

## Refuting Irrational Ideas

In this chapter you will learn to:

- \* Recognize how your thoughts influence your feelings, physical sensations, and behavior
- \* Assess your distressing thoughts
- \* Counteract your needless distressing thoughts

### BACKGROUND

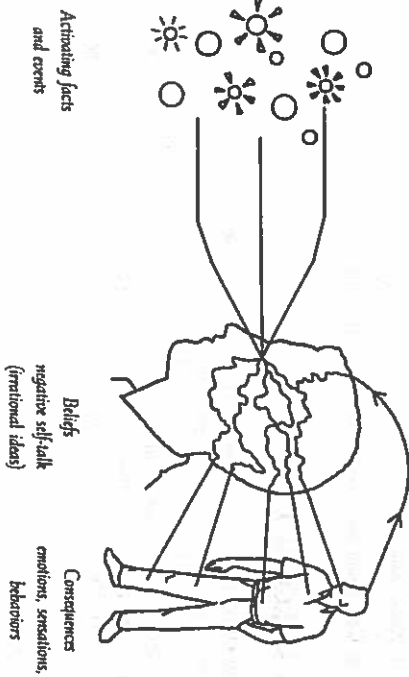
Almost every minute of your conscious life you are engaging in self-talk, your internal thought language. These are the sentences with which you describe and interpret the world. If your self-talk is accurate and in touch with reality, you function well. If it is irrational and untrue, you experience stress and emotional disturbance. Here is an example of irrational self-talk: "I can't bear to be alone." No physically healthy person has ever died merely from being alone. Being alone may be uncomfortable, undesirable, and frustrating, but you can live with it and live through it.

Another example of irrational self-talk might be: "I should never be cruel to my child. If I am, I'll know I'm a rotten person." The phrase "should never" allows no possibility of flaw or failure. When the inevitable quarrel occurs, you indict yourself as entirely rotten—all on the basis of a single incident.

Irrational ideas may be based on outright misperceptions ("When the airplane's wing shakes, I know it's going to fall off") or the perfectionist's "shoulds," "oughts," and "musts" ("I ought to keep quiet rather than risk upsetting anyone"); inaccurate self-talk such as "I need love" is emotionally dangerous compared to the more realistic "I want love very much, but I don't absolutely need it, and can survive and feel reasonably happy without it." "How terrible to be rejected" is fear-producing in comparison to "I find it unpleasant, awkward in the moment, and feel regretful when I am rejected." Imperatives such as "I've got to be more helpful around the house" can be converted to more rational statements, such as "There would probably be more peace and compatibility in my home if I did a greater share of the work."

Albert Ellis developed a system to attack irrational ideas or beliefs and replace them with realistic statements about the world. He called his system "rational emotive therapy" and wrote about it, with coauthor Harper, in *A Guide to Rational Living* (1997) first published in 1961. Ellis's basic thesis is that emotions are only partially related to actual events. Between the event and the emotion is realistic or unrealistic self-talk. The self-talk produces the emotions. Your own thoughts, directed and controlled by you, are what create anxiety, anger, and depression. Ellis later renamed his system "rational emotive behavior therapy," stressing that people's actions as well as their emotions are influenced by their ideas. The image below shows how it works.

### FEEDBACK LOOP



### Example

Ellis's model is as simple as A, B, C.

### ACTIVATING FACTS AND EVENTS

A mechanic replaces a fuel pump he honestly believes was malfunctioning, but the car's performance doesn't improve. The customer is very upset and demands that the mechanic put the old fuel pump back.

### BELIEFS OR NEGATIVE SELF-TALK ABOUT THE ACTIVATING FACTS OR EVENT

The mechanic says to himself,  
*He's just a growdy—nothing would please him.*  
 and  
*Why the hell do I get all the tough jobs?*  
 and  
*I ought to have figured this out by now.*  
 and, finally,  
*I'm not much of a mechanic.*

### CONSEQUENCES: EMOTIONS, SENSATIONS, AND BEHAVIOR

The mechanic feels anger, resentment, and depression, as well as a sense of worthlessness. He feels a knot in his stomach. As the day wears on, he develops a headache. He reluctantly agrees to put in the old fuel pump, but for the rest of the day he is short-tempered with coworkers and then with his family later that night.  
 The mechanic may later say to himself, "That guy really made me mad." But it is not the customer or anything the customer has done that produces the anger—it is the mechanic's own self-talk, his interpretation of reality. Such irrational self-talk can be changed and the stressful emotions, sensations, and behavior that result from this self-talk can be changed with it.

