



Exploring rigid inflexible Must Should and Ought beliefs in CBT

According to Dr Albert Ellis - a pioneer in cognitive science, and one of the founding fathers of CBT, many of us have unhelpful 'musty' thinking.

Introduction – Dr Ellis was a 'founding-father' of CBT - who revolutionised psychology through examining and challenging the way we perceive and accept our irrational thoughts and beliefs, dramatic emotions, and self-sabotaging behaviours.

A key finding is that many of us have rigid inflexible beliefs, particularly our "Must" "Should" and "Ought" rules/demands about ourselves, and others and the world.

*“There are three musts that hold us back:
I must do well.
You must treat me well.
And the world must be easy.”*
— Dr Albert Ellis

Understanding Rigid Inflexible Beliefs / Demands - Dr. Ellis says that *absolutist* "Must," "Should," and "Ought" *rules* contribute significantly to *irrational* thinking patterns. Why are they irrational? They are not reality based! They are causing you unnecessary upset. They're not working out for you.

To overcome the negative effects of "Musts," "Shoulds," and "Oughts," Ellis proposed a process of disputing and changing irrational beliefs through identifying and replacing them with more rational and flexible *preferences*, rather than unrealistic *demands*. Changing how we think - literally and consciously and deliberately, as a skill – which in turn changes how we feel and behave.

Here are examples of rigid inflexible beliefs / 'irrational cognitions', with disputing rational alternatives:

Should Statements:

Rigid Belief 1: "I should always be successful in everything I do, or it's awful and I can't be happy."

Consequence: Feeling constant pressure and anxiety, fear of failure, and a sense of inadequacy when not meeting unrealistic expectations.



Alternative: "I would prefer it if I was always successful in everything I do - but I don't 'demand' it, as that would be ridiculous. I'm a human, just doing my best and striving to do better where I can, like everybody else..."

Rigid Belief 2: "People should think and feel and behave as I think they should, or it's awful and they're awful, and I can't tolerate it."

Consequence: Feeling upset and angry, mistaking your imaginary rules as set values and morals that must be met, instead of accepting people as they are and having realistic expectations and boundaries and good communication.

Alternative: "I would prefer it if everybody felt and behaved towards me as I think they should, but I don't demand it, as that would be unrealistic. I'm not the supreme ruler of the world, and I'm not entitled to everybody behaving according to my rules. People are governed by their own lens that they view the world through, and their own needs and responses - it's perfectly healthy and normal for me to be disappointed at some people's behaviour, but I can accept that they, like me, are perfectly imperfect humans. I can do my best to communicate and build good relationships, and accept it when others may have different ideas to me, or accept that I'm just not that into some people, and that's ok too.

Must Statements:

Rigid Belief: "I must please everyone and gain their approval."

Consequence: Experiencing chronic stress, sacrificing personal needs, and feeling overwhelmed by the impossibility of meeting everyone's expectations.

Alternative: "I would prefer it if I automatically pleased everybody and had approval from everybody, but I don't demand that of myself, because that demand would be irrational. I can't mind read and anticipate everything - and I do not have to have everybody else's 100% approval all of the time. I'm just doing my best, and striving to learn from outcomes to do better, and that's ok, that's enough.

Ought Statements:

Rigid Belief: "I ought to be perfect in every aspect of my life."

Consequence: Struggling with perfectionism, fearing judgment from others, and feeling a persistent sense of failure for not living up to unattainable standards.

Alternative: "I'd prefer it if I were perfect in every aspect of my life, but I don't demand it, as that would be irrational - nobody is 'perfect' - we're all just doing our best to do well and get good outcomes - I can accept that I'm a perfectly imperfect creature.

All-or-Nothing Thinking:

Rigid Belief: "If I'm not the best, I'm a complete failure."

Consequence: Feeling extreme disappointment and low self-worth when not achieving perfection, leading to a narrow and distorted view of success and failure.

