

## Dispute Irrational Beliefs and Teach Rational Beliefs: An Interview with Albert Ellis

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**Abstract** In this interview, Ellis acknowledges that irrational beliefs have a higher biological basis than rational beliefs and that they are not at opposite ends of the same continuum. Ellis agrees that irrational beliefs are more involved in mental health problems while rational beliefs contribute to the psychology of success. The strength of conviction in both rational and irrational beliefs including self-acceptance and self-downing is explored. Ellis equates the conviction with which rational beliefs need to be held to influence emotions and behaviors with “faith.” He acknowledges the importance of faith built on facts rather than religiosity. Ellis agrees that ridding strongly motivated individuals of self-depreciation may lead to a decrease in their high frustration tolerance and, ultimately, their drive for and achievement of success. Ellis supports adding an “F” to the ABCDE model—forcefully agreeing with and applying new rational beliefs. Ellis discusses the need to develop a literature on therapeutic techniques and methods for helping people to apply rational beliefs more strongly to different areas of their lives. Ellis highlights the perils of self-efficacy positive psychology interventions if people’s innate tendency towards self-depreciation is ignored. The interviewer concludes the interview expressing the view that if we listen to Ellis, “we” need to re-think the ways we teach people of all ages to think rationally knowing that the rational re-statement of

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This interview was conducted in January, 2005, at the Albert Ellis Institute. At the time of the interview, Dr. Ellis was in good health. In this interview held over two separate sessions, a series of questions prepared by the interviewer were presented to Albert Ellis that were designed to stimulate discussion on differences between rational and irrational beliefs and on the issue of whether once irrational beliefs have been disputed, more time and REBT methods need to be devoted to helping clients strengthen their conviction in and application of rational beliefs.

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previously disputed irrational beliefs is only one of many different teaching methods.

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### Question 1

Focusing on the nature of rational beliefs, does the degree of endorsement or belief in a rational belief such as self-acceptance vary across people? And if this is the case, is there an optimum level of self-acceptance?

**AE:** Well, a low level of self-acceptance is the universal condition. Practically nobody in the human race really accepts themselves just because they decide to do it, which is sort of philosophical. They all accept themselves conditionally. So, I would say that it's *innate* and just about everybody has it.

**MB:** So self-downing is innate. And you are making a case that it's extremely common. Even people relatively free from significant psychological problems still have tendencies to self-down.

**AE:** Yes, I think it's very, very hard to come to our philosophic position. Even Carl Rogers didn't see you could not rate yourself at all.

**MB:** If self-downing is innate, does self-acceptance have to be learned?

**AE:** Well, I think it not only has to be learned, but taught and figured out, because a lot of people do not agree with it when you teach it to them.

**MB:** Let's say you're teaching self-acceptance to someone who never learned it, been taught it, and hasn't figured it out. And let's say you teach them the idea and they understand and they accept it.

**AE:** Right.

**MB:** But let's say they still have a long ways to go before they can actually put it into practice.

**AE:** Right, I just had a client last night on the phone. And he's a very seriously disturbed OCDer. He gets self-acceptance after I spend 20 minutes showing him examples of his non-self-acceptance for the tenth time and he's fine with that. But then a few minutes later he slips back into self-rating saying "Because I have some good friends and I'm kind to my mother, I'm OK."

**MB:** Do some people have a little bit of self-acceptance and some people have a lot of self-acceptance?

**AE:** Oh yes. Let's put it this way. Let's take self-downing. People with severe personality disorders *abysmally* blame themselves. Now, all people blame themselves, practically. Almost 100 percent do. But some do it *abysmally*; they believe they are utterly worthless.

**MB:** But take self-acceptance. The ideal of self-acceptance, the idea of it. Some people have a little bit of it or believe it lightly. When you have taught it to them, they have a little bit of it.

**AE:** Yes, but they fall back.

**MB:** And then, over time, they have more of it and more of it.

**AE:** If they keep practicing, it's almost routine, but it's hard.

**MB:** But that process from going from a little bit of self-acceptance to a lot of self-acceptance is a process of growth.