### SYMPTOM-RELIEF EFFECTIVENESS

Rimm and Litvak (1969) found that negative self-talk produced substantial physiological arousal. In other words, your body tenses and becomes stressed when you use irrational arguments such as:

- People seem to ignore me at parties.
- ↓
- It's obvious that I'm either boring or unattractive to them.
- ↓
- How terrible!

The emotional results of irrational negative self-talk are anxiety, depression, rage, guilt, jealousy, low frustration tolerance, shame, and a sense of worthlessness. Rational emotive behavior therapy has been shown to be effective in decreasing the frequency and intensity of these emotions.

### TIME TO MASTER

Assessment of your irrational beliefs, plus homework sufficient to refute one of these beliefs, can take approximately twenty minutes a day for two weeks. Rational emotive imagery, the process by which you work directly on changing your emotions, also takes about two weeks if you practice ten minutes a day.

### INSTRUCTIONS

#### Beliefs Inventory

The following Beliefs Inventory will help you uncover some of the irrational ideas that contribute to unhappiness and stress. Take the test now, score it, and note the sections where your scores are highest.

Note that it is not necessary to think over any item very long. Mark your answer quickly and go on to the next statement. Be sure to mark how you actually think about the statement, not how you think you should think.

### BELIEFS INVENTORY

Score	Disagre	Agree	Belief
			1. It is important to me that others approve of me.
			2. I hate to fail at anything.
			3. People who do wrong deserve what they get.
			4. When I don't get what I want, I get mad.
			5. Negative feelings are natural consequences of negative events.
			6. I need everyone to like me.
			7. I avoid things I cannot do well.
			8. Too many bad people escape the punishment they deserve.
			9. I'm easily frustrated when things don't go my way.
			10. The best way to avoid pain and be happy is to have control over your environment.
			11. I find it hard to go against what others think.
			12. It is very important to me to be successful in everything I do.
			13. Those who do wrong deserve to be blamed and punished.
			14. I often get disturbed over situations I don't like.
			15. People who are miserable are victims of circumstances beyond their control.
			16. I often worry about how much people approve of and accept me.
			17. It upsets me a lot when I make mistakes.
			18. Immorality should be strongly punished.
			19. I get extremely annoyed when others inconvenience me.
			20. The more problems a person has, the less happy he or she will be.
			21. I worry a lot about what people think about me.



Add up your points for items 28, 33, 38, 43, and 48, and enter the total here: \_\_\_\_\_  
 The higher the total, the more you agree with the irrational idea that you need something other or stronger or greater than yourself to rely upon.

Add up your points for items 29, 34, 39, 44, and 49, and enter the total here: \_\_\_\_\_

The higher the total, the more you agree with the irrational idea that the past has a lot to do with determining the present.

Add up your points for items 30, 35, 40, 45, and 50, and enter the total here: \_\_\_\_\_

The higher the total, the more you agree with the irrational idea that happiness can be achieved by inaction, passivity, and endless leisure.

## Irrational Ideas

At the root of all irrational thinking is the assumption that things are done to you: "That really got me down. . . . She makes me nervous. . . . Places like that scare me. . . . Being lied to makes me see red." Nothing is done to you. Events happen in the world. You experience those activating events (A), engage in self-talk (B), and consequently experience an emotion (C) resulting from the self-talk. A does not cause C—B causes C. If your self-talk is irrational and unrealistic, you create unpleasant emotions.

Two common forms of irrational self-talk are statements that "awfulize" and "absolutize." You awfulize by making catastrophic, nightmarish interpretations of your experience. A momentary chest pain is a heart attack, the grumpy boss intends to fire you, your spouse takes a night job and the thought of being alone is unthinkably terrible. Awfulizing involves exaggerating unwanted events, traits, or behaviors, while almost always ignoring the positive ones. The emotions that follow awfulizing self-talk tend themselves to be awful—you are responding to your own description of the world.

For instance, if you think that a situation is painful, boring, or difficult and you exaggerate these qualities beyond your ability to cope, you'd likely feel overwhelmed. If you define people by their flaws or misdeeds and tell yourself these flaws or misdeeds are horrible, they become terrible people. It becomes easy to justify your anger. Irrational self-statements that absolutize often include words like "should," "must," "ought," "always," and "never." The idea is that other people or things must be a certain way, or you must be a certain way. Any deviation from that particular value or standard is bad. The person who fails to live up to the standard is bad. In reality, the standard is what's bad, because it is inflexible and narrow-minded.

