A NEW GUIDE TO RATIONAL LIVING

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1 HOW FAR CAN YOU GO WITH SELF-ANALYSIS?

People often say to us, "Look, let's suppose that your principles of rational-emotive therapy actually work. Let's suppose that you really can, as you claim, teach any intelligent human not to feel desperately unhappy about practically anything. If you find this true, why don't you just put your theories in a book and let us read them? That way, we'd save a whale of a lot of time, trouble, and treasure going for psychotherapy."

We usually demur.

Self-analysis, we point out, has distinct limitations. No matter how clearly one states the principles of self-help, people often misunderstand or distort them. They read into these principles what they want to read—and ignore some of their most salient aspects. They oversimplify, edit out most of the ifs, ands, and buts and cavalierly apply cautiously stated rules of disturbance to almost any person in any situation.

Worse yet, thousands of readers give vast lip service to psychological, moral, social, and other principles in which they stoutly say they believe. "I just don't know how to thank you," they keep saying and writing, "for having written that wonderful book! I keep rereading it all the time and have found it the greatest of help." But when we correspond or speak with them further, we find that they often have done nothing along the lines painstakingly described in our "wonderful book"—or that their actual behavior diametrically opposes our advocacies.

Intensive psychotherapy has this unique advantage over almost any other form of reconstructive teaching: it provides for
systematic and periodic check on whether the therapist’s message really gets home to the client. Somewhere in the early part of treatment, the active-directive, rational psychotherapist (quite unlike the passive orthodox psychoanalyst or the nondirective therapist, with whom we respectfully but wholeheartedly disagree) clearly indicates to you that not only do you have problems, but that if you want to get on a saner course you’d better see that you think and act in irrational ways and had better forcefully challenge your illogical assumptions and begin to think and act more rationally and less self-defeatingly.

“Very well,” you say after a fairly short period of rational-emotive therapy (RET), “I think I pretty much see what you mean. I’m going to try to do as you say and challenge my own nonsense by which I keep creating my emotional disturbance.” And you do try, and soon (perhaps even the very next session) come back to report significant progress. You report, for example (as one of our clients stated), “Say, I find this really great! I did exactly what you told me to do. Instead of groveling before my wife, as usual, when she laid me out for having come to see you, supposedly telling tales about her, and spending money for treatment, I remembered what you said. ‘What does she think she gains,’ I asked myself, ‘from her anger? I’ll bet that, just as the doctor said, she really has covered-up weaknesses, and perhaps tries to feel strong by jumping on me. But this time I refuse to take her so seriously and upset myself about her weakness.’ And I didn’t. I didn’t let it bother me at all.”

“Fine!” I (A.E.) said, feeling that perhaps this client really had begun to learn how to question his own assumptions regarding himself and his wife and to act more rationally. “And then, when you didn’t let it bother you, what did you do, how did you behave toward your wife?”

“Oh, that seemed easy!” said the client. “I just said to myself again—just like you told me to, Doctor—‘Look, I won’t let this sick-thinking female get away with this kind of stuff any longer. I’ve taken it for much too long now. I’ve had enough!’ And I really let her have it. I didn’t feel afraid, as I usually do, and I told her exactly what I thought of her, how goddamn stupidly she behaved, how you agreed with me that she kept giving me too hard a time, and how if she kept up that kind of stuff any longer I’d push her goddamn teeth in and make her swallow them. Oh, I really let her have it! Just like you told me.”

“I did? I told you that?” I asked, appalled. And for the next few sessions, by careful repetition and the use of the simplest examples tailored to order for his level of understanding, I helped him—finally—to see what I really meant. Yes, he would better learn to question his wife’s motives, and not take her disapproval too seriously. But he could also learn not to condemn her (or
anyone else) for acting the way she did, and try to accept and forgive her shrewishness and sympathetically help her, if possible, to overcome it. Eventually (actually, after three and a half months of weekly rational-emotive therapy), he learned to think and act more rationally. But only after persistent repetition by me, backsliding on his part, more explanations, his renewed experimental attempts to apply his perceptions of my instructions, and still more corrections.

One of the main advantages of intensive psychotherapy lies in its repetitive, experimenting, revising, practicing nature. And no book, sermon, article, or series of lectures, no matter how clear, can fully give this. Consequently, we, the authors of this book, intend to continue doing individual and group therapy and to train other psychotherapists. Whether we like it or not, we cannot reasonably expect most people with serious problems to rid themselves of their needless anxiety and hostility without some amount of intensive, direct contact with a competent therapist. How nice if easier modes of treatment prevailed! But let us face it: they rarely do.

Now for a look at the other side of the fence. While most emotionally disturbed individuals only benefit to a limited extent by reading and hearing material designed to help them combat their disturbances, some do derive considerable help, like the fifty-year-old engineer who visited me (A.E.) after reading my book How to Live with a Neurotic. This man had a wife with obvious psychotic difficulties, with whom he had had a most difficult time for the twenty-eight years of their marriage. He reported that, until he read the book, he had continually felt angry at her because of her behavior. After reading it twice, almost all his anger vanished and he lived peaceably, though not entirely happily, with her and devoted himself more effectively to protecting their three children from some of the effects of her erratic behavior.

“One passage in the book particularly helped me,” he reported. “After I read and reread that passage several times, almost all my anger against my wife seemed to melt away, as if by magic. It really impressed me.”

“And what was that passage?” I asked.

“In your chapter on how to live with a person who has severe disturbances, you say, ‘All right. So Jones gets drunk every night and acts noisily. How do you expect a drunk to act—sober?’ That really hit me. And I asked myself: ‘How do you expect your crazy wife to behave—sanely?’ That did it! Ever since then, would you believe it? I’ve acted a heck of a lot differently—and more sanely.”

As far as I could see, he had acted much more rationally since he took this passage to heart—even though, technically, both he and the book made wrong statements. For no such person as a
drunk exists—only a person who frequently drinks or behaves drunkenly. And no one “is” crazy—we only have humans who behave crazily. When we use terms like a drunk and a crazy person, we make slipshod overgeneralizations. We imply that an individual who drinks too much will always and only do so, and that a person who behaves crazily will inevitably behave that way. False! “Drunks” can sober up—sometimes for good. And “crazy people” can train themselves to behave much more sanely.

Anyway, the reader of How to Live with a Neurotic began to see one thing clearly: that we’d better not expect people who consistently act drunkenly to maintain sobriety; nor expect those who frequently behave crazily to keep acting sanely. If we expect otherwise, we ignore reality.

Another instance proves even more spectacular. An ex-client, whom we shall call Bob Smith, spent a year and a half in a state hospital with a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia. He has worked in the community for the past five years and does remarkably well. Not only has he taken care of his family, but he has also considerably helped many other somewhat disturbed individuals.

But Bob Smith has had his problems. For a couple of years he has not talked to his parents (who, expectably, have their own personality difficulties). He has verged on divorcing his wife. He has anxiously refrained from doing many things, such as approaching various people and discussing intimate or “embarrassing” situations with them. In many ways he has acted defensively and angrily.

Came the dawn: several weeks after running across the article “An Impolite Interview with Albert Ellis,” in the iconoclastic magazine The Realist, and tracking down some of the main papers on rational-emotive psychotherapy published in professional journals, Bob Smith went through mental mood changes “the likes of which I never felt before.” He suddenly learned a simple fact: “People and things do not upset us. Rather, we upset ourselves by believing that they can upset us.”

This main tenet of what Bob Smith refers to as the “anti-unhappiness formula,” constituting his own simplified restatement of principles presented in the first major paper on RET, remarkably changed his life. Almost immediately, he began talking to his parents, getting along much better with his wife, and discussing with people the things he had fearfully refrained from voicing for years.