**AE:** Yes, they're going to have to practice.

**MB:** But is that part of the educational process that should take place in therapy and in schools for that matter?

**AE:** Well, yes, but you better watch it, because I think that it's *self-practice* more than anything else. You don't have a teacher standing over you saying "Keep doing it, keep disputing, there you go again." You get the ideal and then you realize that you fall back and, then, you force yourself up again.

**MB:** So the endorsement of self-acceptance as a rational belief can be seen to be on a continuum, from a little bit of it to a lot of it.

**AE:** Yes. If you studied it, you would probably find it exists in groups of people from a little to moderate to ideal levels. Also, self-downing exists on a continuum from moderate self-downing to little, some and very little. It's not probably an even continuum, but there is a range.

**MB:** And is there an optimum degree or level on that continuum of self-acceptance?

**AE:** The optimal is the ideal.

**MB:** The more of it, the better?

**AE:** Yes.

**MB:** The more you can self-accept yourself in different difficult situations the better.

**AE:** And the fewer times you fall back, the better.

**MB:** Does the capacity to learn self-acceptance depend upon the strength of your self-downing or the success with which it is taught?

**AE:** Partly as a result of self-downing tendencies. But it also depends on the hard work that you do in disputing and how well it is taught.

**MB:** But that partly depends upon your degree of low frustration tolerance (LFT). Is it the case that the less disturbed, the quicker your rate of learning?

**AE:** Yes.

**MB:** If some people do not self-down, predominately, do they still need to be taught self-acceptance?

**AE:** Yes.

**MB:** Would teaching people self-acceptance help them live life more confidently with less avoidance of things?

**AE:** Well, for example, I have several OCDers that I've largely taught unconditional self-acceptance (USA) and they do much better with their lives, they practice their OCD less and other things are better.

**MB:** Right.

**AE:** So it helps you enormously to deal with practical problems and other emotional problems if you did.

**MB:** In a similar way, you could teach high frustration tolerance (HFT) to someone who doesn't have an inordinate amount of LFT as a way of showing them how to be even more successful and achieving through a HFT philosophy.

**AE:** Right.

**MB:** If you don't have a personality disorder and you're not in therapy and you do not have strong self-downing and LFT, do you think that self-acceptance and HFT is still a useful set of values or ideas that can help people live more productive lives?

**AE:** Yes. I think the whole human race would—because the whole human race has a great deal of non self-acceptance and also LFT.

**MB:** Would you also say that with HFT and self-acceptance you can be more efficient and effective?

**AE:** A lot of the entrepreneurs like Henry Ford have a lot of HFT.

**MB:** Right.

**AE:** You see. But they still have LFT at times, less I think than others less successful. But they definitely don't have self-acceptance. They have *conditional* self-acceptance and that helps them get HFT since they believe "I'm such a shit if I fail, I *have* to succeed, I *have* to succeed. I have to work until I drop."

**MB:** So what happens if we rid the Henry Fords of their self-downing? Do we rid them of their drive to be successful?

**AE:** Oh some of them wouldn't be as successful, others would because the drive to success is partly inherited and some talented people I think have more.

## Question 2

You indicate that, oftentimes, rational beliefs are lightly held, but irrational beliefs are more strongly held. Can rational beliefs be lightly or strongly held and, if so, how strongly does a rational belief need to be held for it to have a strong influence over emotions and behaviors?

**AE:** Yes, we do have a technique we teach when people have light, rational beliefs. We get them to dispute the irrational belief and say, "Well, I now tell myself that it's not so bad to do this thing—to stop drinking or whatever it is. Now, do I really believe it? Well, let's question it. I'll give myself reasons why it's not so bad."

**MB:** Right.

**AE:** You see, rational beliefs are light and strong and irrational beliefs are, too, and usually the irrational beliefs are stronger and win out over lightly held rational beliefs.

