

Self-Help Techniques:

strategies to help you move from self-defeat to rational living.

Changing the way you think is the secret to feeling better and behaving in more functional ways. But changing beliefs is more easily said than done - as the saying goes, old habits die hard. Fortunately, there are many strategies and techniques you can use to help make the changes that are in your interests.

A key technique: Rational Self-Analysis

Probably the most useful technique is Rational Self-Analysis. Doing an analysis, preferably in writing, enables you to identify and change the thoughts involved when you experience distress or behave in self-defeating ways. This helps you in the present and in the future - you deal with any current distress, and reduce the likelihood of reacting the same way from now on.

How to complete a self-analysis

The first thing to do when you are feeling or acting in a dysfunctional manner is to stop. Interrupt any self-defeating episodes. Take time out to get your brain working on the problem. Get a good-sized sheet of paper and follow this sequence:

1. Identify and write down the Activating event - the stress trigger (the 'A'). What are you reacting to? Be brief - summarise the 'A'.
2. Identify the Consequence - (the 'C') - how you felt and behaved in reaction to the 'A'.
3. Identify your Beliefs - (the 'B'). What you are telling yourself about the 'A'?
 1. Look for any distortions of reality - over-generalising, mind-reading, fortune-telling, emotional reasoning, personalising.
 2. Even more important, identify your evaluative beliefs. Ask questions like:
 - What is 'terrible'? (awfulising).
 - What is 'intolerable'? (discomfort-intolerance).
 - What am I telling myself must/should be (or not be)? (demandingness).
 - What I am labelling myself (or others)? (people-rating).
 3. Finally, identify the underlying rule(s) on which you are operating.

- Identify the new Effect you want - ('E'). How would you prefer to feel or behave differently to how you reacted at 'C'?
 - a. Your goal is to replace the self-defeating reaction with a more appropriate emotion or behaviour.
 - b. Make sure that any new emotion you want is realistic. Rather than attempt to replace an intense negative emotion with a strongly positive one, aim to substitute a more moderate negative feeling. If you are anxious, for example, do not make your goal to 'feel great'. That would be unrealistic. It would be better to aim to be 'concerned'. This is still a negative emotion, but more in perspective to the 'A' and less disabling than anxiety.

- Dispute each of your beliefs - ('D'). Substitute rational alternatives for those beliefs you decide are self-defeating. There are three ways to dispute a belief:
 - a. Empirical disputing: 'Where is the proof?' 'What evidence is there?' 'Is there a Law of nature that proves ... ? Or does the evidence really prove some other conclusion?' 'Is the 'Law' really only in my head?'
 - b. Logical disputing: 'Does it logically follow that because ... (I want something, it's unpleasant, I made a mistake)' that 'therefore ... (I must get what I want, it's awful, I am a total failure)?'
 - c. Pragmatic disputing: 'Does it help?' 'Does believing this help me to be effective, achieve my goals, and be happy? Or does it create unneeded distress, difficulties with other people, or blocks to achieving my goals?'

- Finally, develop a plan for Further Action - ('F'). What can you do to reduce the chance of thinking and reacting the same old way in future? Some ideas for self-help action assignments follow later in this chapter.

An example

Here is an example of a Rational Self-Analysis to show how it works in practice.

A. Activating event (what started things off):

Head of Department criticised me in front of my team.

C. Consequence (how I felt and/or behaved):

Stayed angry all day, took it out on my team, unable to concentrate on my work.

B. Beliefs (what I told myself about the 'A'):

1. It was awful to be put down in front of my subordinates. (awfulising).
2. I couldn't stand it. (discomfort-intolerance).
3. She should have talked to me in private. (demandingness)
4. She's a bitch. (people-rating)
5. I must always be treated in a fair and just manner, and it is awful and intolerable when I am not. (underlying rule)
6. People should always do the right thing. When they don't, this shows how bad they are. (underlying rule)

E. New Effect I want (how I would prefer to feel/behave):

I would prefer to feel annoyed (rather than hostile), and assertively sort it out with her (rather than brood and take it out on others).

D. Disputation and new beliefs (that will help me achieve the new Effect I want):

1. It was uncomfortable, but hardly a source of abject terror!
2. I didn't like it, but I stood it.
3. It would have been better for her to talk to me in private; but where is it written that she 'should' behave correctly at all times?
4. She is not a 'bitch' - she is just a person who sometimes does bitchy things.
5. I would prefer to always be treated fairly and justly; but nowhere is it written that I 'must'; and though I dislike poor treatment, I can survive it.
6. It would be better if people always behaved correctly - but demanding that reality not exist will only screw me up. And a bad action does not make the total person bad.

F. Further action (what I will do to avoid the same dysfunctional thinking and reactions in future):

1. Re-read material on demandingness and how I can combat it.
2. Enrol for an assertiveness training workshop.
3. Once every day, deliberately choose to ignore a misdemeanour on the part of my staff, or other people in my life, to which I would normally react.

Learning and using rational self-analysis

The best way to learn self-analysis is to practice it in writing. Later, you will be able to do it in your head (though at times you will still find it helpful

to get out pen and paper and analyse an episode more formally).

