

SAGE COUNSELLING IN ACTION

SERIES EDITOR WINDY DRYDEN

RATIONAL EMOTIVE
BEHAVIOURAL
COUNSELLING
IN ACTION

THIRD EDITION

WINDY DRYDEN AND MICHAEL NEENAN



RATIONAL EMOTIVE
BEHAVIOURAL COUNSELLING
IN ACTION

SAGE COUNSELLING *IN ACTION*

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BEHAVIOURAL COUNSELLING
IN ACTION

Third Edition

Windy Dryden *and*
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Preface

Our goal in this book has been to present the essence of rational emotive behavioural counselling (REBC) *in action*. To this end we have structured the book in three parts. In Part 1, we outline the basic theoretical and practical principles of REBC. In Part 2, we detail a sequence of six steps that you need to follow when attempting to help your client with any given problem using REBC. Finally, in Part 3, we consider the process of rational emotive behavioural counselling from beginning to end. To highlight rational emotive behavioural counselling *in action* we have presented the case of Paula (a pseudonym) whom you will meet in Parts 2 and 3 of the book.

Windy Dryden, and Michael Neenan
April 2004

Part 1

THE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF RATIONAL EMOTIVE BEHAVIOURAL COUNSELLING

In this first part of the book we will first consider the theoretical underpinnings of rational emotive behavioural counselling and then focus on the key practical elements of this counselling approach.

Theoretical Underpinnings of Rational Emotive Behavioural Counselling

Historical Context

Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) was originated in 1955 by Albert Ellis, a New York clinical psychologist. Ellis originally worked as a psychoanalyst and, while he enjoyed practising this mode of therapy, he later became dissatisfied with it because it was, in his words, 'inefficient' in that it took a long time and did not produce very effective therapeutic results. For a while Ellis experimented with the shorter-term psychoanalytic psychotherapy and with various eclectic approaches before he founded REBT. In doing so he was influenced more by philosophers than by psychologists, returning to a long-standing interest in practical approaches within the philosophic tradition. In particular he was influenced by the views of Epictetus, a Roman philosopher, who stated that 'men are disturbed not by things but by their views of things'.

At that time in the mid-1950s most therapists were influenced by psychoanalytic theories and methods and thus, to emphasise the logical and cognitive disputing aspects of his therapeutic approach, Ellis called his

method 'rational therapy'. This caused problems in that it was generally assumed that rational therapy only involved a focus on cognition (that is, thoughts and beliefs). However, right from the start Ellis held that cognition, emotion, and behaviour were interrelated psychological processes and that his approach to therapy emphasised all three. In order to counter further unwarranted criticisms that were made about rational therapy, namely that it neglected emotion, Ellis retitled his approach to psychotherapy 'rational-emotive therapy' in 1961, a point which was stressed in the title of Ellis's first major book on RET (as the approach came to be known), entitled *Reason and Emotion in Psychotherapy* (Ellis, 1962). In 1993, Ellis changed the name of the therapy to Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) because he argued that commentators were neglecting its behavioural elements. This was never true of the therapy, and from the outset, in addition to focusing on clients' emotions and beliefs, rational emotive behavioural counsellors encourage their clients actively to put into practice what they learn in therapy through the use of behavioural methods (Ellis, 1994).

Goals, Purposes and Rationality

According to REBC theory humans are happiest when they set up important life goals and purposes and actively strive to achieve these. In doing so, we had better acknowledge that we live in a social world and thus we are encouraged to develop a philosophy of enlightened self-interest. This involves pursuing our valued goals while demonstrating what Alfred Adler called social interest – a commitment both to helping others achieve their valued goals and to making the world a socially and environmentally better place in which to live.