**MB:** Do you see that there is an educational-therapeutic process for deepening rational beliefs?

**AE:** Very definitely.

**MB:** How important is that?

**AE:** Very important. That's what people do when they do good therapy on themselves. They consciously or unconsciously make their rational beliefs stronger. As well as dispute their irrational beliefs, both. They can see a reason why it's irrational, disputing, regularly disputing. And then they see the reasons why it's rational.

**MB:** I was thinking about the ABCDE model. Now the E is a new effect that arises out of disputing.

**AE:** Effective new philosophy.

**MB:** Yes. Now, I'm wondering whether in addition to "E" if, maybe, we need an "F"? Do we need an additional set of techniques to strengthen the degree of endorsement of the new effect? We have now the newborn rational belief. It's not fully developed, it's not applied extensively and people fall back.

**AE:** Right and the answer is yes. Ideally, yes, you can put it under "E" or you can call it "F." "F" could be forcefully agreeing with the rational belief and applying it.

**MB:** And learning when and where to apply the rational belief may require some time and call for new techniques other than disputing.

**AE:** Yes, right. Agreeing with and applying rational beliefs takes time.

### Question 3

Recent research suggests that there are two different dimensions of psychological functioning associated with rational and irrational beliefs. Dimension One could be referred to as "The Psychology of Poor Mental Health" and may consist of an irrational mindset and irrational and negative beliefs associated with extreme anger, high anxiety, depression and chronic procrastination. Dimension Two, which could be referred to as the "The Psychology of Success" may consist of a rational mindset and rational and positive beliefs that support positive emotions and behaviors. What are your thoughts on the existence of these two distinct dimensions?

**AE:** You are partly correct. The word *distinct* is dangerous because lots of self-help books especially those for executives stress the psychology of success. But let's call it *self-efficacy*. Bandura has lots of studies that show the importance of self-efficacy. But the trouble is that when you have self-efficacy, let's suppose you really envision you're able to do something and say to yourself: "I'm able to do this, I'm able to do this, I want to do it, I'm able to do it", you still have self-esteem or low self-acceptance most of the time.

**MB:** Right.

**AE:** You see, so they're not the same and it appears that rational and irrational are distinct.

**MB:** Right.

**AE:** Yes, but on the other hand, people who understand USA—especially if they are bright—will almost automatically have more psychology of success. But not necessarily.

**MB:** But if USA is connected with the psychology of success, self-downing is connected with the psychology of poor mental health.

**AE:** Right.

**MB:** So in other words they (self-acceptance and self-downing) could split contributing to two separate dimensions of psychological functioning.

**AE:** Yes. My hypothesis is that most of Bandura's self-efficacious people still very often either put themselves down or have to do better than most people in order not to put themselves down.

**MB:** It seems that irrational beliefs are associated with Dimension 1, poor mental health, while rational beliefs are associated with the second positive dimension, the psychology of success and well-being?

**AE:** HFT and LFT are not necessarily the same but they probably could be correlated. People who are free from LFT probably also have on the whole have HFT. Both LFT and HFT have a biological element and are partly learned.

**MB:** Do you think that LFT has a stronger biological component than HFT?

**AE:** Well practically everybody has LFT so the answer is probably yes.

**MB:** What are the implications of these two dimensions for the practice of REBT?

**AE:** Well, what I teach is that one of our cognitive techniques that has emotional qualities is self-efficacy training. We have clients imagine feeling confidence about doing well and, then, they are supposed to imagine themselves doing poorly and to practice not feeling down about it.

**MB:** Imagining themselves doing poorly helps them with their self-acceptance.

**AE:** Yes, because then they say, “Oh boy, I’m succeeding better therefore I’m OK.” So you have to warn people when you teach them self-efficacy, which we do because REBT right from the start has always had a practical approach especially to sex therapy. In relationships, we want people to relate better because they enjoy it better because they *do* better. But, I usually tell my professional audience that, first, we minimize the effects of irrational beliefs—depression, despair, etcetera—then as we’re doing that, we go back to the activating event and we show them how to change it, to be more successful. So the practical way is to do what’s done in behavior therapy—just do problem solving. We do it as an important technique, but we do it along with USA.