Albert Ellis suggested ten basic irrational ideas, which are listed below. To these we have added some additional common self-statements that are highly unrealistic. Based on your scores on the Beliefs Inventory, and your knowledge of the situations in which you characteristically experience stress, place a check mark next to the ones that seem to apply to you.

142

— 1. It is an absolute necessity for an adult to have love and approval from peers, family, and friends. In fact, pleasing all the people in your life is impossible. Even those who basically like and approve of you will be turned off by some behaviors and qualities. This irrational belief is one of the greatest causes of misery.

— 2. You must be unfailingly competent, successful, and almost perfect in all that you undertake. The results of believing that you must behave perfectly are self-blame for inevitable failure, lowered self-esteem, perfectionistic standards applied to spouse and friends, and paralysis and fear at attempting anything. Compare this to the belief that you can strive to do your best and learn from your errors.

— 3. Certain people are evil, wicked, and villainous and should be punished. A more realistic position is that they are behaving in ways that are antisocial or inappropriate. They are perhaps stupid, ignorant, or neurotic and may need to change their behavior.

— 4. It is horrible when people and things are not the way you would like them to be. This might be described as the spoiled-child syndrome. As soon as the tire goes flat the self-talk starts: "Why does this happen to me? Damn, I can't take this. It's awful, I'll get all flitty." Any inconvenience, problem, or failure to get your way is likely to be met with such awfulizing self-statements. The result is intense irritation and stress.

— 5. External events cause most human misery—people simply react as events trigger their emotions. A logical extension of this belief is that you must control the external events in order to create happiness or avoid sorrow. The fact is, our control is limited and we are at a loss to completely manipulate the wills of others. Interpreting an event as the reason for your unhappiness can keep you stuck. Although you may have only limited control over others, you do have enormous control over your thoughts, emotions, and behavior.

— 6. You should feel fear or anxiety about anything that is unknown, uncertain, or potentially dangerous. Many describe this as "a little bell goes off and I think I ought to start worrying." They begin to rehearse their catastrophic scenarios. Increasing the fear or anxiety in the face of uncertainty makes coping more difficult and adds to stress. Saving the fear response for actual, perceived danger allows you to enjoy uncertainty as a novel and exciting experience.

— 7. It is easier to avoid than to face life's difficulties and responsibilities. There are many ways of ducking responsibilities: "I should tell him, I'm no longer interested—but not tonight. . . . I'd like to get another job, but I'm just too tired on my days off

143



11. You are helpless and have no control over what you experience or feel. This belief is at the heart of much depression and anxiety. In truth, we have some control over interpersonal situations, and a lot of control over how we interpret and emotionally respond to life events.

You can add other irrational beliefs to this list:

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### Identifying Elusive Irrational Ideas

Much of the difficulty in uncovering irrational self-talk results from the speed and invisibility of thoughts. They may be lightning quick and barely on the edge of awareness. You will rarely be conscious of a complete sentence, as in the irrational statements above. Because self-talk has a reflexive, automatic quality, it is easy to keep the illusion that feelings arise spontaneously from events. However, once the thoughts are slowed down like a slow-motion film frame by frame, the millisecond it takes to say "I'm falling apart" is exposed for its malignant influence. The thoughts that create your emotions frequently may appear in a kind of shorthand: "No good ... crazy ... feeling sick ... dumb," and so on. That shorthand has to be stretched out into the original sentence it was extracted from. The sentence can then be challenged with methods you'll learn in the section on refuting irrational ideas.

The best way to uncover your irrational ideas is to reflect on situations in which you experience distressing emotions such as anxiety, depression, anger, guilt, or a sense of worthlessness. Behind each of these emotions, particularly if they are chronic, is irrational self-talk. Ask yourself, "What am I telling myself about this situation?" You may be tempted to immediately self-correct with rational self-talk. For instance, in response to the irrational thought "My brother never helps out with our elderly parents, it's just not fair," Amy might have immediately told herself, "Nobody said life was fair." This would have prevented her from exploring the other thoughts that are distressing her.

