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 styles, which causes us unnecessary upset. This handout is a crash course in understanding the issue and building CBT skills to address it.

Introduction - Dr. Albert Ellis was a 'founding-father' of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) - a pioneer who revolutionised psychology through examining and challenging our thoughts, emotions, and behaviours.

One of his most influential contributions lies in the identification and exploration of rigid inflexible beliefs, particularly our "Musts," "Shoulds," and "Oughts."

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*"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 Beliefs

Dr. Ellis emphasised the pivotal role of irrational beliefs in stress disorders. He contended that certain absolutist terms such as "Must," "Should," and "Ought" contribute significantly to *irrational* thinking patterns, that cause emotional upset and self-sabotaging behaviours that give us bad outcomes.

How are they irrational? Well, they are not reality based! They're not working out for you.

The ABC-D Model

At the core of Ellis's original Rational Emotive Behavioural Therapy (REBT) modelling is 'the ABC', a simple and effective framework that helps to map patterns, and identify the relationship between **A**ctivating events or situations, our **B**eliefs and Thoughts about the situation, and the emotional and behavioural **C**onsequences of accepting those beliefs.

The ABC of CBT
mapping your self talk

Does A cause C?
Or does B cause C?

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A
ACTIVATING EVENT OR SITUATION

C
CONSEQUENTIAL FEELINGS AND BEHAVIOURS

D
Add a 'D' to dispute B...

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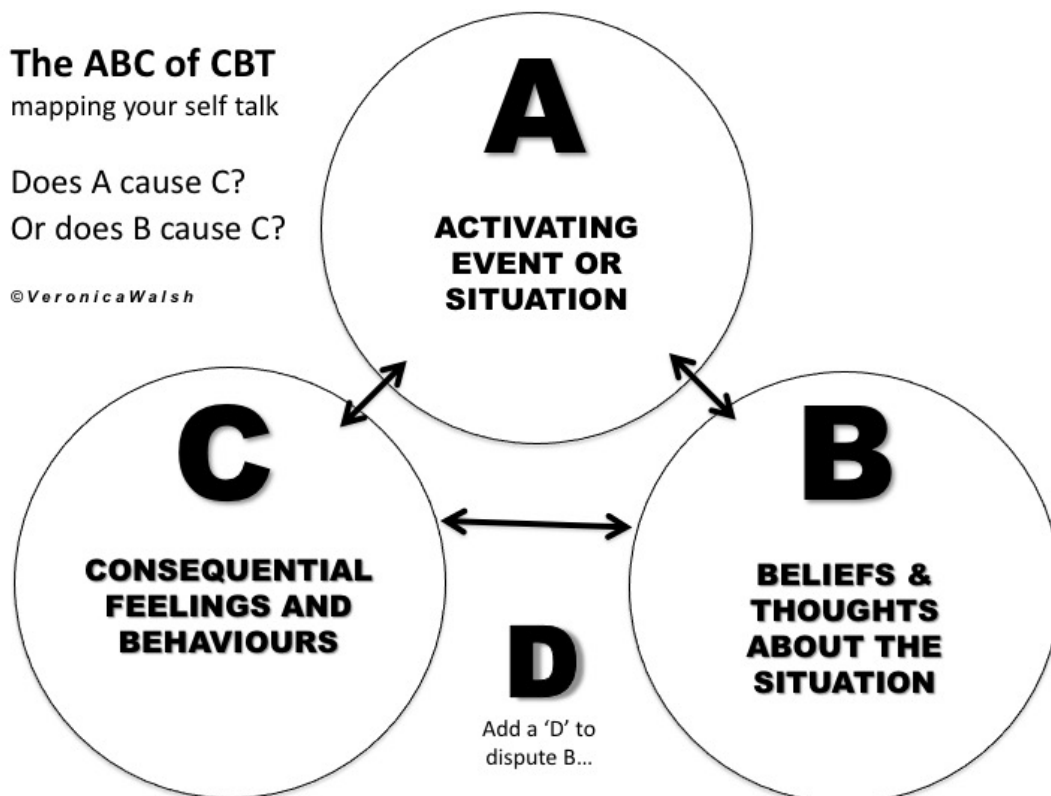
According to Ellis (and Buddha and the Greek Stoic philosophers), it is not the Activating events themselves that mostly cause dramatic emotional distress and self-sabotaging, but rather the irrational Beliefs individuals hold about those events.

What can we do about it? Ellis proposed a process of **disputing** and changing self-talk through journaling and identifying, challenging, and replacing irrational beliefs with more evidence based and flexible '**preference**' alternatives. 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 in action, with alternatives:

Should Statements:

Rigid Belief: "I should always be successful in everything I do."

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..."

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.

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 becuase 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 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.

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 rational awareness and self-regulation, and get better outcomes, and lead happier and more fulfilling lives.

| A Activating event or situation | B Beliefs and thoughts about it | C Consequence feelings and behaviour | D Dispute and reframe the beliefs and thoughts | NC New consequence feelings and behaviour |

Summary:

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.

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

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