Given that we tend to be goal-directed, *rational* in REBC theory 'means primarily that which helps people to achieve their basic goals and purposes', whereas irrational 'means primarily that which prevents them from achieving these goals and purposes' (Dryden, 1996: 306). While rationality is not defined in any absolute sense, it does have four major criteria: namely, it is (a) flexible and non-extreme; (b) pragmatic; (c) logical; and (d) reality-based. Thus, a more extended definition of rationality would be, first, that which is flexible and non-extreme; secondly, that which helps people to achieve their basic goals and purposes; thirdly, that which is logical; and fourthly, that which is empirically consistent with reality. Conversely, an extended definition of irrationality would be, first, that

which is rigid and non-extreme; secondly, that which prevents people from achieving their basic goals and purposes; thirdly, that which is illogical; and fourthly, that which is empirically inconsistent with reality.

Responsible Hedonism

REBC theory argues that as humans we are basically hedonistic in the sense that we seek to stay alive and to achieve a reasonable degree of happiness. Here hedonism does not mean ‘the pleasures of the flesh’ but involves the concept of personal meaning; a person can be said to be acting hedonistically when she is happy acting in a way that is personally meaningful for her. The concept of responsible hedonism means once again that we are mindful of the fact that we live in a social world and that ideally our personally meaningful actions should help to make the world a better place in which to live, or at the very least should not unduly harm anyone.

REBC theory makes an important distinction between short- and long-range hedonism. We are likely to be at our happiest when we succeed in achieving both our short-term and our long-term goals. Frequently, however, we defeat ourselves by attempting to satisfy our short-term goals while at the same time sabotaging our long-term goals. Thus, for example, we often strive to avoid discomfort when it would be advisable for us to experience discomfort because doing so would help us to achieve our long-term goals. Rational emotive behavioural counsellors encourage their clients to achieve a balance between the pursuit of their short- and long-range goals, while being mindful of the fact that what represents a healthy balance for a given person is best judged by that person.

Enlightened Self-interest

REB counsellors have often been accused of advocating selfishness since they actively encourage their clients to pursue happiness. However, this criticism is not accurate if we define selfishness as ‘the ruthless pursuit of one’s goals while cynically disregarding the goals and viewpoints of others’. Rather, REB counsellors encourage their clients to demonstrate enlightened self-interest (or healthy self-care), which involves putting themselves first most of the time while putting others, and particularly significant others, a close second. Enlightened self-interest also sometimes involves putting the desires of others before our own, particularly when the welfare and happiness of these others are of great importance to them and our

desires are not primary. Self-sacrifice is discouraged unless the person wants to sacrifice herself and finds personal meaning and happiness in doing so.

Philosophic and Scientific Emphasis

Rational emotive behavioural theory stresses that we are born philosophers. We have the ability to think about our thinking and to realise that we are highly influenced by our implicit philosophies of life which are either flexible and undogmatic or musturbatory and absolutist. REBC theory agrees with the ideas of George Kelly (1955) that we are also scientists and are able to appreciate that our philosophies are basically hypotheses about ourselves, other people, and the world, which need to be tested. This is best done together with our philosophical abilities, particularly our ability to think critically about the logical and illogical aspects of our thought.

While Ellis (1976) has argued that humans have a strong tendency to think and act irrationally, he has stressed that we also have the ability to think critically about our thinking and behaviour and to correct the illogicalities in our thinking as well as to judge whether or not our hypotheses are consistent with reality. Rational emotive behavioural theorists do, however, appreciate that reality cannot be judged in any absolute manner but is best regarded as accurate if it is seen as such by a group of neutral observers (the principle of consensual reality).

Humanistic Outlook

REBC is not only philosophical and scientific in orientation but it takes a specific humanistic-existential approach to human problems and their solutions. This view conceptualises humans as holistic, indivisible, goal-directed organisms who have importance in the world just because we are human and alive. It encourages us to accept ourselves unconditionally with our limitations while at the same time encouraging us to work towards minimising our limitations. REBC agrees with the position of ethical humanism which 'encourages people to live by rules emphasising human interests over the interests of inanimate nature, of lower animals or of any assumed natural order or deity' (Ellis, 1980: 327). However, this does not mean being ecologically or environmentally insensitive, advocating the mindless slaughter of animals or being disrespectful of others' religious