Not only did he effect some almost incredible unblockings in his own thinking and doing, but Bob Smith also began talking to others, sending out leaflets, writing letters, and doing a host of other things that he hopes will lead to a “chain reaction” of interest in rational living. He believes that by continuing this chain, and by inducing important people and statesmen to think sanely
and stop upsetting themselves with the belief that other people and events upset them, unusual strides toward world peace will occur. Whether right or wrong about this, he has certainly helped himself to think straight and now leads a more productive and peaceful existence.

So you can do it. With or without prior psychological knowhow, you can read or hear about a new idea, forcefully set about applying it to your own thought and action, and carve amazing changes in your own life. Not everyone, of course, can or will do this. But some can; and some will. Will you?

History gives us several outstanding instances of those who changed themselves and helped change others by hardheaded thinking. Zeno of Citium, for example, who flourished in the third century B.C., and founded the Greek Stoic school of philosophy. The Greek philosopher Epicurus; the Phrygian Epicetetus; the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius; the Dutch Jew Baruch Spinoza. These and other outstanding rational thinkers, after reading about the teaching of still earlier thinkers (Heraclitus and Democritus, among others), and doing some deep thinking of their own, enthusiastically adopted philosophies radically different from their original beliefs. More to the point for purposes of our present discussion, they actually began to live these philosophies, to act in accordance with them.

All this, mind you, without benefit of what we today would call formal psychotherapy. Granted, of course, these individuals performed outstandingly—and held rare places in human history. But they did see the light of another's reasoning and use it for their own saner living.

Can basic personality change, then, really result from anything except intensive psychotherapy? Most modern authorities strongly say no. Thus, Sigmund Freud, Otto Rank, Wilhelm Reich, Carl Rogers, and Harry Stack Sullivan all stoutly contend that certain therapeutic conditions must exist and continue over a period of time for basic personality change to occur. But this unanimity of opinion hardly proves anything than that the quoted authorities agree.

Our own position? People with personality disturbance usually have such deep-seated and long-standing problems that they often require persistent psychotherapeutic help. But this by no means always holds true. Profoundly changed attitudes and behavior patterns follow from no single condition. Many conditions, such as those listed by the therapists mentioned in our last paragraph, may prove highly desirable. But improvement can occur as long as a troubled person somehow undergoes significant life experiences, or learns about others' experiences, or sits down and thinks for himself, or talks to a therapist who helps him reconstruct his basic attitudes toward himself and others.
Let us, then, not put down self-analysis, for all its limitations. We rarely find those who complete it. But they do exist; they can effectively employ it.

In one sense, indeed we require self-analysis for all basic personality change. For even when people receive competent, adequate therapeutic help, unless they add persistent and forceful self-analysis, they will tend to obtain superficial and nonlasting results. As we often explain to our psychotherapy and marriage counseling clients, our instruction and advice help them overcome their emotional upsets mainly because of what they do with what we say.

More concretely: Although effective therapists teach their clients to think straight, they cannot at any time really think for them. Even though we may advise them what to do in a given life situation, and although they may benefit thereby, we strive to get them to think for themselves—otherwise, they may always remain dependent upon us or others.

This means that therapy, in essence, largely involves teaching clients effective self-analysis: how to observe their own feelings and actions, how to evaluate them objectively instead of moralisti-
cally or grandiously. Also: how to change, by consistent effort and practice, so that they may achieve the things that they most want to do while not needlessly interfering with the preferences of others. Clients find self-analysis not merely important but virtually necessary for successful therapy.

In RET in particular, we induce individual and group therapy clients to do considerable work in between sessions. We give them concrete homework assignments—such as risk-taking, imagining failing and not upsetting themselves about this failure, or chang-
ing their thinking in some important ways. We also teach self-
management techniques: methods of reinforcing or rewarding themselves for good behavior and penalizing (but not damning) themselves for poor behavior. We show them how to dispute irra-
tional thinking on many occasions during the week, not merely during therapy sessions. RET (like many other therapies) conse-
quently includes self-work and self-analysis, and makes this kind of activity an integral part of the therapeutic process.

Which brings us to one of the main purposes of writing this book. We hope that it will reach many individuals who have never had (though many of them well could use some) therapeutic help, and that it will help some of them to think more clearly and act more effectively in regard to their personality problems. We also hope that it will serve as useful supplementary readings for the millions of Americans who have had some therapy.

Continually, as we practice psychotherapy and marriage and family counseling, clients ask us: "What can we read that will help us while we undergo therapy? Have you any kind of a reading list
to supplement our work with you?” In answer to these questions, we try to suggest some suitable reading and have included some references for this purpose in the bibliography at the end of this volume.

Since, however, we do a particular kind of treatment (RET), and since most of the published material in the area of self-analysis only partially includes some of its principles, we have written (and revised) the present volume to provide a book that goes beyond our two earlier and less comprehensive books in this area—How to Live with a Neurotic and Creative Marriage. We comprehensively discuss rational-emotive therapy in such books as Reason and Emotion in Psychotherapy, Growth Through Reason, and Humanistic Psychotherapy: The Rational-Emotive Approach. In the present book, we shall mainly outline its principles and give some concrete descriptions of its self-help aspects.

To those who want to get specific personal help from this book, let us again sound a warning: No book, including this one, can cure all your emotional problems. Since you always have something unique about your individual makeup and situation, a book cannot substitute for personalized counseling. A good book, however, may nicely supplement or reinforce therapy. And it can encourage highly beneficial self-analysis.

Still another caveat. Remember that every language has its limitations. Because we, like other writers in the field of mental health, use words such as “creativity,” “happiness,” “love,” “maturity,” and “problem-solving,” do not jump to the conclusion that we hand out the same old hackneyed, Pollyannaish message that you may have long ago considered and rejected as having no practical value. Superficially, some of the things we say may sound like “positive thinking,” let-us-pray-for-the-best-ism, orthodox stoicism, or other utopian creeds. Actually, no! Try reading the anti-unhappiness principles we present in this book; then try thinking and acting on them. We confidently expect that you, like many of our clients, will find that we've “got something there.”

Here, then, we present our plan for straight thinking and rational living. Read it carefully and with all due allowances for our limitations—and yours! No matter how good the rules of living that we set before you, what reads easily and simply may prove quite difficult and complicated to believe and to act upon. Do not assume that because you have read and understood some of our practical suggestions for improving your life functioning that that remains that. That doesn't. To change, you still have before you the great task of seeing, challenging, and blocking out old self-defeating behavior patterns and learning new, self-fulfilling ways of thinking, perceiving, feeling, and doing.

Well, happy thinking!
"What you say, Dr. Harper, seems on the surface plausible and sensible. And it would delight me if people actually worked as simply as you indicate they do! But, frankly, what you and Dr. Ellis call your theory of rational therapy sounds to me, when you probe a little into it, very superficial, antipsychoanalytic, and like a few pages out of the how-to-lift-yourself-by-your-bootstraps school of slick magazine psychology."

The speaker, Dr. B., attended my lecture to a group of educators to whom I had set out to describe the tenets of rational-emotive therapy. And his views had some truth. Some of our ideas on RET do sound superficial. And they definitely oppose the views of orthodox psychoanalysis—though they overlap with the teachings of Alfred Adler, Karen Horney, Harry Stack Sullivan, Erich Fromm, Eric Berne, and the psychoanalysts who stress "ego psychology."