**MB:** Because most of the people you work with have a tendency to be self-rating?

**AE:** And come pretty depressed or anxious.

**MB:** And that’s why you need to remind them all the time that even though they’re successful and confident, don’t be prone to rate yourself.

**AE:** Yes. *It* is good but *you’re* not good.

**MB:** Whereas, if you were dealing with a group of people that didn’t have a strong tendency to self-down, then self-efficacy training might be quite helpful for them.

**AE:** Yes.

#### Question 4

In helping people to be more successful in employment, loving relationships and happy, does it make sense to conceptualize their rational beliefs as existing on a continuum? In REBT, should therapists spend time on teaching and strengthening the conviction to which rational beliefs are held at the same time as eliminating the conviction with which irrational beliefs are held?

**AE:** Yes, that’s why I talk about helping clients prove to themselves the benefits of rational beliefs and to reinforce their conviction in rational beliefs.

**MB:** If you think back to your work in a *New Guide to Rational Living*, you provided a list of rational beliefs that can help people live more happily.

**AE:** Yes. I've always had a list, right in my very first paper. In my very first paper in 1956, I put the irrational and then the rational beliefs.

**MB:** Now, because you've talked about the importance of rational emotive education and teaching rational thinking to young people in school, can you talk a little bit about teaching young people rational beliefs without concentrating as much on disputing and eliminating their irrational beliefs.

**AE:** Well, younger children are not going to be able to learn disputing so, therefore, we work out a rational coping statement and go over and over it with them. And mentally deficient adults.

**MB:** But let's look at your core rational beliefs: accepting yourself as a mistake-maker without putting yourself down, understanding that to be successful you sometimes have to do things that you don't feel like doing as well as not rating people on the basis of their behavior. These are extremely important and fundamental aspects of a flexible, adaptive and realistic belief system of young people. Now, in therapy, they can be taught after disputing. What's your view on teaching these as a philosophy of life to people of all ages whether or not they have mental health problems? Does it take a long time? And given that they have many fewer irrational beliefs to dispute as a pre-requisite to teaching them rational beliefs, surely there are additional methods that have been and can be employed.

**AE:** Sensible education now often does. The Dalai Lama has written about rational beliefs against anger. Sensible people figure many of them out and many are expressed as practical slogans, "A stitch in time saves nine." But some are philosophic, like "Accept the sinner but not the sin."

**MB:** Right. Now, that's a part of your education for people, to help them be successful, to relate well to others and to live healthy lives.

**AE:** Yes. But, on the other hand, if you only do that and don't also teach them how to dispute, it's going to be partly ineffective. But it would be better than nothing.

**MB:** Right.

**AE:** And that's why a lot of people read books on positive thinking and feel better.

**MB:** But if these ideas were taught to kids as young as 3 and 4 and 5.

**AE:** I don't know if they can be at 3, 4, and 5 years of age but at 6, and 7 years of age they probably can.

**MB:** We can teach young children the rational belief "It's okay to make mistakes when learning something new. You don't have to be perfect."

**AE:** Right. And with children and mentally deficient adults, sometimes you really have to focus on the positive rather than disputing the negative.

**MB:** So, do we have a literature on helping people to more strongly apply rational beliefs to different areas of their life?

**AE:** Probably not. It's somewhere in my writings and other people's but maybe not emphasized enough.

**MB:** Would it be useful to extend our thinking in this area?

**AE:** Yes, and as a matter of fact, I am beginning to see more and more that people *irrationally* have faith in various crap that helps them because of their faith, religiosity and everything else. It is irrational when they believe that there is a god that is going to help them and, therefore, everything will be OK. But, part of what we call conviction is *faith*.

