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Get a Grip

How To Understand And Control Your Emotions!

Part I - How We Think, Is How We Feel

People often ask me where emotions come from, so we're going to talk about how emotions are created. It's common to think that emotions simply "happen." But our emotions run hot and cold due to how we think, not by outside forces or other people.

To start with it is important to have an understanding of the basic teaching of Rational Theory. This teaching is not new. Much of its origin can be traced back to Greek and Roman philosophers, such as Epicurus, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius. Names that are more familiar come from ancient Asian philosophers such as Confucius, Gautama, Buddha, and Lao-Tsu. In recent years we see the evidence in the work of notable psychologists Alfred Adler, and particularly the founder of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), Dr. Albert Ellis.

There are others who had a hand in the teachings, but more importantly, are the basic ideas of Rational Theory valid?

The basic assumption is that we as humans are mainly responsible for how we think, feel, and behave is one of the cornerstones to change.

It is logical to say that if you perceive your life to be unhappy, or you find yourself most often in a state of anxiety, anger, depression, or "stressed-out," then change is necessary in order to alleviate these feelings.

It is not the events in our lives which "cause" us to feel certain ways, such as depressed, anxious, guilty, or angry, but much more importantly it is how we think about these events,
Which drive all human emotions.

Subsequently, the behavior that follows is an extension of these emotions and both are directly related to how you think.

So if you want to change how you feel, and adopt new behaviors, then it is important for you to listen in to your defeating self-talk. Dispute it, challenge it, and replace it with new ideas, which promote health and happiness.

The idea that you are mainly responsible for how you think, feel, and behave can be validated with a simple example. The one I often use is this: let's say we are at a party hanging out with old and new friends and I decide to tell a joke.

This joke is risqué' and it is a mixed crowd. One joke, we will call it the Event. Is it reasonable to suggest that we are going to get multiple reactions, feelings from the group? Probably so!

One joke, many reactions.

If it were true that events are responsible for how we feel, then it would follow that each person would feel the same. But they don't. How come?

The reason is each person thinks differently about the joke. Thoughts are based upon genetics: "hard wiring," as well as your learning history (direct teaching and experiential learning "your life experiences,") and how you feel at that time.

All this is the basis of your thinking and largely responsible for how you react to the joke.

One joke, multiple reactions.

The joke does not have the power to create human emotions. Words cannot come out of my mouth, float thru the air, bounce off the walls, jump into your body, and create an emotional reaction!

That is magical thinking and does not have a basis in reality. Does the joke have an influence? Certainly, but it does not cause!

The same goes for anything that is said or done. Your friend/mate/spouse does not have the power to make you feel angry or guilty with the simple use of their words; the driver who
just cut you off does not have the ability to make you mad: you are in control of all of this yourself.

And stress works the same way: the world around us does not cause us stress, we do that on our own.

What Is Stress? Is It All Bad? What Can We Do About It?

Why do we need to manage stress? If it's bad for us, why don't we just eliminate it instead of manage it?

So we'll start by defining stress to be sure that we're all in agreement as to what it means. Then we'll look at why we want to manage it, or even eliminate it where possible.

By definition, stress refers to "a state of strain, whether physical or psychological." I like to view stress in two contexts. The first context is those negative events or happenings that we perceive and evaluate as being negative or aversive.

They can be real or imagined. In either case, the person sees the event as detrimental to them in some way. Simple examples might be studying for an exam, not having enough money in
your checking account to cover a check you have just written or your gas gauge registers empty with no service stations in sight.

Interestingly, not all stressors are created equal or perceived by all people the same. In fact, the perceived "stressor" may not even be perceived as stress at all by some.

The other type of stress is the emotions or feelings we experience in a reaction to these perceived negative events/stressors.

As human beings, it is natural for us to have a reaction to what is going on around us, past, present, and future. When these reactions are negative or adverse, they interfere with our ability to enjoy life. These adverse reactions to what is happening to us are called the:

The Four Emotions That Block Your Happiness

- Anxiety
- Anger
- Depression
- Guilt

These emotions block our ability to experience joy, contentment, and “peace of mind” at any moment.

Usually these emotions are painful or uncomfortable and interfere with our ability to behave in adequate or productive ways.

There may be some situations where a person would do well to manage the stress and thereby create a less painful stress response, such as WORRY vs. Anxiety, IRRITATION vs. Anger, REMORSE vs. Guilt. Notice the first emotion is easier to deal with then the second.