Still, I couldn't help taking my heckler somewhat to task—not because I thought I could change his mind, for who can unfreeze the prejudices of a trained psychotherapist?—and not because I itched to put him in his place (for the luxury of venting one's spleen on others holds, as we shall show later in this book, little reward for the rationally inclined person), but because I thought that his objections might demonstrate one of the main principles of RET for the rest of my audience.

"You presumably object," I said, "to our view that human feelings significantly overlap with thoughts, and you believe that they cannot get changed, as I have just said they could, mainly
by changing one's thinking. Do I grasp your main point?"

"Yes. We have fifty or a hundred years' history of experimental and clinical findings that prove otherwise."

"Perhaps so. But suppose we forget this hundred years of history for a moment and concentrate on the history of the last few moments. Just a short while ago, as I gave my talk on RET, you experienced some intense feelings, did you not?"

"I certainly did! I felt that you acted idiotically and should not go on spouting such nonsense."

"Fine," I said, as the rest of my audience gleefully howled. "But you also," I persisted, "had another emotion, just before you stood up to speak against me, did you not?"

"I did? What kind of an emotion do you mean?"

"Well, I would say that judging from the high and uneven pitch of your voice as you just spoke, you had at least a little bit of anxiety about getting up among your peers here and voicing your anti-Harperian opinion. Do I judge incorrectly about this?"

"Uh..." My antagonist hesitated for several long seconds (while the knowing smiles of the members of the audience changed in my favor). "No-. I guess you don't judge totally incorrectly. I did have some anxiety just before speaking and during the first part of my words; though I don't have it now."

"All right. Just as I imagined, then. You had two emotions while I spoke: anger and anxiety. And now, at this present moment, you seem to have neither? Correct?"

"Definitely. I no longer feel anxious or angry—though perhaps I feel a littly pity for you for still holding to an untenable position." Touche! Again the smiles backed him.

"Good. Maybe we'll examine the feeling of pity for me a little later. But let's, for a moment, get back to the anxiety and anger. Do I wrongly assume that behind your anger lay some chain of sentences such as: 'That idiot, Harper—along with that nincompoop colleague of his, Ellis—mouths utter hogwash! They ought to outlaw his boring us to tears with this kind of stuff at an otherwise highly scientific meeting'?"

"Precisely! How did you guess?" Again the chorus of snickers pretty solidly supported him. I continued:

"My clinical intuition! Anyway, you did have such a thought, and by it you made yourself angry. Our thesis in rational therapy holds just that: From your thought—'Dr. Harper not only mouths hogwash but he shouldn't do so'—comes the real source of your anger. Moreover, we believe that you do not, at this present moment, still feel angry, because you have replaced the original thought with quite a different one, namely: 'Oh, well, if Dr. Harper wrongly believes this nonsense, and if the poor fellow wants to keep believing it, let him have this problem.' And this new thought, Dr. Ellis and I would contend, lies at the heart of
your present state of feeling, which you accurately describe, I think, as ‘pity.’"

Before my opponent could say anything further, another member of the audience interjected: "Suppose you rightly see the origins of Dr. B.'s feelings of anger and now pity. What about his anxiety?"

"According, again, to the theories of rational-emotive psychology," I replied, "his anxiety occurred as follows. As I spoke, and as he incited himself to anger by telling himself how badly I behaved—and should not behave—Dr. B. also said to himself something along these lines: 'Just wait till Harper stops talking! Boy, have I something to say that will show everyone how idiotically he acts (and how cleverly I come across for showing him up before everyone!). Let me see, now, how shall I squelch him, when I get the chance?"

"And then, I further suggest, Dr. B. tested several opening sentences in his mind, rejected some of them quickly, thought others might do, and kept looking for still better ones with which to annihilate my views. Not only, however, did he try to discover the best set of phrases and sentences he could use against me, but he also kept saying to himself: 'What will the other members of the group think? Will they think I act just as foolishly as Harper? Will he sway them by his charm? Will they think I feel jealous of his and Ellis's success with clients and with their writings? Will it really do me any good to open my big mouth against him?"

"These self-created sentences of Dr. B.'s, I hypothesize, caused him to feel anxious. True, Dr. B.?"

"Not entirely wrong," my opponent acquiesced, with more than a shade of embarrassed redness of his face and nearly bald pate. "But doesn't everyone, do not all of us, say things to ourselves like this before we get up to talk about almost anything in public?"

"We most certainly do," I heartily agreed. "And, believe me, I use your internalized beliefs as an example here only because they illustrate what virtually all of us do. But that precisely covers my main point: that exactly because we keep telling ourselves these kinds of sentences, we feel anxious before speaking in public. Because we tell ourselves (a) 'I might make a mistake and fall on my face before this group of my peers' and, much more importantly, tell ourselves (b) 'And I have to think it awful if I do make a mistake and fall on my face in public.'"

"Precisely because we tell ourselves these catastrophizing sentences, we almost immediately begin to feel anxious. Otherwise, if we told ourselves only sentence (a) and instead of (b), said to ourselves quite a different sentence, which we might call (b), namely, 'Too bad! If I make a mistake and fall on my face, I won't think it great, but I still don't have to view it as awful'—if
we told ourselves this at (b), we would practically never feel anxious."

"But suppose," asked the same educator who had asked about Dr. B.'s anxiety, "you correctly see, Dr. Harper, how B. created his anxiety. How do you explain its later disappearance, in terms of your theory of RET?"

"Very simply again. Having screwed up sufficient courage to speak in spite of his self-created anxiety, Dr. B. found that even though he did partly fall on his face, the world did not come to an end, and no actual horror occurred. At worst, he found that I kept standing up to his assault and that some of the members of the audience remained on my side, although perhaps some also sided with him. So he changed his internalized beliefs to something like:

"'Oh, well. Harper still doesn't really get my point and see his errors. And several others still side with him. Too damned bad! You can always fool some of the people, and I just can't expect anything different. I'll just bide my time, continue to present my view, and even if I don't win everyone over, I can still hold it myself.'

"With these new, anti-awfulizing beliefs, Dr. B. has dispelled the anxiety he previously caused himself and now feels, as he again has probably accurately reported, more pitying than angry. Correct?"

My opponent again hesitated a moment; then replied, "I can only repeat that you may prove partially right. But I still don't feel entirely convinced."

"Nor did I expect that you would. I just wanted to use your own example to induce you to give this matter some additional thought, and to encourage the members of this audience to do likewise. Maybe rational psychotherapy has, as you say, superficiality and slickness. I only ask that you professionals give it an honest try to see for yourself whether it really works."

As far as I know, I have not yet convinced my heckler of the soundness of my position. But several other members of my audience now enthusiastically see that human emotions do not magically exist in their own right, and do not mysteriously flow from unconscious needs and desires. Rather, they almost always directly stem from ideas, thought, attitudes, or beliefs, and can usually get radically changed by modifying our thinking processes.

When we first began thinking and writing about rational-emotive therapy, in the latter half of the 1950's, we could cite little research material to back up the idea that humans do not get upset, but that they upset themselves by devoutly convincing themselves, at point B, of irrational Beliefs about what happens to them (the Activating Events or Activating Experiences of their lives) at point A. The field of cognitive psychology, then in its formative stages, only included rare psychologists, such as Magda
Arnold, who viewed emotions as linked with thinking. Since that time, hundreds of experiments have clearly demonstrated that if an experimenter induces, by fair means or foul, individuals to change their thoughts, they also profoundly change their emoting and behaving. Evidence that we feel the way we think keeps accumulating, steadily reaffirmed by the work of many experimenters, including Rudolf Arnheim, Richard S. Lazarus, Donald Meichenbaum, Stanley Schachter, and numerous others.