If you are like most people, you will start by doing analyses after an episode. Later, you will be able to do them while episodes are happening. Eventually, you will begin to anticipate dysfunctional reactions and interrupt them at the start.

The technique of Rational self-analysis is described in detail, along with some practice exercises, in the book [Choose to be Happy](#).

Cognitive techniques

There are some additional tools that will help you deal with stress and develop a functional coping philosophy. Most of the techniques in this and the next two sections can be used either alone or as part of completing a rational self-analysis.

Reading

Keep educating yourself about the world and the people in it. Get information on particular problems from sources like books, magazine articles, pamphlets, and the internet.

Rational cards

After disputing a self-defeating belief, take a small card and write the old belief on the top and the new belief at the bottom. Carry the card with you for a week or so, and take it out of your pocket or purse and read it eight to ten times a day. This will take less than thirty seconds each time, but the repetition can be very productive for establishing a new rational belief. Don't be misled by the simplicity of this technique - it can be surprisingly effective. Note that a new thought requires daily practice for about twenty-one days before it becomes a habit, so refer to the card at least once a day for a few more weeks.

Catastrophe scale

This is a technique to get things back into perspective when you find yourself awfulising. On a sheet of paper draw a line down one side. Put 100% at the top, 0% at the bottom, and fill in the rest at 10% intervals. At each level, write in something you think could legitimately be rated at that level. You might, for example, put 0% - 'Having a quiet cup of coffee at home', 20% - 'Having to mow the lawns when the rugby is on television', 70% - being burgled, 90% - being diagnosed with cancer, 100% - being burned alive, and so on. Whenever you are upset about something, ascertain what rating you are (subconsciously) giving it and pencil it on your chart. Then see how it compares to the items already there. Usually what happens is that you will realise you have been exaggerating the badness involved. Move the item down the list until you feel it is in

perspective. Keep the chart and add to it from time to time.

Reframing

This is another strategy for getting bad events into perspective. One way to reframe events is to reevaluate them as 'disappointing', 'concerning', or 'uncomfortable' rather than 'awful' or 'unbearable'. Another way is to see that even negative events almost always have a positive side to them, listing all the positives you can think of.

Benefits calculation

This is a way to break through decision-making blocks. It is based on the principle that we are likely to be happiest when our decisions take into account both the desirability of getting enjoyment now, and continuing to get it in the future. To carry out a calculation, list all the factors that seem relevant to the decision. Include the likelihood of short- and long-term consequences for each factor. Decide how much value or benefit each item has to you, negatively or positively, then add up the pro's and con's.

Imagery techniques

Rational emotive imagery

Using the power of your imagination, REI can prepare you to deal with situations you would rather avoid because of anxiety. The steps, showing an illustrative example, are as follows:

Procedure	Example
1. Imagine, vividly and clearly, the event or situation with which you have trouble.	You have to inform a staff member their request for promotion has been turned down due to their poor performance record.
• Allow yourself to feel - strongly - the self-defeating emotion which follows.	Anxiety
• Note the thoughts creating that emotion.	He will be upset. I couldn't stand feeling responsible. I must find a way to say it without him getting upset.
• Force the emotion to change to a more functional (but realistic)	Concern

feeling. It is possible to do this, even though briefly.

- Note the thoughts you used to change the emotion. It will be uncomfortable, but it won't kill me. While I would prefer him not to get upset, his emotions are his responsibility - I cannot control his feelings or be responsible for them.
- Practice the technique daily for a while.

Coping rehearsal

Coping rehearsal is a variation of rational-emotive imagery. You imagine experiencing the dysfunctional reaction you anticipate, then imagine yourself changing the self-defeating thinking involved, and feeling and behaving in more functional ways. Here are the steps you would follow:

1. Do a rational self-analysis.
2. Vividly imagine yourself in the situation you are concerned about.
3. Feel the emotions that follow and see yourself behaving in the self-defeating ways you anticipate, and repeating the self-defeating beliefs you listed in the analysis.
4. Then imagine yourself (still in the situation) disputing and replacing those self-defeating beliefs, using the rational alternatives you developed with your analysis. Feel your negative emotion reducing to a level you can handle, and visualise yourself acting appropriately.

You can use this to prepare yourself for many situations - behaving assertively, giving a talk, coping with a job interview, negotiating a contract, and so on.

The 'blow-up' technique

Use the power of humour to get a feared situation into perspective. Imagine whatever it is you fear happening, then blow it up out of all proportion till you cannot help but be amused by it. Laughing at your fears will help you get control of them.

Let's say, for example, you are afraid to assert yourself with a co-worker who dumps her work onto you. Visualise yourself telling her how you feel about it. See her accusing you loudly of being selfish and unwilling to work as part of a team, the rest of the office gathering around and agreeing with her, management called in to deal with you, the police

called to take you away, your picture and a description of your actions on the television news, the country in uproar, the Government passing an Act to have you personally restrained from ever confronting anyone again, the army, complete with tanks and artillery, patrolling your workplace to make sure you stay in line.

Time projection

This technique is designed to show that one's life, and the world in general, continue after a feared or unwanted event has come and gone.