Keep in mind though that if you strive for the elimination of stress, that you will probably not be successful all the time, but you will minimize your stress response and be more likely to engage in acceptable behaviors, and accomplish more.

Is It Possible to Eliminate Stress?

The primary reason for eliminating stress in our lives is to increase pleasure and decrease pain.

Human beings have 5 major goals:

1. The first is To Survive and if you choose to survive the other four will follow.
2. Increase Your Pleasure and Decrease Your Pain,
3. Live Socially with Others,
4. To Experience Various Degrees of Intensity or Closeness with Others,
5. To Have Meaningful Investment in One’s Activities

I believe a person can get close to these goals if he/she can learn to eliminate stress from their lives. And as one gets more skilled at eliminating stress, their happiness and energy levels increase and they move closer to achieving these goals.

Fact vs. Fiction: if you accept the idea that at least in our current human form, we have about 75 plus years of time to meet these five goals. Then it makes sense to tell ourselves the Truth, rather than to embellish in Fiction.

One of the key ideas of interest in eliminating stress from our life is to “Tell Yourself the Truth”. Not to say that daydreaming, occasionally living in “La La Land”, or every once in awhile telling a “white lie” isn’t advantageous.

But, to think more empirically, logically, and practically as a general practice will not only help you to feel better, but will also allow you to reach your goals much more efficiently, as well as effectively.

Part Two - There Are 3 Insights Or Beliefs That Make Up The Foundation For Thinking Factually /Rationally.

First Insight - Human Beings are Primarily Responsible for How They Think, Feel, and Behave

Individuals are born with tendencies towards thinking in certain unique ways. They inherit these genetic traits from their biological parents. This hard wiring exists whether the person has knowledge of their existence. These genetic tendencies are inherited and become part of our biology.

These thinking tendencies have been referred to as one's "Racket." Actualizing these tendencies or whether or not they become real for the person depends on other factors.

Conditioning has a significant influence on how our genetics are materialized in our thinking, which will influence our emotions and subsequent behavior. Our conditioning comes from others and the world around us, and from ourselves.

In our early years, conditioning will play a very profound role in our lives and can significantly establish the groundwork for much of our misery and self-induced neurosis as we move towards adolescence.

Children are extremely impressionable and superstitious. They actually believe much of the fiction their parents and others communicate to them. (Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy, and much more.)

Fortunately, there is hope once you begin to enter adolescence. Your brain becomes much more developed and you can begin to dispute and challenge the fiction or irrational beliefs taught by people you have grown up with. By this time, you can begin to tell yourself your own fiction and begin your own indoctrination/ conditioning without anyone's help.

Remember though, your genetics was first, then other conditioning, now self-conditioning.

I would not be sensitive or accurate at this point if I didn't note that trauma, whether it is physical, verbal, sexual or by experience, can have a profound influence on how we think. And often much more significant than the irrational ideas of parents and relatives. But I do caution. I say influence, not cause.

If these influences caused, then they would have to cause the same for all human beings, but they don't.

Self-conditioning begins to become important in our stress reactions in adolescence...and thus our 2nd insight

Second Insight – No matter how we created our stress reactions in the past, they are maintained today because we continue to believe the same Irrational/Fictional ideas

Self-indoctrination becomes the rule and not the exception. It is no coincidence that Middle School experiences are extremely difficult for many young people. Many are desperately trying to make sense out of their world, challenging many of the ideas of the past, and attempting to differentiate fact from fiction. Things often don't "feel" right, but they have no clue why.

Certainly parents, other adults, and friends continue to shape or condition their thinking, but young people function under a more critical filter and begin to challenge much more frequently...often without being aware of the process.

Since our biology, early learning history, and now our self-conditioning has produced so many habits of thinking, feeling and behaving, our third insight may be the most important.

Third Insight - Hard Work and Practice

It's the only way to eliminate the stress responses or negative emotions and their maladaptive behaviors from our lives.

Focus on Facts, not Fiction. Dispute and challenge the ideas we have grown up to believe are true, but on inspection realize make little sense. And force the behavior that will reinforce the new, more rational ideas.

To Reiterate These Three Insights:

Human Beings are Primarily Responsible for How They Think, Feel, and Behave.

No matter how we created our stress reactions in the past, they are maintained today because we continue to believe the same irrational or fictional Ideas.

Happiness Takes Hard Work and Practice.

We hope that this handout has been helpful to you. If you would like to talk to one of our counselors about eliminating some of your irrational belief please call 386-423-9161. They can help you make sense of the struggle as well as help you learn and practice new positive thoughts and behaviors that will create happiness and peace in your life.