All of which brings us back to the paramount thesis of this book: namely, that people can live the most self-fulfilling, creative, and emotionally satisfying lives by disciplining their thinking. All the pages that follow will, in one way or another, bear testimony to this central rational-emotive view.
3 FEELING WELL BY THINKING STRAIGHT

"What do you mean by a person’s intelligently organizing and disciplining his thinking?” our clients, friends, and professional associates often ask.

Answer: “Exactly that. Just what we say.”

“But when you say that by rationally and realistically organizing and disciplining his or her thinking a human can live the most self-fulfilling, creative, and emotionally satisfying life, you make that ‘life’ sound like a cold, intellectual, mechanical and, candidly, rather unpleasant affair.”

“Maybe so. But doesn’t it sound that way because our parents, teachers (and therapists!) propagandize us to believe that we can ‘live it up’ and ‘get the most out of life’ only through highly ‘emotional’ experiences? Haven’t novelists and dramatists, by rationalizing some of their own ‘emotional’ excesses, often spread the dubious notion that unless we roller-coast from deep depression to manic joy and then down to the bogs of despair again, we can’t claim we really ‘live’?”

“Oh, come now! Don’t you exaggerate?”

“Yes, probably. But don’t you?”

“No. Surely you don’t, in your own personal lives, always behave like cold-blooded, big-brained, emotion-squelching individuals who never feel any sorrow, pain, joy, elation—or anything?”

“We hope we don’t. And we can get affidavits from sundry past and present wives, sweethearts, friends, and co-workers to prove that we don’t. But whoever proved well-organized, rational thinking incompatible with intense emotion?”
“It still sounds that way. And as yet you rational therapy boys haven’t done a thing to disprove this. How can you disprove our feeling that rationality makes us too cold?”

“We don’t have to disprove your hypothesis. According to the first principles of science, the individual who hypothesizes had better prove the theory and not expect anyone who doubts to disprove it. You assume that just because reason may interfere with intense emotion (and we definitely grant that it may) it must so interfere. When and how will you prove that?”

“A good point,” our questioners often admit. “Reasoning need not interfere seriously with intense feeling, but doesn’t it normally tend to do so?”

“Not that we’ve ever found. Reasoning normally blocks inappropriate, self-defeating, or disorganizing emotion. Indeed, we hold, as one of our main tenets of RET, that since thinking creates feeling, the more clearly the inappropriately emoting individual thinks, the less he continues to sustain his inappropriate state of feeling.”

“Then you’ve practically admitted our charge,” our questioners often interject at this point. “You’ve just said that rational thinking and intense emotion cannot coexist and that the former drives away the latter.”

Nothing of the sort! You’ve illegitimately substituted the word ‘intense’—which we did not use—for our words ‘inappropriate, self-defeating, and disorganizing.’”

“What a silly quibble! Don’t they mean the same thing?”

“Not necessarily. Intense emotion may appropriately and realistically follow the actualizing of some of your values. Thus, you may greatly desire to love, find a most suitable object (such as a member of the other sex) with traits you rate highly, and intensely love that person. You may then express your love quite constructively by treating your beloved affectionately and by inducing him or her to join you as your steady companion or mate. And your love may lead to fortunate results: inducing you to work harder at your profession. Self-defeating or disorganizing love, on the other hand, would rarely lead to these results.”

“Your main point, then,” interject our skeptics, “holds that although disorganizing emotion seems largely incompatible with rational thinking, appropriate emotion and rationality seem compatible. Right?”

“Yes. We contend that rational thinking in the long run results in increased feelings of pleasure. For human reason, properly used, helps peoplerid themselves of their disruptive feelings—and especially of disorganizing panic and rage. Then highly pleasurable emotions and pursuits tend to surface. Even unpleasant emotions—such as intense sorrow and regret—help us to feel happier and get more of what we want in life. For when we handle them properly,
and use them as signals that something has gone wrong in our lives
and had better get corrected, they help us rid ourselves of undesir-
able experiences and occurrences (such as failure and rejection)
that instigate us to feel sorry and regretful.”

“Very interesting. But this remains your hypothesis. And, as
you so cleverly noted before, the onus now rests on you to prove
your view valid.”

“Right. And prove it we shall, in the remaining pages of this
book, by presenting a mass of clinical, experimental, personal, and
other data. But the most important and unique proof remains the
one you’d better try for yourself.”

“Who—us?”

“Yes—you. If you really want to see whether the theories we
shall present have value for you, we would strongly advise you to
keep your present appropriately skeptical frame of mind, but also
experimentally to put it at times in abeyance and give yourself a
chance to try out our rational viewpoint in your own life. Take
some area in which you think you have needless misery—some
shame, guilt, or grandiosity that keeps ravaging you—and try,
really try, some of our thinking formulas to rid yourself of these
damaging feelings. Don’t accept what we say on faith. Try out our
notions. See to what results they lead.”

“Seems fair enough. Maybe we shall try.”

“OK, then. Let’s see if we can get on with some of the
evidence to back our basic theories of rational thinking and appro-
priate emoting.”

At this point, we generally outline some of the basic prin-
ciples of rational living.

As noted, human feeling stems from thinking. Does this mean
that you can—or should—control all your emotions by reason? Not
exactly.

As a human, you have four basic processes, all indispensable
to your survival and happiness: 1. You perceive or sense—see,
taste, smell, feel hear. 2. You feel or emote—love, hate, fear, feel
guilty or depressed. 3. You move or act—walk, eat, swim, climb,
and so forth. 4. You reason or think—remember, imagine, hypoth-
esize, conclude, solve problems.

Ordinarily, you experience none of these four basic processes
in isolation. Take, first of all, perceiving. When you perceive or
sense something (for example, see an apple), you also tend, at
the very same time, to think about it (figure out its suitability
for food); to have some feelings about it (to desire or not to
desire it); and to do something about it (to pick it up or throw it
away).

Similarly, if you move or act (say, pick up a stick), you also
tend to perceive what you do (for example, to see and touch the
stick); to think about your act (imagine what you might do with
How the devil can we understand emotion?

Hundreds of profound books and articles have tried to answer this question—none of them, as yet, with anything close to certainty. Let us now, with something short of a perfect answer as our goal, see if we can shed some light on this puzzling question.

Emotion seems a life process involved with perceiving, moving and thinking. It emerges as a combination of several seemingly diverse, yet actually closely related, things. The famous neurologist Stanley Cobb has given this somewhat technical description, suggesting (as interpreted by John Reid):

that we use the term “emotion” to mean the same thing as (1) an introspectively given affective state, usually mediated by acts of interpretation; (2) the whole set of internal physiological changes, which help (ideally) the return to normal equilibrium between the organism and its environment, and (3) the various patterns of overt behavior, stimulated by the environment and implying constant interaction with it, expressive of the stirred-up physiological state (2) and also the more or less agitated psychological state (1). [An emotion doesn’t mean] a private mental state, nor a set of static qualities abstracted from such a state, nor a hypothalamic response with intense autonomic discharge, nor a pattern of behavior viewed in purely objective terms, nor a particular stimulus-situation, even though it has some emotogenic
meaning for distinguishable things, nor the entire set of them viewed as constituting a merely additive whole. An emotion [constitutes] rather, an acute disturbance, involving marked somatic changes, experienced as a more or less agitated feeling. There remain associated inferences, of varying degrees of explicitness, as to the meaning of what happens. Both the feeling and the behavior which expresses it, as well as the internal physiological responses to the stimulus-situation, constitute a dynamically interrelated whole, which [constitutes] the emotion. Thus, an emotion [remains] at once physiological, psychological, and social since other persons usually [emerge as] the most highly emotogenic stimuli in our civilized environment.

