him so. His wife or children may consider him a bad man because he plays his role as a husband and his role as a father rather poorly. The abstraction he is "great" is a matter of opinion. The person who sees themselves as a failure is holding an opinion, but this is false to the facts. Subjective opinions and definitions of human worth lead to dysfunctional narcissism and dysfunctional self-loathing. Avoid subjective definitions of human worth, and unconditionally accept yourself as a changing, complex, human capable of error and achievement.

## **Conclusions on Unconditional Self-Acceptance**

Unconditional Self-acceptance is challenging for humans to cultivate. We think in sloppy ways, which is the human condition. We can think in a highly precise way but it takes effort and training. We could acknowledge the two critical qualities of the self, namely flux and complexity, but we are naturally

inclined to abstract only bits of what we observe. We forget that the future has yet to arrive, and we may do better as time goes on. We do much emotional self-harm by defining ourselves. Despite our nature to error, and to think and abstract in an overgeneralized way, we can learn to reason precisely and logically. REBT teaches you how to reason correctly about what you do and the many characteristics you possess and deeds you do. REBT argues that you can validly evaluate what you do and rate some of your many parts in the context of your goals and values. However summing all the parts for a human worth score is folly. What works in the real world is to assess what you do. Keep your eye on your goal and evaluate if you are doing well or poorly. This evaluation will give you valuable feedback that will enable you to learn to do better. Avoid linking your self-acceptance to any condition. You will do better, live more freely, think more independently, take more worthwhile, calculated risks, and feel healthier feelings, some of which will be negative when you fall short of your goals. I tell people I want to die with as much unconditional self-acceptance as I possibly can cultivate over the course of my life. As we look back on the successes and failures before we take our final breath, unconditional self-acceptance will help make death easier to accept. To me, that is the way to exit this life. I know no more a precious gift than unconditional self-acceptance to give oneself today, tomorrow, and during their final hour.

**Bottom line:** Do yourself a favor and learn to accept yourself unconditionally.

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### ***REBT Works When You Work It!***

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