

## Using Rational-Emotive Therapy to control anger

adapted from <http://www.palace.net/llama/psych/ret.html>

Although RET doesn't directly address self-harm as an issue, its precepts can be helpful in controlling the sometimes uncontrollable rage self-injurers feel. Rational-Emotive therapy was developed by Albert Ellis, among others, who believe that your feelings don't control your thoughts -- your thoughts control your feelings. Negative emotions are not inevitable, but come about as the result of patterns of thinking we've laid down over the years. If we can learn to rethink the situations, we can learn to control negative emotions.

A. Jack Hafner (1992) gives some excellent examples of this process. Known in RET as the "ABC" format, it allows you to recognize triggering situations and cool down anger before it starts.

### **The ABCs**

#### **A=Situation**

For example, you are working on an important document for work or school when your spouse/roommate/cat trips on your computer cord and shuts the machine down.

#### **B=Beliefs**

Your first reaction is, "Dammit, why did she have to do that? Couldn't she see I was working? She should look where she's going, and she shouldn't even come around when I'm working anyway.

#### **C=Feelings and Actions**

You get pissed off. You yell at the person who unplugged your computer and blame them for all the work you lost. You sulk all evening and refuse to be placated.

#### **D=Dispute**

You start to question your demandingness: "Accidents happen. God knows I'm enough of a klutz myself. It's not like she did it on purpose. It'd be nice if she'd not rush through the room when I'm working, but I can deal.

#### **E=Realistic goals**

You decide that in the future you'd like to have less risk of having your work interrupted and lost by unexpected intrusions without making your spouse/roommate angry or being unrealistic.

#### **F=Constructive options**

You decide that moving the computer cord to make it harder to accidentally unplug and saving your work more often are both options that might help prevent this in the future.

#### **G=Put option into practice**

You move the computer cord and you set up your programs to auto-save every three minutes. Hafner notes, "You will still feel some upset -- since using RET does not squelch your feelings -- but you will probably feel frustrated and disappointed instead of enraged."

## **An example of how you might use RET**

Let's say that you're hurting really badly: for instance, you're very very angry at your friend for doing something awful. Maybe he was supposed to call tonight, and he didn't, and this is the third night in a row that he's forgotten. This isn't a classic triggering situation for everyone, but it will suffice for illustration.

### **A=Situation**

Your boyfriend has forgotten, for the third night running, to call when he said he would.

### **B=Beliefs**

"If he really cared, he'd remember to call." "He should know that not calling hurts my feelings."  
"I need him to call; I can't go on if he doesn't."

### **C= Feelings and actions**

You feel angry, and you call and yell at him or break up with him. This leaves you feeling worse than ever. You realize how worthless and horrible you are, and out come the blades (or whatever). You feel like hurting yourself is the only way to make it feel okay again.

### **D=Dispute the beliefs in B**

"Maybe he's got something on his mind right now that's really bothering him. Maybe he doesn't attach as much importance to his phone calls as I do. Maybe he thinks that whether or not he calls is unrelated to whether or not he loves me."

### **E=Realistic goals**

I want to convey to him that, in my mind, his keeping promises to call is connected to my belief that he loves and respects me.

### **F=Constructive options**

I can use my interpersonal skills and write out my case as I prepare for a talk with him. I can try to explain that his calls are, to me, an important reminder of his love and that when he repeatedly fails to call when he said he would, I feel hurt and unloved (notice: there's no blaming here, no "you make me feel..."; it's just a simple statement of fact).

### **G=Put option into practice**

The next time you see him, talk about how the missed phone calls make you feel, and explain that you really like having little reminders of his love and respect for you. Explain that you can understand if sometimes things get in the way of a prior commitment to call you, but that you wish he'd contact you later just to reassure you.

This isn't easy at first, and it takes a while to train yourself to look at situations in terms of the ABCs, but learning to use them can help reduce the suffering in your life.