Question: Has Dr. Cobb’s definition of emotion final and full acceptance by all modern psychologists and neuropsychiatrists?

Answer: No. As Horace English and Ava English point out, in their Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychological Terms, we cannot as yet define emotion without referring to several conflicting theories. Most authorities agree, however, that emotion has no single cause or result. Emotions arise through a three-way process: first, through some kind of physical stimulation of the special emotional center of our brains (called the hypothalamus) and the autonomic nervous system; second, through our perceiving and moving (technically called our sensorimotor) processes; and third, through our desiring and thinking (technically, conation and cognition).

Normally, our emotional centers as well as our perceiving, moving, and thinking centers display a degree of excitability and receptivity. Then a stimulus of a certain intensity impinges upon and excites or damps them. We can directly apply this stimulus (in rather unusual cases) to the emotional centers—for example, by electrically stimulating parts of the brain or by giving the individual exciting or depressing drugs which act on parts of the brain or autonomic nervous system. Or we can (more usually) apply the stimulus indirectly, through the individual’s perceiving, moving, and thinking, thereby affecting the central-nervous-system and brain pathways which, in turn, connect with and influence the emotional (hypothalamic and autonomic) centers.

If you wish to control your feelings, then, you may do so in three major ways. Suppose, for example, you feel highly excitable and wish to calm down. You can directly influence your emotions by electrical or biochemical means—such as by taking barbiturates or tranquilizing drugs. Or, secondly, you can work through your perceiving-moving (sensorimotor) system—for example, by doing relaxation exercises, by dancing, by resorting to “primal screaming,”
or by yoga breathing techniques. Or, thirdly, you can counteract your excitability by using your willing-thinking processes—by reflecting, thinking, imaginatively desensitizing yourself, or telling yourself calming ideas.

Which combination of these three means of controlling your emotional state will prove most effective in any given instance will depend largely on how disturbed you feel and in what direction and how extensively you wish to change or control your feeling.

*Question:* If we have three effective methods of controlling one's emotions available, why do you emphasize one of them in RET and in rational living?

*Answer:* For several reasons. First, we do not specialize in medicine or biophysics, and therefore do not consider pharmacological, bioelectrical, or other physical methods our field. We at times refer clients to physicians, physiotherapists, masseurs, and other trained individuals who specialize in physical modes of treatment; and we see good reason to combine some of these methods with RET. But we don't especially consider them our thing.

Second, we do not doubt that certain physical means of reducing tensions and changing human behavior—such as yoga, bioenergetics, and Rolfing—at times have a beneficial effect. But we look with skepticism on the all-encompassing claims frequently made for these techniques. They largely consist of diversion, since they help people to focus on their bodies rather than on the nutty thoughts and fantasies with which they tend to plague themselves. Consequently, they bring palliation rather than cure, help people *feel* better instead of *get* better, and rarely produce elegant philosophic changes.

We think it highly probable that biophysical and sensorimotor techniques for affecting human emotions, unless combined with thinking-desiring methods, produce limited effect. People may get helped through a depression by the use of drugs or relaxation techniques. But unless they begin to think more clearly and to value their aliveness, they will tend to depress themselves again when they stop the drugs or exercises. For effecting *permanent* and *deep-seated* emotional changes, philosophic changes appear virtually necessary.

We particularly encourage people with disturbances to help themselves and not rely too much on what others (such as biochemists, physicians, or physiotherapists) can do for them. They'd better, in many instances, seek outside help to stop over- or under-emoting. But the less dependent they remain on drugs or physical apparatuses, the better. Our rational-emotive methods of persuading them to think for themselves ideally lead to independence. Once they learn and persistently practice rationality for a while, they require little or no further outside assistance.

We do not, then, oppose controlling defeating emotions by
drugs, relaxation techniques (such as those of Edmond Jacobsen, or J. H. Schultz and W. Luthe), movement therapy, yoga exercises, or other physical approaches. We believe that these techniques may help. And we teach, as we shall show later, many emotive, dramatic, fantasy, self-management, and behavior modification methods. More than most other schools of therapy, RET employs a comprehensive, almost eclectic, multifaceted approach to treatment.

We mainly hold, however, that if you would make the most thoroughgoing and permanent changes in your disturbed feelings, you’d better use considerable reasoning and reality-testing. Because a huge element (though not the whole) of emoting directly stems from thought.

**Question:** Granted that bioelectrical, pharmacological, and sensorimotor approaches to emotional change seem limited. But has not the rational approach to conscious thought equal superficiality? Have not the psychoanalysts long ago established the fact that unconscious processes create much emotional behavior? How can we learn to control and change the thoughts that create our feelings, if we have these thoughts buried deeply in our unconscious minds?

**Answer:** A very good point! And one that we cannot answer in a word. As we shall keep showing throughout this book, what the orthodox Freudians and many other psychoanalysts keep referring to as “deeply unconscious thoughts” emerge, in the vast majority of instances, as what Freud originally called preconscious ideas. We don’t have these thoughts and feelings immediately accessible to our awareness. But we can fairly easily learn to infer and observe them, by working back from the behavior which they induce.

We firmly believe that, whatever your emotional upsets, you can learn to perceive the cerebral self-signalings that invariably lie behind and motivate your emotions—and thereby succeed in deciphering the “unconscious” messages you transmit to yourself. Once you clearly see, understand, and begin to dispute the irrational beliefs that create your inappropriate feelings, your “unconscious” thoughts will rise to consciousness, greatly enhancing your power of emotional self-control.

Enough of our own promises! Let us note again that a large part of what we call emotion stems from a certain kind—a biased, prejudiced, or strongly evaluative kind—of thinking. What we usually label as thinking consists of a relatively calm appraisal of a situation, an objective comparison of many of its elements, and a coming to some conclusion as a result of this comparing process.

Thus, when you think, you may observe a piece of bread, see one part of it as moldy, remember that eating mold previously made you ill, and therefore cut off the moldy part and eat the rest
of it. When you inappropriately emote, however, you will tend to observe the same piece of bread and remember so violently or prejudicially your previous experience with the moldy part that you may feel nauseated, throw away the whole piece of bread, and go hungry.

When you emote, in this instance, you do as much thinking as when you merely think about the bread. But you do a different kind of thinking—thinking so prejudiced about an unpleasant prior experience that you do it in a biased, overgeneralized, and ineffective way. Because you feel relatively calm when you “think,” you use the maximum information available to you—the information that moldy bread brings unpleasant and nonmoldy bread good results. Because you feel excited when you “emote,” you tend to use only part of the information available—that moldy bread has unpleasant qualities.

Thinking does not mean unemotional; nor does emotional mean unthinking. When you think, you usually find yourself less strongly biased by previous experience than when you feel “emotional.” You therefore tend to employ more of the available information. You then act more flexibly about making decisions.

Question: Hadn’t you better watch your step? After first making a four-way division of human behavior into the acts of perceiving, moving, thinking, and feeling, you now talk about a “thinking” and an “emotional” individual as if you had never made your previous distinctions.

Answer: Right! No exclusively thinking or emotional persons exist, since everyone simultaneously perceives, moves, thinks, and feels. However, to use our previous terms, some people perceive, move, think, and feel; while others perceive, move, think, and feel. The latter do a kind of thinking different from the former, and hence predominantly feel. While the others, with their calmer and less prejudiced type of cognition, predominantly think. All people, however, think and emote.

More important: We all feel, but many of us have inappropriate feelings much of the time, while others have largely appropriate feelings. For no matter how honestly and authentically you experience intense feelings, they don’t prove holy; and the encounter movement that has achieved such popularity has often misled people in this respect.