Alternative: "I'd prefer it if I were effortlessly 'the best' at everything at all times - but I don't demand it - because that would be irrational. If I'm not 'the best' (whatever that is!) at something, it doesn't mean I'm a 'failure', it just means I'm not rating myself highly at that particular thing, and I can do something about it, or accept facts and reality in a proportional way. I'm ok. It is what it is. I am of value.

Catastrophizing:

Rigid Belief: "If something bad happens, it's an absolute disaster."

Consequence: Constant anxiety, fear of the worst-case scenario, and an inability to cope with life's challenges due to an exaggerated sense of impending doom.

Alternative: "Sometimes life is difficult and I have stressors and negative events or situations - they are unfortunate, but they are not 'an absolute disaster' - I can cope, I can make choices in some cases, in others I have to accept the unfortunate situation - that's ok, I can deal with adversity.

Personalization:

Rigid Belief: "I am responsible for everything that goes wrong, it's me."

Consequence: Taking on excessive guilt and self-blame, feeling overwhelmed by a sense of responsibility for events beyond one's control, and experiencing heightened stress.

Alternative: "I am not responsible for unfortunate events or situations that are out of my control - it's not all about me - I'm ok, I can deal with this if I look at it objectively and rationally."

Labelling:

Rigid Belief: "I am a failure when I make a mistake."

Consequence: Internalising negative labels, low self-esteem, and overlooking personal achievements due to a focus on perceived flaws and errors.

Alternative: "I would prefer it if I never made a mistake, but I won't demand it, or damn myself when I do make a mistake - these things happen - it does not make me a total 'failure' - it's how we respond to mistakes that matters. I'm ok, it's ok.

Negative Mind Reading:

Rigid Belief: "I know what others are thinking, and they are always judging me negatively."

Consequence: Social anxiety, avoidance of social situations, and strained relationships due to an unfounded belief in negative perceptions from others.

Alternative: "I worry about what others are thinking, and I often assume that they are thinking negative things about me - but I'm just guessing, I'm pretty sure that I get it wrong sometimes - and even if somebody does think little of me, I don't have to agree with it. I can work on changing their perception of me - or I can accept that's it's their right to figure things out themselves, even if it's not ideal for me, and even if they're being unfair. I can work on

trying to connect in healthy ways with others, just doing my best and hoping for the best. I can't control others perception, but I can work on regulating my own.

Emotional Reasoning:

Rigid Belief: "If I feel anxious, there must be something to worry about."

Consequence: Allowing emotions to dictate reality, experiencing heightened anxiety, and making decisions based on irrational fears rather than objective evidence.

Alternative: "Feelings are not facts, just because I feel anxious doesn't mean that threats and disasters are pending, I'm probably just a bit trippy and hopped up with stress hormones - I'm ok, I'll breathe it down and look at the situation again with clear eyes."

Control Fallacies:

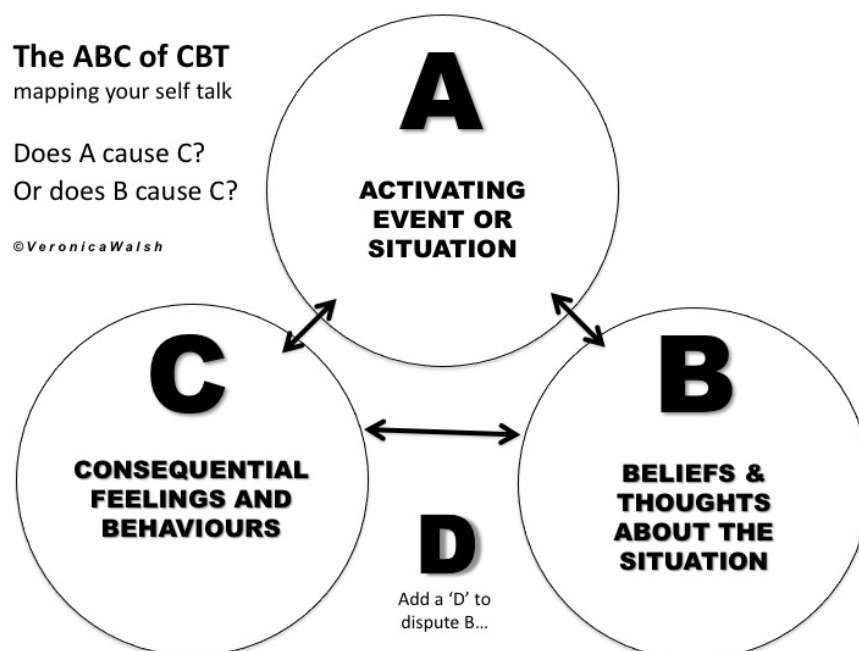
Rigid Belief: "I must have control over every aspect of my life to be happy."