Visualise the unwanted event occurring, then imagine going forward in time a week, then a month, then six months, then a year, two years, and so on. Consider how you will be feeling at each of these points in time. You will eventually see that life will go on, even though you may need to make some adjustments.

You can use this with a range of events and circumstances, such as actual or feared redundancy, loss of a contract, business failure, reduction in income, death of a loved one, disability, failure to pass an examination, and so on.

Behavioural techniques

It is important to put your cognitive changes into actual practice. Behavioural techniques, or 'action assignments', will help you in a number of ways. You can deepen and consolidate rational beliefs by acting in accordance with the new beliefs and against the old ones. You can raise your tolerance for frustration and discomfort by deliberately exposing yourself to them. And you can experiment with and practice new ways of handling problematical situations.

Exposure to real life situations

Exposure involves deliberately putting yourself into real-life situations you tend to avoid. The main purposes are to test out beliefs (like, for example, that you can't stand rejection) and to increase your tolerance for discomfort.

It is helpful to deliberately set up the situations rather than wait for them to occur. You can prepare for them, so they are under your control. The advance practice will then help you cope when they happen unexpectedly.

Here are some of the ways you can use real-life exposure:

- Shame attacking. This involves doing things you have previously avoided through fear of what other people might think. It will increase your tolerance for discomfort, reduce your overconcern

about disapproval, and increase your ability to take (sensible) risks. The actions need to be things that other people are likely to notice and disapprove of. Here are some examples:

- a. If you are obsessive about your appearance, go out wearing unmatched items of clothing or without your usual grooming.
 - b. If you worry about behaving correctly in front of others, break some minor social convention.
 - c. Face your fear of being seen as stupid by expressing an opinion to a group of people.
- Risk-taking. The purpose is to challenge beliefs that certain behaviours are too dangerous to risk, when reason tells you that while the outcome is not guaranteed, they are worth the chance. Some examples:
 - a. Combat perfectionism or fear of failure by starting tasks where there is a good chance of failing or not matching your expectations.
 - b. Face fear of rejection by seeking it out - talk to an attractive person at a party, or ask someone to go out with you.
 - Real-life desensitisation. Deliberately enter situations you fear in order to discover that you survive or that you can learn to handle them. For example, if you are afraid of being in lifts, go into a lift several times a day for about a month till the fear diminishes.

Paradoxical behaviour

When you have difficulty with something, actually do it or make it happen. Behaving in new ways will help you change dysfunctional tendencies.

- Step out of character. If you are perfectionistic, deliberately do some things to less than your usual standard. If you feel guilty because you think you are a 'selfish' person, do something nice for yourself each day for a week. If you rush around a lot but worry you are not getting enough done, deliberately slow down and take long breaks where you do nothing but relax.
- Postponing gratification. If your problem is undue frustration when you have to wait for what you want, deliberately delay gratification with one thing each day for a month or two.

Role-playing

Role-playing difficult situations will enable you to test out and practice different ways of coping with them before you face the real thing. Role-playing is often used when the situation involves communicating with others. Practising assertiveness is a common example.

Role-play with a trusted friend or colleague. Repeat the role-play till you feel you have got it right. Get the other person to give you feedback on how you came across, so you can gradually refine your technique.

Important points on using action techniques

Don't take foolhardy risks. Avoid doing anything that might cause injury, or unduly alarm or disrupt the lives of others.

The object of action assignments is not to 'succeed'. The real purpose is to expose yourself to problematical situations, to either test them out or increase your tolerance. If your risk-taking always succeeded, you would do little to raise your tolerance for discomfort. Often what you fear will not actually occur - but it is better that it sometimes does. For example, you would not develop the confidence you could handle rejection till you were actually rejected a few times.

You can either start at the deep end and tackle the things that bother you most, or take a graduated approach. With the latter, start by preparing a list of the things you find difficult, and order them into a hierarchy according to the level of anxiety you associate with each. Then confront the situations systematically, working your way up from the low-anxiety items through to the high-level ones. Don't try to avoid all discomfort. If you make it too easy, you will do little to increase your tolerance.

You can prepare yourself in advance of confronting a problematical situation by using the techniques described earlier. Imagery can help you cope emotionally. Role-playing can give you confidence.

For new behaviours to consolidate, you will usually need to carry them out on a number of occasions over a period of time.

Making rational techniques work for you - the importance of persevering

The techniques you have learned here will be very helpful as you seek to change self-defeating thinking. But they will only work if you use them - and keep on using them. Keep in mind, too, that even when you have been coping well for a while, humans tend to go back to previously dysfunctional methods of coping when under significant stress. So don't get discouraged when you find yourself worrying again, drinking more, or avoiding discomfort like you used to. Use this as a signal that you are under extra stress and need to dust off your new coping skills and consciously put them into practice. See the page on [motivation](#) for some help if you feel blocked.

As time goes on, the new ways of reacting will become more automatic. This happens when you use slip-backs as further opportunities to practice your coping skills. So don't see your downturns as events that 'shouldn't'

happen. Rather, view them as inevitable human occurrences that you can use to your longer-term advantage.



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