You do not merely feel; nor do you just (for no reason) feel. You feel, rather, because you evaluate things as good or bad, favorable or disadvantageous to your chosen goals. And your feelings motivate—move—you to survive and feel happy (or unhappy) while surviving.

You feel, for example, good about living and bad about dying. So you avoid, because of these feelings, swimming too far out to sea, driving your car at ninety-five miles an hour, jumping
off cliffs, and consuming poisonous foods. If you didn’t have these feelings, how long would you survive?

You also feel, now that you have chosen to live, that you prefer different kinds of pleasures; that you desire productivity rather than idleness; that you choose efficiency instead of inefficiency; that you like creativity; that you enjoy absorption in long-range pursuits (such as building a business or writing a novel); and that you desire intimate relations with others. Notice that all the words in italics involve feelings and that without them, you would not experience pleasure, joy, efficiency, creativity, and love. Your feelings not only help to keep you alive; they also aid you to survive happily.

Feelings, then, have valuable goals or purposes—usually your survival and happiness. When they help you achieve these goals, we call them appropriate feelings. When they serve to block your basic goals, we call them inappropriate. RET shows you how to distinguish clearly between appropriate emotion, such as your feeling real sorrow or annoyance when you don’t get what you want, and inappropriate or self-defeating emotions, such as your feeling depressed, self-downing, or enraged under the same conditions.

By the same token, RET helps you discriminate between rational and irrational thinking. It holds that rational thinking normally leads to appropriate and irrational thinking to inappropriate emoting. What do we label as rational thinking? That kind of thinking that assists you (1) to survive and (2) to achieve the goals or values you select to make your survival pleasurable, enjoyable, or worthwhile.

As Dr. Maxie Maultsby states, in his introduction to the pamphlet giving information on Associated Rational Thinkers (ART), a self-help group of individuals who want to learn and to teach their fellows the main principles of RET (which also stands for rational-emotive thinking):

*Rational thinking has the following four characteristics: (1) It [bases itself] primarily on objective fact as opposed to subjective opinion. (2) If acted upon, it most likely will result in the preservation of your life and limb rather than your premature death or injury. (3) If acted upon, it produces your personally defined life’s goals most quickly. (4) If acted upon, it prevents undesirable personal and/or environmental conflict.*

Maultsby also notes that rational thinking (5) minimizes your inner conflicts and turmoil.

Perhaps it will make things a bit clearer if we note that much of what we call emotion mainly seems to include (1) a certain kind of forceful thinking—a kind strongly slanted or biased by previous perceptions or experiences; (2) intense bodily responses, such as
feelings of pleasure or nausea; and (3) tendencies toward positive
or negative action in regard to the events that seem to cause the
strong thinking and its emotional concomitants.

In other words: "Emotion" accompanies a kind of powerful,
vigorous, or prejudiced thought; while "thinking" often involves a
relatively calm, unbiased, reflective kind of discrimination. Thus,
if we compare one apple with another, we may thoughtfully con-
clude that it has more firmness, fewer blemishes, and better color
and therefore will more likely please. But if we have had very
pleasant prior experiences with blemished apples (if we, for in-
stance, successfully bobbed for one at a Halloween party and, as a
prize, kissed an attractive member of the other sex); or if we have
had unpleasant prior experiences with unblemished apples (if we ate
too many and felt ill), we may excitedly, rashly, and prejudicially—
meaning, emotionally—conclude that the blemished apple has
advantages and may start eating it.

It would appear, then, that thinking and emoting closely in-
terrelate and at times differ mainly in that thinking involves a
more tranquil, less activity-directed mode of discrimination; while
emoting comprises a less tranquil, more somatically involved, and
more activity-directed mode of behavior.

Question: Do you really contend that all emotion directly
follows thought and can under no condition exist without
thinking?

Answer: No, we do not believe or say that. Emotion may
briefly exist without thought. An individual, for instance, steps on
your toe and you spontaneously, immediately get angry. Or you
hear a piece of music and you instantly begin to feel warm and
excited. Or you learn that a close friend died and you begin to feel
sad. Under these conditions, you may feel emotional without
doing any associated thinking.

Perhaps, however, even in these cases you do, with split-
second rapidity, start thinking to yourself: "This person who
stepped on my toe acts like a blackguard!" or "This music sounds
wonderful!" or "Oh, how awful that my friend died!" Perhaps
only after you have had these rapid-fire and "unconscious"
thoughts you then begin to feel emotional.

In any event, assuming that you don't, at the very beginning,
have any conscious or unconscious thought accompanying your
emotion, you virtually never sustain an emotional outburst with-
out bolstering it by ideas. For unless you keep telling yourself
something on the order of "That blackguard who stepped on my
toe shouldn't have done that!" or "How could he do a horrible
thing like that to me!" the pain of having your toe stepped on will
soon die and your emotional reaction will die with the pain.

Of course, you may keep getting your toe stepped on and the
continuing pain may help sustain your anger. But assuming that
your pain stops, you sustain your emotional response by some kind of thinking. Otherwise, by what magical process could it endure?

Similarly with pleasant feelings. By continuing to listen to certain music and having your sensations thereby prolonged, your feelings of warmth and excitement may get sustained. But even then you will have difficulty perpetuating your feelings unless you keep telling yourself something like: “I find this music great!”; “Oh, how I love those harmonies!”; “What a wonderful composer!”; and so on.

In the case of the death of one of your close friends or relatives, you will find it easy to make yourself depressed, since you have lost a relationship with someone truly dear to you. But even in this instance you will find it difficult to sustain your emotion of depression unless you keep reminding yourself: “Oh, how terrible that he has died!” or “How could she have died so young?” or something of that sort.

Even then, when thinking does not immediately precede or accompany feeling, sustained emotion normally requires repeated evaluative thought. We say “normally” because emotional circuits, once they have begun to reverberate to some physical or psychological stimulus, can also keep reverberating under their own power.

Drugs or electrical impulses can also keep acting directly on emotion-carrying nervous circuits (such as the cells of the hypothalamus and autonomic nervous system) and thereby keep you emotionally excited once arousal has started. Usually, however, continued direct stimulation of the emotion-producing centers does not occur. You make it occur by restimulating yourself with exciting ideas.

**Question:** Granting that thinking processes usually precede, follow, and sustain human feeling, must these thinking processes literally consist of words, phrases, and sentences that people “say to themselves”? Does all thinking consist of self-verbalizations?

**Answer:** Perhaps not. We certainly do not want to take an absolutist position. However, practically all of us, by the time we reach adulthood, seem to do most of our important thinking, and consequently our emoting, in terms of self-talk or internalized sentences.

Humans, as uniquely language-creating animals, begin to learn from early childhood to formulate thoughts, perceptions, and feelings in words, phrases, and sentences. They usually find this easier than to think in pictures, sounds, touch units, or other possible methods.

To illustrate this human propensity, let us take the example of a man who gets interviewed for a job (at point A, his Activating Experience). Before the interview, he will often start talking to himself (at point B, his Belief System) along the following lines:
How You Create Your Feelings

"I wonder if I'll get this job. . . . I wish I didn't have to face the interview, because I don't enjoy it and they may reject me. . . . But if I don't face the interview, I certainly won't get the job. . . . Besides, what difference does it make if they do reject me? I really have nothing to lose thereby. . . . While if I don't try for the job, I may have a lot to lose. . . . I'd better, then, take the interview, get it over with, and see whether I get accepted."