**MB:** Yes.

**AE:** It's a thin line to get people to have faith in themselves and their confidence etcetera, etcetera, without easily taking it to idiotic extremes.

**MB:** I've noticed that when young people use rational self-talk, they seem to have more motivation and because they have more energy, they seem to accomplish more and function at a higher level. Simply teaching people to recognize that they can think more positively about something has an immediate benefit in the way that they view life; and they're more energized and they're more confident.

**AE:** Well, Emile Coue had his clients affirm "Day by day and in every way I am getting better and better" and that seems to help a lot of people.

**MB:** You have pooh-poohed Coue saying his type of positive thinking was a very light intervention. But when I listen to young people using positive rather than negative self-talk, I think it is not a light intervention, it is stronger than I'd ever thought. There is something in it that seems to energize people in a way that I hadn't anticipated.

**AE:** Yes. Well, you could say that the reason that religious beliefs benefit people and why practically all people are innately religious is *that*. Because, by devoutly believing in something, crap or non-crap, they get self-efficacy.

## Question 5

In encouraging the development of rational beliefs, is there a distinct process of encouraging or deepening the strength of conviction in beliefs over and above disputing irrational beliefs and then teaching rational beliefs didactically. For example, let's consider strengthening the rational belief "In order for me to be successful in the long-term, I sometimes will have to do unpleasant things in the short-term. Things don't always have to be easy." It might take some time to strengthen this rational belief after one has successfully disputed the irrational need for comfort.

**AE:** Yes, there is a process to help deepen the strength of conviction in rational beliefs. So, we do it didactically and we show them that it is useful and they better to do it -and some bright people will do that but others won't. However, it's faith founded on fact. You see, a great deal of faith is unfounded. Because the fact is, rational thinking will do them some good.

**MB:** In REBT, we have risk-taking activities to deepen the strength of conviction in non-perfectionism and the need for achievement. We assign risk-taking activities as homework as a way of disputing the irrational need for achievement. Now, in my REE program for schools, You Can Do It! Education, to strengthen the rational belief "It's okay to make mistakes when learning something new", we get kids to



behave confidently. We review with them confident behavior that may involve making mistakes. They, then, go ahead and engage in that behavior.

**AE:** They learn by trial and error.

**MB:** The method we use in *You Can Do It!* Education when teaching a rational belief is not one that follows on after we dispute an irrational belief. Rather, we discuss with students the meaning of the rational belief and ask them to practice behavior that requires them to apply the rational belief or can be assisted by the use of the rational belief. For example, we get them to practice staying engaged in school work that they find very frustrating by using rational self-talk surrounding high frustration tolerance. “To be successful, I sometimes have to do things I do not feel like doing.” Once they accomplish the task successfully, they gain reinforcement for the utility of the rational belief.

**AE:** And again, we use *both* rather than either/or—disputing *and* explicit teaching of the rational belief.

**MB:** Would you agree that a good way of strengthening the conviction with which rational beliefs are held and in deepening their internalization is by giving people behavioral activities?

**AE:** Yes and that’s why it’s *always* cognitive, emotional and behavioral. You’re giving them an idea but you’re getting them to think of it emotionally, forcefully and act on it.

**MB:** So, if we want to strengthen a young person’s self-acceptance, we could give them homework to be confident in putting up their hand in class to answer difficult questions where they will likely make mistakes so that that they can work through the experience using self-accepting self-talk.

**AE:** A shame-attacking exercise.

**MB:** But, because it’s building up the rational belief rather than tackling it from shame and reducing shame, we can teach it in the context of learning new confident behavior with the positive benefits that accrue from being confident.

**AE:** Right.

**MB:** For example, we teach young people that there are two rational beliefs that will help them to be successful; one is HFT, the other, internal locus of control “The harder I work, the more successful I’m going to be.” Next, we discuss with them things in their lives where they could put these two rational beliefs into practice. We ask: “Where in your life could you be doing better if you were more persistent?” and here are two ways to think that will help you.