Instead, she asked herself "What if that were true? What would it mean to me?" (Burns 1999). To this, she responded, *He has it easy. I want his easy life. I'm really as selfish as he is. But I have no right to be angry.* By repeatedly asking herself the three questions in bold type, Amy was able to

identify many of her other upsetting, irrational thoughts, including these: *It's only right to sacrifice my life—after all, they're family. I love my parents, but they're driving me crazy! I should be stronger. I feel like I'm drowning. What if something happens to me—what will happen to them? I can't stand to think of them all alone. That would be a disaster ...* Amy wrote down these thoughts in a notebook to refer to later.

As you can probably imagine, Amy is in an objectively difficult situation. In addition, she has many irrational thoughts that are generating so much distress that she isn't able to problem solve effectively or to make sensible decisions. She can use the Refuting Irrational Ideas technique described next to step back from and challenge the irrational ideas that are bothering her the most.

### REFUTING IRRATIONAL IDEAS

There are five steps (A through E) to disputing and eliminating irrational ideas. Begin by selecting a situation that consistently generates stressful emotions in you.

- A. Write the facts of the event as they occurred at the time you were upset. Be sure to include only the objective facts, not conjectures, subjective impressions, or value judgments.
- B. Write your self-talk about the event. State all your subjective value judgments, assumptions, beliefs, predictions, and worries. Note which self-statements have been previously described as irrational ideas.
- C. Focus on your emotional response. Make a clear one- or two-word label such as "angry," "depressed," "felt worthless," "afraid," and so on.
- D. Dispute and change the irrational self-talk identified at step B. Here's how it is done, according to Ellis:
  1. Select the irrational idea that you wish to dispute. As an illustration, we will use the irrational idea "It's not fair that I have to suffer with such a problem."
  2. Is there any rational support for this idea? Since everything is as it should be, given long chains of cause and effect, the answer is no.  
The problem must be endured and dealt with because it happened. It happened because all the conditions necessary to make it happen existed.
  3. What evidence exists for the falseness of this idea?
    - a. There are no laws of the universe that say I should not have pain or problems. I can experience any problem for which the necessary conditions exist.

- b. Life is not fair. Life is just a sequence of events, some of which bring pleasure and some of which are inconvenient and painful.
- c. If problems occur, it is up to me to try to solve them.
- d. Trying to keep a problem from developing is adaptive, but resenting and not facing it once it exists is a dangerous strategy.
- e. No one is special. Some people go through life with relatively less pain than I do. This is due to one of two things: the luck of the draw, or decisions I've made that contributed to the necessary conditions for my problems.
- f. Just because I have a problem doesn't mean I have to be miserable. I can take pride in the challenge of a creative solution. This may be an opportunity to increase my self-esteem.
4. Does any evidence exist for the truth of this idea? No, my suffering is due to my self-talk, how I have interpreted this event. I have convinced myself that I should be unhappy.
5. What is the worst thing that could happen to me if what I want to happen doesn't, or what I don't want to happen does?
  - a. I could be deprived of various pleasures while I deal with the problem.
  - b. I might feel inconvenienced.
  - c. I might never solve the problem and experience myself as ineffective in this particular area.
  - d. I might have to accept the consequences of failure.
  - e. Others might not approve of how I am behaving or I might be rejected as incompetent.
  - f. I might feel more stress and tension.
6. What good things might occur if what I want to happen doesn't, or what I don't want to happen does?
  - a. I might learn to tolerate frustration better.
  - b. I might improve my coping skills.
  - c. I might become more responsible.

E. Substitute alternative self-talk, now that you have clearly examined the irrational idea and compared it with rational thinking.

1. There's nothing special about me. I can accept painful situations when they emerge.
2. Facing the problem is more adaptive than resenting it or running away from it.
3. I feel what I think. If I don't think negative thoughts, I won't feel stressed out. At worst, I will experience inconvenience, regret, and annoyance—not anxiety, depression, and rage.

### Homework

To succeed in your war against irrational ideas, you need a daily commitment to doing homework. Make at least 100 copies of the blank Homework Sheet to use, and fill out one copy at least once a day, spending at least twenty minutes on it. Whenever possible, do the homework right after the event has occurred. Use a separate sheet for each event, and save them as a record of your growth.

First read the sample Homework Sheet on the page opposite the blank Homework Sheet. It was completed by a man who had a date with a friend who canceled.