By telling himself these kinds of sentences, this man thinks. For all practical purposes, his sentences constitute his thinking. And we may call his thoughts rational Beliefs (rB's) because they help him to get what he values or wants—the job which he seeks. He therefore feels appropriate emotional Consequences (at point C)—determination to get the job; positive action to go for the interview; and feelings of disappointment and annoyance if he gets rejected.

If, however, this same individual creates for himself inappropriate emotional Consequences (C), he does so by telling himself different sentences that include irrational Beliefs (iB's):

"Suppose I go for this interview, make a fool of myself, and don't get the job. . . . That would make life awful! . . . Or suppose I go for the interview, get the job and then prove incompetent. . . . How horrible! I would rate as a worm!"

By telling himself these kinds of sentences, and including the irrational negative evaluation "That would make life awful!" or "How horrible! I would rate as a worm!" this man changes his rational thinking into irrational evaluation of his job-seeking situation. We can see, then, that for all practical purposes, his evaluative internalized sentences create his emotional reactions. He feels in his gut, in his body; but he largely creates his feelings in his head.

It would appear, then, that positive human emotions, such as feelings of love or elation, often accompany or result from positive internalized sentences, such as "I find this good!" and that appropriate negative human emotions (like feelings of displeasure and disappointment) accompany or result from rational sentences, such as "I find this frustrating and bad," and that inappropriate negative emotions (like depression and anger) result from irrational sentences, such as "I find this awful! It makes me a worm!"

Without employing—on some conscious or unconscious level—such strong sentences as these, we would simply not feel much emotions.

**Question:** If what you say holds true, why do so few people, including few members of the psychological profession, clearly see that thinking and emoting go together and that they largely stem from internalized sentences? Pure ignorance on their part?

**Answer:** In part, yes. Many people, including psychologists and psychiatrists, just don't bother to look very closely at so-called
emotions and therefore remain ignorant of their ideological basis. Others look closely enough, but only in the light of some pre-conceived dogma, such as classical psychoanalysis. Some rigid Freudians will no more consider the possibility that you can understand and change your emotion by observing and changing the sentences that create it than will some religious fundamentalists consider anything other than their rigid interpretation of the Bible.

We unreligiously contend: You can change your thinking and emotions associated with this thinking by observing and changing your strong beliefs that underlie them. We hold, more specifically, that you needlessly create inappropriate emotions—such as depression, anxiety, rage, and guilt—and that you can largely eradicate such sustained feelings if you will learn to think straight and to follow up your straight thinking with effective action.

**Question:** Can you eliminate all negative emotions by controlling your thinking?

**Answer:** Hardly. Many emotional outbursts, such as fits of grief or fear, almost spontaneously follow pronounced frustration or loss. Thus, if your beloved parent or child dies, you immediately tend to feel great sorrow or grief.

These kinds of emotions, based on distinct threats to your satisfactions, tend to have biological roots and probably have their source in primitive pleasure-pain processes. We could hardly survive without such negative feelings.

Certain negative emotions seem especially to aid survival. Thus, if you did not feel displeased, sorry, regretful, annoyed, irritated, frustrated, or disappointed when you suffered hunger, injury, or defeat, would you feel motivated to keep out of harm’s way and to continue your existence? Or would you favorably compete with others who did feel very displeased when they didn’t get their way?

Many emotions, moreover, add appreciably to human health and happiness. Your joy at hearing a beautiful piece of music, watching a lovely sunset, or successfully finishing a difficult task does not exactly preserve your life. But an existence bereft of feelings like these would indeed seem drab and nonrewarding.

Anyone, therefore, who attempts to control human emotions out of existence tackles a goal of dubious value. Succeeding at such a task helps dehumanize men and woman and makes their lives meaningless.

The ancient philosophers who wanted humans to achieve a state of pure “soul” or pure intellect, devoid of all “crass” emotions, actually asked us to behave as super-robots. If we achieved this “superior” state, we could, like some of our modern electronic computers, effectively solve certain problems but would not feel any pleasure or satisfaction. Who would want such a super-“human” existence?
Question: Then ridding the world of emotion, or substituting intellect for feeling, definitely does not send you? Correct?

Answer: Quite correct. If anything, we mainly want to help many inhibited and apathetic individuals to achieve more honest-to-goodness feeling, higher pitches of emotion. We definitely favor highly emotional experiencing. We merely oppose unduly negative, self-defeating, highly exaggerated emotionalizing that tends to sabotage the goals of survival and joyfulness.

We also favor your honestly, openly, and nonjudgmentally getting in touch with your feelings—as long as you forgo perfectionism. For what you really or truly feel you often cannot precisely determine. You make yourself angry, for example, at a friend who has let you down. Then you make yourself feel guilty because you hate him. Then you deliberately remember, again, the wrongs he has done you and thoroughly incense yourself at him, thereby covering up or driving away your guilt. What do you really feel in this case: anger? guilt? defensive hatred? What?

Who can, with absolute precision, say? Yes, you act, as a human, highly suggestibly. Yes, you can easily escalate or cover up your own feelings. Yes, your moods show susceptibility to alcohol, drugs, food, others' words and moods, and a host of other influences. These facts tend to prove that you can feel, from moment to moment, almost any way you choose to feel, and that all your feelings (just because you honestly feel them) have reality and authenticity. But none of them emerges as super-real or absolutely "true."

Anyway, you’d better recognize, as honestly and as accurately as you can, your basic feelings. Do you, at a given time, feel loving, hating, or indifferent? angry or determined? concerned, anxious, or unconcerned? How can you tell? Mainly by accepting yourself fully with whatever feelings you do have; by distinguishing clearly the "goodness" or "badness" of the feeling from the "goodness" or "badness" of you.

RET notably can help you get in touch with your feelings, and acknowledge their intensity, by helping you stop rating yourself for having (or not having) them. Using a rational philosophy, you first can choose to accept yourself with your feelings—even the crummy ones of depression and hatred. You can actually, then, show interest in and curiosity about your feelings. You can say to yourself: "How fascinating I find it" (instead of "How awful!") "that a basically intelligent person like me keeps acting so damned foolishly and negatively!" You can see that you choose to create your self-downing feelings, and that you can choose to change them if you really want to work at doing so.

You can also discriminate your appropriate (self-fulfilling) from your inappropriate (self-damning) feelings. You can see the difference between your healthfully feeling displeased with your
acts and your unhealthfully feeling horrified about them. You can distinguish between your feeling disappointed with others' behavior and asserting your disappointment, and your feeling angry at their behavior and your commanding that they change it.

Rational-emotive thinking, in other words, helps you to more and openly observe your feelings, acknowledge that they, accept yourself with their existence, determine their appropriateness, and eventually choose to feel what you want to feel what will help you get more of what you want out of life. Its highly rational methods, paradoxically enough, can put you more in touch with your feelings and help you react more emotionally than you ever could previously allow yourself.
Many psychotherapy clients make difficult customers, but this one abused the privilege. No matter how often I (A.E.) tried to show her that she had control over her own destiny, if only she believed that she had, she kept parrying my arguments with all kinds of excuses and evasions.

“I know you’ve shown many other clients how to handle their feelings,” she said, “but I just can’t seem to do it. Maybe I work differently. Maybe they’ve got something that I lack.”

“Yes, maybe they have got something that you haven’t,” I agreed. “Recently acquired corks to plug the holes in their heads. And I’ve shown them where to get the corks. Now, how come I have so much trouble showing you?”

“Yes, how come you haven’t shown me? God knows, I’ve tried to see what you keep telling me.”

“You mean God knows you keep thinking you really try to see. But maybe the trouble lies there—you’ve convinced yourself that you keep trying to see how you bother yourself with the nonsense you keep drumming into yourself all the time. And having convinced yourself that you keep trying, you find no reason for actually trying. So you quickly give up and don’t really try to see anything. Now, if I could only get you to work at observing and changing your own self-defeating internal sentences, your enormous feelings of anger against your mother and your brother would go away with surprising speed.”