**AE:** And at the same time, you are strengthening rational beliefs, you are also automatically disputing some of the irrational beliefs.

**MB:** But, some people might say that for years you said that if you effectively dispute irrational beliefs, people will readily endorse rational alternatives and that disputing of irrational beliefs should be sufficient to help people live satisfying and productive lives. Are you saying now we need to do more than just dispute irrational beliefs? Do we also need to spend time on, as we eliminate the negative, developing the positive?

**AE:** Let me say it hasn’t been empirically observed but that the chances are that it is much better to do both. If you do either, it will work but with limitations while if you do both, there will be some, but fewer limitations. Because the human being

is a complex animal and unconsciously. If you do one, you are also doing the other. Consciously and unconsciously, but not well enough so our theory would say it's admissible to do both.

**MB:** Would you say that many of your clients have grown up in homes and have had early experiences where they have never really learned a rational way of thinking?

**AE:** Well, no, partly because they're in a culture like ours with all our proverbs, you have a lot of rationality and they were told many times, "A stitch in time saves nine" and things like that, mottos in fact. In our culture and in probably every culture, they have a lot of rational, positive thinking. And the positive thinking thoughts figured out over the centuries, along with irrational thoughts, are communicated widely. In school, everybody learns a good many rational beliefs.

**MB:** I wonder if they really do. I don't think rational beliefs are really taught. I think young people hear about them occasionally.

**AE:** Well, that may be true.

**MB:** Because if they were effectively taught, then your clients would be more persistent, more confident in the way that they live their lives.

**AE:** Well, I would say that they will irrationally resist them.

**MB:** Yes.

**AE:** So we don't know, but you're probably right.

**MB:** So the test of that might be if they went through a curriculum where rational beliefs were effectively and regularly taught over the years young people attend school.

**AE:** Yes.

**MB:** To see if in fact then they were less resistant and were developing better habits. Perhaps, constant exposure to rational beliefs leads to a neutralizing of the negative impact of irrational beliefs.

**AE:** Yes. Well, don't forget my concept of "will power." It says that will power consists of: First, making the decision and *deciding* to change. Second, *determining* to change which is a stronger thing. Third, preferably, *looking for information* on how to change. And fourth, *acting*, keep acting on it. Without that, "will" has no "power". And I said that in several books clearly.

**MB:** Right. Changing tack a bit, do you think that people lack confidence because they have never been effectively taught how to be confident? Or do you think that they lack confidence because they have high anxiety?

**AE:** Well, again it's both and not either/or. They lack confidence because they tend to be self-esteeming having no self acceptance and, therefore, when they try something and fail, they immediately say, "I'm no good" or something like that so that knocks off their confidence.

**MB:** Would it also be the case that they weren't effectively taught that "It is okay to make mistakes when learning something new"? And that "It doesn't matter that much what people think about you"?

**AE:** Yes, yes.

**MB:** So they would go hand in hand?

**AE:** Yes, now a few people figured that out for right or wrong reasons.

**MB:** The rational?

**AE:** Yes.

**MB:** Or, they could be taught it in schools which they're not. And if they were taught it, not to worry what people think about you and that it's okay to make mistakes and don't evaluate yourself in terms of your behavior, that would help people be more confident.

**AE:** Yes. It might also have other better consequences such as increasing high frustration tolerance.

**MB:** Right.

**AE:** It always gets more complicated than it seems at first blush.

**MB:** Thank you.

**MB:** (comment after interview): It would seem to be the case that since Ellis believes that irrational beliefs have a stronger biological contribution and are represented in a separate psychological dimension from rational beliefs which have a stronger learned component, they require different and, perhaps, more powerful methods for change. Rational beliefs have a stronger learned component and require different pedagogical-therapeutic methods for strengthening. It would seem to me to be the case that "we" need to re-think the way we teach people of all ages to think rationally knowing that rational re-statements of irrational beliefs after disputing are only one of many different teaching methods.