Consequence: Frustration, anxiety, and a sense of helplessness when facing situations beyond one's control, leading to difficulty adapting to change.

Alternative: "I'd prefer to be able to micro manage and control every aspect of my life, but I don't demand it as that would be impossible, it's an irrational idea. I can be happy even in a random world full of variables - it is not true that I cannot cope with reality. I can cope - I can build great coping skills through awareness of what I can control versus what I cannot control, and I can move and bend with life as it happens."

The ABC-D Model

At the core of Ellis's original Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT) modelling is 'the ABC', a simple and effective framework that helps to map patterns, and the relationship between **Activating** events or situations, our **Beliefs** and **Thoughts** about the situation, and emotional and behavioural **Consequences** of accepting those beliefs and thought.



According to Ellis (and Buddha and the Greek Stoic philosophers), it is not the Activating events themselves that mostly cause dramatic emotional distress and self sabotaging, but rather the irrational Beliefs individuals hold about those events.

What can we do about it? We can **Challenge and Dispute Musty Beliefs** and change them to evidence based preferences instead.

Conclusion - Dr. Albert Ellis's work on rigid beliefs, particularly the "Musts," "Shoulds," and "Oughts," has left an indelible mark on the field of psychology. By understanding and challenging the self-talk of irrational beliefs, individuals can develop greater awareness and self-regulation, and get better outcomes, and lead happier and more fulfilling lives.

Ellis's teachings give us a structure and guide to enable us to think different, feel different, and behave different.

Key ideas – what did I learn? How might this apply to me?

This below summary was developed with use of the ChatGPT AI model to identify several key ideas that I expanded and built on. This content is free to use - copy and past whatever text you'd like in your work with clients.

1. **Musts: The Absolutes of Life**

Musts are absolute demands that individuals impose upon themselves and/or others. These rigid beliefs often manifest in statements like "I must succeed," "Others must treat me fairly," or "Life must go as planned." - or I cannot be happy and cannot cope and cannot accept it.

According to Ellis, these musts are unrealistic and contribute to emotional disturbances when life inevitably fails to conform to these absolute expectations. ~ Citation: Ellis, A. (1962). Reason and Emotion in Psychotherapy.

2. **Shoulds: The Internal Critic**

Should statements are judgments about how things SHOULD and must be. Whether directed at ourselves or others, these statements set standards that, when unmet, lead to feelings of upset, guilt, frustration, disappointment, and anxiety or anger. Ellis argued that a simple new habit of replacing "should" with "prefer" can lead to more rational and flexible thinking that accepts reality and facts.

3. **Oughts: The Moral Imperatives**

Similar to "Shoulds," "*Oughts*" are 'moral imperatives' that dictate how people believe they and others OUGHT to behave. Ellis argued that these rigid supposedly moral codes/values contribute to feelings of anger, resentment, and judgment, hindering healthy interpersonal relationships. ~ Citation: Ellis, A., & Harper, R. (1975). A New Guide to Rational Living.