### SAMPLE HOMEWORK SHEET

- A. Activating event:  
*A friend canceled a date with me.*
- B. Rational ideas:  
*I know she's under a lot of time pressure right now ... I'll do something by myself.*  
Irrational ideas:  
*I'll feel terribly alone tonight ... The emphasis is setting in ... She doesn't really care for me ... No one really wants to spend time with me ... I'm falling apart.*
- C. Consequences of the irrational ideas:  
*I was depressed ... I was moderately anxious.*
- D. Disputing and challenging the irrational ideas:
  1. Select the irrational idea:  
*I'll feel terribly alone tonight ... I'm falling apart.*
  2. Is there any rational support for this idea?  
*No.*
  3. What evidence exists for the falseness of the idea?  
*Being alone is not as pleasurable as having a date, but I can find pleasure in an alternative activity. I usually enjoy being alone, and I will tonight as soon as I face the disappointment. I'm mislacking frustration and disappointment as "falling apart."*
  4. Does any evidence exist for the truth of the idea?  
*No, only that I've talked myself into feeling depressed.*
  5. What is the worst thing that could happen to me?  
*I could continue to feel disappointed and not find anything really pleasurable to do tonight.*
  6. What good things might occur?  
*I might feel more self-reliant and realize that I do have inner resources.*
- E. Alternative thoughts:  
*I'm okay! I'll get out my detective novel. I'll treat myself to a good Chinese dinner. I'm good at being alone.*  
Alternative emotions:  
*I feel quiet, a little disappointed, but I'm anticipating a good meal and a good book.*

### HOMEWORK SHEET

- A. Activating event: \_\_\_\_\_
- B. Rational ideas: \_\_\_\_\_
- Irrational ideas: \_\_\_\_\_
- C. Consequences of the irrational ideas: \_\_\_\_\_
- D. Disputing and challenging the irrational ideas: \_\_\_\_\_
  1. Select the irrational idea: \_\_\_\_\_
  2. Is there any rational support for this idea? \_\_\_\_\_
  3. What evidence exists for the falseness of the idea? \_\_\_\_\_
  4. Does any evidence exist for the truth of the idea? \_\_\_\_\_
  5. What is the worst thing that could happen to me? \_\_\_\_\_
  6. What good things might occur? \_\_\_\_\_
- E. Alternative thoughts: \_\_\_\_\_
- Alternative emotions: \_\_\_\_\_

## Rules to Promote Rational Thinking

Evaluate your self-statements against these six rules, or guidelines, for rational thinking (adapted from David Goodman's *Emotional Will: Bring Through Rational Behavior Training* (1978)).

1. It doesn't do anything to me.  
The situation doesn't make me anxious or afraid. I say things to myself that largely produce my anxiety and fear.
2. Everything is exactly the way it should be.  
The conditions for things or people to be otherwise don't exist. To say that things should be other than what they are is to believe in magic. They are what they are because of a long series of causal events, including interpretations, responses from irrational self-talk, and so on. To say that things should be different is to throw out causality.
3. All humans are fallible creatures.  
This is inescapable. If you haven't set reasonable quotas of failure for yourself and others, you increase the prospects for disappointment and unhappiness. It becomes all too easy to attack yourself and others as worthless, bad, and so on.
4. It takes two to have a conflict.  
Before beginning a course of accusation and blame, consider the 30 percent rule. Any party to a conflict is contributing at least 30 percent of the fuel to keep it going.
5. The original cause is lost in antiquity.  
Trying to discover who did what first is a waste of time. The search for the original cause of chronic painful emotions is extremely difficult. The best strategy is to make decisions to change your behavior now.
6. We largely feel the way we think.  
This is the positively stated principle behind the first statement in this list. This statement reinforces the idea that events don't cause emotions—our interpretations of events cause emotions.

## SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

If you have difficulty making headway with rational emotive behavior therapy, one of three factors may be influencing your difficulties:

1. You remain unconvinced that thoughts cause emotions. If this is the case, confine your work initially to rational emotive imagery described in the next section. If you then find

that changes in your self-talk can push you toward experiencing less stressful emotions, the statement that thoughts cause emotions may become more believable.

2. Your irrational ideas and self-talk are so lightning-swift that you have difficulty catching them. If this is the case, try keeping a journal of events and situations associated with intense emotions. Put down everything that flows through your mind: scenes, images, single words, vague half-formed thoughts, names, sounds, sentences, and so on.
3. You have difficulty remembering your thoughts. If this is the case, don't wait until after the fact. Use a journal to write everything down just as it is happening.

