

To illustrate this, Ellis developed a simple format to teach people how their beliefs cause their emotional and behavioral responses. It is called the ABC format. It works like this:

- A. Something happens.
- B. You have a belief about the situation.
- C. You have an emotional reaction to the belief.

For example:

- A. Your wife wrongly accuses you of having an affair and threatens to leave you.
- B. You believe, “She has no grounds to accuse me. She’s so wrong!”
- C. You feel angry.

If you had held a different belief, your emotional response would have been different:

- A. Your wife wrongly accuses you of having an affair.
- B. You believe, “I must not let her believe that. It would ruin our marriage and be unbearable.”
- C. You feel anxious.

The ABC model shows that A does not cause C. It is B that causes C. In the first example, it is not your wife's false accusation and threat that make you angry; it is your belief that she has no grounds to accuse you.

In the second example, it is not her accusation and threat that make you anxious; it is the belief that you must not lose your wife, and that losing your wife would be unbearable.

Ellis also wrote about the three basic musts. Although we all express ourselves differently, according to REBT, the beliefs that upset us are all variations of three common irrational beliefs. Each of the three common irrational beliefs contains a demand. This demand may be about ourselves, other people, or the world in general.

These beliefs are known as "**The Three Basic Musts.**"

The first is that I must do well and win the approval of others for my performances or else I am no good.

The second is that other people must treat me considerately, fairly and kindly, and in exactly the way I want them to treat me. If they don't, they are no good and they deserve to be condemned and punished.

The third is that I must get what I want, when I want it; and I must not get what I don't want. It's terrible if I don't get what I want, and I can't stand it. The first belief often leads to anxiety, depression, shame, and guilt. The second belief often leads to rage, passive-aggression and acts of violence. The third belief often leads to self-pity and procrastination.

REBT states that it is the demanding nature of the beliefs that causes the problem. If the beliefs were less demanding and more flexible this would lead to healthy emotions and helpful behaviors.

The goal of REBT is to help people change their irrational beliefs into rational beliefs. Changing beliefs is the real work of therapy and is achieved by the therapist disputing the client's irrational beliefs.

REBT posits that although we all think irrationally from time to time, we can work at eliminating this. While it's unlikely that we can ever entirely eliminate the tendency to think irrationally we can reduce the frequency, the duration, and the intensity of these irrational beliefs by developing three insights:

1. We don't merely get upset but mainly upset ourselves by holding inflexible beliefs.
2. No matter when and how we start upsetting ourselves, we continue to feel upset because we cling to our irrational beliefs.
3. The only way to get better is to work hard at changing our beliefs.

REBT is generally considered to be effective and efficient at reducing emotional pain. When Albert Ellis created REBT in the 1950s he met with much resistance from others in mental health. But today it is one of the most widely-practiced therapies throughout the world.