



Stress-Proof Your Thinking

How to analyze & challenge the thinking patterns that make you anxious

Your A-B-Cs

A= Activating Event

B= Beliefs and Thoughts

C=Consequences

Activating Event/s → Beliefs and Thoughts → Consequences

Your Activating Event/s

Begin by taking a piece of paper and writing down an event or situation in which you felt anxiety or another strong negative emotion.

Describe this situation in just the same way a video camera might, using simple factual language. Just record what actually happened, not how you felt or what you did at this stage.

It might be an actual event or situation, such as “walking through the Xyz shopping centre”. It could also be a mental picture or recollection that triggered some unpleasant thoughts and feelings, for example, “Remembering the last time I had a panic attack.”

C – The Consequences

(We'll get to B later!)

There are three types of consequences to record here:

1. Your feelings. To begin, write down any words you can think of that describe what you were feeling. Then, give each one a rating from 0-10, with 10=most intense.

Finally, look at what you have written, and choose the one feeling that best represents how you felt at the time. Underline this one.

2. Your physical symptoms. This includes symptoms such as heart racing, breathlessness, sweating, feeling dizzy, or anything else you can remember.
3. Your actions and behaviour – what you actually did. Again, just record this as a simple observation, without judgement about whether it was good or bad.

B – Your Beliefs and Thoughts

Now ask yourself:

“What was I thinking when this happened?”

“What was going through my mind at the time?”

For example, you might have been walking through your local shopping center. You might identify a thought such as, "I don't want to be here." So continue to explore this thought:

"I don't want to be here because....."

"I can feel my heart beating faster.."

"...and that is bad because....."

"I might have a heart attack"

"I might have a panic attack"

"and that will mean....."

"People will think I'm crazy...."

"I might die..."

....and so on.

Dysfunctional Beliefs

As well as exploring this type of anxiety-making self-talk, it is also useful to look at some of the underlying beliefs that many of us have been brought up with – beliefs that drive us nuts, because they are impossible to live by.

Dr Albert Ellis, the founder of one of the early types of CBT called Rational Emotive Therapy (RET) identified a list of 10 common dysfunctional beliefs that cause problems for us.

Go down to the next page to find the 10 irrational beliefs of Dr Albert Ellis, and find one or two that particularly resonate with you, and might be operating in the situation you have described in your A-B-Cs exercise.

Challenging Your Dysfunctional Self Talk and Beliefs

Once you have identified some thoughts and beliefs that underpin your anxiety, it is time to begin to question them.

Often, just the act of identifying these beliefs is enough to start changing them!

Here are some ways to get started to challenge the anxious thoughts that you might have:

- What other ways are there of looking at this situation?
- If I weren't anxious, how would I see this?
- Realistically, what are the chances of that happening?
- How might someone else see this situation?
- If I were giving advice to a friend, what would I say?

You can find some examples of rational ways to challenge Albert Ellis' irrational beliefs on page 4.



The 10 Irrational Beliefs of Dr Albert Ellis

Here are 10 common dysfunctional beliefs identified by Dr Albert Ellis as being the underling cause of all kinds of emotional distress:

1. The idea that you must have love or approval from all the significant people in your life.
2. The idea that you absolutely must be thoroughly competent, adequate, and achieving or the idea that you must be competent or talented in some important area.
3. The idea that other people absolutely must not act obnoxiously and unfairly, and, that when they do, you should blame and damn them, and see them as bad, wicked, or rotten individuals.
4. The idea that you have to see things as being awful, terrible, and catastrophic when you are seriously frustrated or treated unfairly.
5. The idea that you must be miserable when you have pressures and difficult experiences; and that you have little ability to control, and cannot change, your disturbed feelings.
6. The idea that if something is dangerous or fearsome, you must obsess about it and frantically try to escape from it.
7. The idea that you can easily avoid facing many difficulties and self-responsibilities and still lead a highly fulfilling existence.
8. The idea that your past remains all-important and because something once strongly influenced your life, it has to keep determining your feelings and behavior today.
9. The idea that we **must** have certain and perfect control over everything in our lives.
10. The idea that you can achieve maximum happiness by inertia and inaction or by passively and uncommittedly enjoying yourself.

Here are 10 rational beliefs to replace them with:

1. It is not possible for everyone to love and approve of us; indeed, we cannot be assured that any one particular person will continue to like us. What one person likes another hates. When we try too hard to please everyone, we lose our identity, we are not self-directed, secure or interesting. It is better to cultivate our own values, social skills, and compatible friendships, rather than worry about pleasing everyone.
2. No one can be perfect. We all have weaknesses and faults. Perfectionism creates anxiety and guarantees failure. Perfectionistic needs may motivate us but they may take away the joy of living and alienate people if we demand they be perfect too. We (and others) can only expect us to do what we can (as of this time) and learn in the process.
3. People's poor behaviors do not make them rotten individuals. Certain acts are self-defeating or antisocial, and people who perform such acts are behaving stupidly, ignorantly, or neurotically, and would be better helped to change.
4. The universe was not created for our pleasure. Children are commonly told, "You can't have everything you want." Many adults continue to have that "I want it all my way" attitude. The idea is silly, no matter who has it. There is nothing wrong, however, with saying, "I don't like the way that situation worked out. I'm going to do something to change it." If changes aren't possible, accept it and forget it.
5. As ancient philosopher Epictetus said, it is not external events but our views, our self-talk, our beliefs about those events that upset us. So, challenge your irrational ideas. You may be able to change external events in the future and you certainly can change your thinking. Remember no one can make you feel anyway; you are responsible for your own feelings.
6. There is a great difference between dreadful ruminations about what awful things might happen and thinking how to prevent, minimize, or cope with real potential problems. The former is useless, depressing, exhausting, and may even be self-fulfilling. The latter is wise and reassuring. Keep in mind that many of our fears never come true.
7. As with procrastination, avoidance of unpleasant tasks, and denial of problems or responsibilities frequently yields immediate relief but, later on, results in serious problems. The lifestyle that makes us most proud is not having an easy life but facing and solving tough problems.
8. You can't change the past but you can learn from your past experiences without being too attached to or prejudiced by them.
9. In fact the world is full of improbability and chance and we can still enjoy life despite this.
10. In truth, we tend to be happiest when we are vitally absorbed in creative pursuits, or when we are devoting ourselves to people or projects outside ourselves.