## Rational Emotive Imagery

In 1971, Dr. Maxie Maultsby introduced rational emotive imagery. This technique will help you develop strategies to change stressful emotions. It works as follows:

1. Imagine an event that is stressful and usually accompanied by unpleasant emotions. Notice all the details of the situation: sights, smells, sounds, how you are dressed, what is being said, and so on.
2. As you clearly imagine the event, allow yourself to feel uncomfortable. Let in the emotions of anger, anxiety, depression, worthlessness, or shame. Don't try to avoid the emotion—go ahead and feel it.
3. After experiencing the stressful emotion, push yourself to change it to a healthier negative emotion. You can fundamentally alter these emotions so that anxiety, depression, rage, and guilt are replaced by keenly felt concern, disappointment, annoyance, or regret. If you think you can't do this, you are only fooling yourself. Everyone can push him- or herself to change a feeling, if only for a few moments.
4. Having contacted the stressful feeling and pushed it, however briefly, into a healthier negative emotion, you can examine how you did it. What happened inside your head that altered your original depression, anxiety, or rage? Clearly, you told yourself something different about yourself, or others, or the situation.
5. Instead of saying "I can't handle this . . ." this will drive me crazy," you might now be saying "I've dealt successfully with situations like this before." You have changed your beliefs, your interpretations of experience. Once you know how you changed the stressful emotion to a healthier negative emotion, you can substitute the new, adaptive beliefs any time you want. Become deeply aware of how the new beliefs lead you away from stress and produce more bearable emotions.

For example a housewife, who became depressed whenever her husband turned on the television in the evening, practiced rational emotive imagery. During the day, she conjured up the situation in her imagination, her husband wiping his mouth, getting up from the table, taking the plates to the sink, and leaving the room. She could imagine a few moments later the sound of the television coming on, the changing of channels, the voices from his favorite sitcom. As she viewed the sequence, she sank into despondency and became depressed.

After coming fully in contact with the stressful emotion, she pushed herself to change the feeling of depression into one of disappointment and irritation. This felt like showing a huge rock single-handed. It took fifteen minutes of effort before she could get even momentary contact with the less stressful emotions. By practicing at hourly intervals, she was soon able to push her depression into irritation or disappointment for several minutes.

She became ready to examine how she had changed her thoughts (self-talk) in order to change her emotions. She found she could change depression into irritation by saying, *I don't have to feel helpless. If he wants to spend his time with TV, I can do something that feels good to me.* Her other thoughts included: *It's his life. He can waste it if he wants to. I'm not going to waste mine.* There are people I don't visit because I think I should stay home with him. But I'm going to take care of myself. He may be displeased if I don't stay home, but staying home to watch the tube is not satisfying for me.

### Developing Alternative Emotional Responses

Here is a list of sample situations and alternative emotional responses:

Situation	Unhealthy Negative Emotion	Healthy Negative Emotion
Fight with mate	Rage	Annoyance, irritation
Work deadline	High anxiety	Concern
Cruelty to a child	Intense guilt	Regret
Something you enjoy is canceled	Depression	Disappointment
Criticized	Worthless	Annoyance, concern
A public mistake	Shame	Guilt about your act, not self

Now fill in your own stressful situations, including the unhealthy negative emotions you feel and the healthier negative emotions you would like to feel.

Situation

Unhealthy Negative Emotion

Healthy Negative Emotion

_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

You can use rational emotive imagery in each of these situations. If the unhealthy negative emotions do not change right away, let yourself keep feeling them until they do change. You can alter these emotions by merely pushing yourself to do so. Afterward, you will isolate the key thoughts and phrases that made the new, healthier emotions possible. Changing your self-talk to include these more adaptive thoughts, beliefs, and ideas will make it increasingly easy for you to change the emotion you're working with. For best results, practice this technique ten minutes a day for at least two weeks.

### Insight

Understand that there are three levels of insight necessary for change to take place. They are the following:

1. Knowing that you have a problem, and awareness of some of the events that may have caused the problem.
2. Seeing clearly that the irrational ideas you acquired early in life are creating the emotional climate you live in now, and that consciously or unconsciously you work fairly hard to perpetuate those irrational ideas.
3. Believing strongly that after recognizing the validity of these two prior insights, you will still find no way to eliminate the problem other than working to change your irrational ideas, steadily, persistently, and vigorously.

Without making a commitment to this last insight, you will experience difficulties altering your habitual emotional responses.

If you think this technique could be useful to you but you are unable to master it, contact a rational emotive therapist or center for consultation.