“But how can I work at a thing like that? I find it so indefinite.”

“It only seems indefinite. Because you make little actual
Effort to grasp it: to see your own beliefs and to examine the premises behind them. Actually, it works like playing the piano or playing tennis—which you once told me you do very well."

"Oh, but I find that much different. Playing tennis involves something physical. Not at all like thinking or getting angry or anything like that."

"Ah, now I think I've got you!" I exclaimed.

"What do you mean?" she asked. I found it almost laughable (had it not seemed so tragic) how fearful she felt about the thought that I might have her, and that she might have to surrender her neurosis.

"You say that playing tennis involves something physical. And on the surface, of course, it does. You make muscle movements with your eyes and your arms and your hands, and somehow the ball keeps going over the net. And, looking at your muscles moving and the ball flying, you think of the whole process as physical, almost mechanical."

"Do I view it wrongly?"

"You do! Suppose your opponent hits the ball to you. You try to hit it back over the net, preferably in a place where he or she won't easily reach and return it. So you run after the ball (using your legs), reach out for it (using your arms), swing at it (using your arms and wrist). But what makes you run this way or that way, stretch out or pull back your arms, turn your wrist to the left or right?"

"What makes me—? Well, I guess my eyes do. I see the ball over here or over there. I see where I want to place it, and I move accordingly."

"Fine. But do you see by magic? And do you somehow magically get your sight to direct your legs this way, your arms that way, your wrist still another way?"

"No, not by any magic. It results from—." My client stopped, troubled.

"Could you," I asked, "could you possibly do it by thinking? Could you see, as you say, your opponent's ball going over here or over there, and think it best to return it on this or that corner of the court, and you think, again, that you can reach the ball by stretching out your arm a little more in this direction, and your wrist in this other direction, and so on and so forth?"

"You mean, I don't act as mechanically and physically in my actions as I think I do; but I really direct these actions by my thinking? You mean I continually tell myself, while playing the game, to do this and that, and to stretch my arm out here or turn my wrist over this way? Do you mean that?"

"Well, doesn't that explain what really transpires while you play this so-called physical game of tennis? Don't you, during every single minute of the play, continually direct your arm to do
this and your wrist to do that? And don’t you accomplish this
directing by real, hard, concerted thinking?”

“Come to think of it—and I must admit I never have thought
of it that way before—I guess I really do. I never noticed! The
whole thing—why, the whole thing seems really mental. Amazing!”

“Yes, amazing! Even this highly ‘physical’ game really works
mentally. And you keep working at this game—and not only work-
ing by running, stretching, and turning your wrist, but working at
thinking about what to do during the game. And this latter work,
the work of thinking, really improves your tennis. Your main
practice, in fact, in playing tennis consists of thinking practice.
Right?”

“When you put it that way, I guess so. Funny! And I thought
I only played physically. I guess I see now what you mean by
working at changing my beliefs and changing my emotions. Just as
in tennis, I work at changing my stance and my stroke and other
things. And, as you say, I really work at thinking, and not just at
mechanical changes.”

“Exactly. Now if I can get you to apply the same method
you use at tennis to changing the beliefs you use to create your
disordered emotions, your game of life will begin to improve
almost as quickly and as well as your game of tennis.”

After this breakthrough, I had less difficulty inducing this
previously stubborn client to work at changing her beliefs and
emotions.

Back, now, to our main theme. Accepting human emotions as
desirable, the important question remains: Do you have to endure
inappropriate emotions, such as sustained anxiety or hostility?

Largely, no. You may occasionally feel appropriate sustained
negative emotions: as, for example, when you suffer continuous
discomfort or pain and you keep feeling sorry, regretful, or
annoyed about this for a long period of time. Under such con-
ditions, you would certainly not appropriately feel glad or
indifferent.

Most sustained negative feelings, however illegitimately,
follow imagined or self-escalated discomfort or pain. Your child
dies, for instance, and for many weeks or months you appropri-
ately sorrow about her death. But as these weeks and months go
by, and as they turn into long years, you keep mulling over the
unfortunateness of the child’s death and you (more illegitimately)
keep awfulizing about it. “How terrible,” you keep telling your-
self, “that my child died! No justice exists in the world, consid-
ering that an innocent youngster such as she has expired! How
awful! She just shouldn’t have died! I can’t stand the thought of
her no longer living!”

Naturally, in these circumstances, you never allow yourself to
forget about the child’s death. In fact, you keep reminding
yourself incessantly that the child died, that more than misfortune has ensued, and that the world must not treat you as cruelly as it does. Not only, then, will you feel continually sad; but you will also make yourself depressed. This kind of sustained negative emotion you needlessly fabricate. It results from your own false and stupid beliefs about what should occur. You may therefore eliminate it by straighter thinking.

How do we reach this conclusion? Simply by extending some of the concepts of thinking and emoting which we have presented. For if sustained negative emotion results from your own thinking, have a choice as to what you can think and how you can think. That remains one of the main advantages of your human-ity: you can choose, usually, to think one thing or another; and you make your goal living and enjoying, one kind of thinking aid this goal while another kind of thinking (and emoting) will sabotage it. Naturally, therefore, you’d better pick the first rather than the second kind of thinking.

You can, of course, choose to change, push aside, sweep under the rug, or repress practically all negative thinking. But would you then act wisely or rationally? You can choose to ignore the fact, for example, that an unnecessarily large amount of unemployment, pollution, or overpopulation exists in your community; and through such avoidance, you will choose not to feel sad, sorry, or frustrated by these unfortunate events (as long as they do not too directly affect you). But if you refuse to do the kind of negative thinking that would keep you feeling sad about truly unfortunate conditions, will you, especially in the long run, truly aid the survival and happiness of yourself and your loved ones, or of others in your community? We doubt it.

Many sustained negative thoughts and feelings, therefore, help you preserve and enjoy yourself. Others do not. Learn to discriminate the former from the latter, and to act accordingly.

Anyway, if sustained feelings usually result from your conscious or unconscious thinking (especially from your internalized sentences), you rarely feel glad or sad because of the things that occur from the outside. Rather, you make yourself happy or miserable by your perceptions, attitudes, or self-verbalizations about these outside events.

This principle, which we have recently rediscovered from the many therapy sessions with hundreds of clients, originally appeared in the writings of several ancient Greek and Roman philosophers, notably the famous Stoic Epictetus, who in the first century A.D. wrote in the Enchiridion: “Men feel disturbed not by things, but by the views which they take of them.” William Shakespeare, many centuries later, rephrased this thought in Hamlet: “There [exists] nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.”
As a case in point, let us turn for a moment to Geraldine, a highly intelligent and efficient thirty-three-year-old female client who came to see me (R.A.H.) about six months after she obtained a divorce. Although she had felt decidedly unhappy in her marriage to an irresponsible and dependent husband, she had gotten no happier since her divorce. Her husband had drunk to excess, run around with other women, and lost many jobs. But when she came to see me, she wondered if she had made a mistake in divorcing him. I said:

“Why do you think you made a mistake by divorcing your husband?”

“Because I consider divorce wrong,” she replied. “I think when people get married, they should stay married.”

“Yet you do not belong to a religious group that takes that position. You do not believe that heaven somehow makes and seals marriages, do you?”

“No, I don’t even believe in a heaven. I just feel wrong about getting divorced and I blame myself for having gotten one. I have felt even more miserable since I got it than I felt when living with my husband.”

“But look,” I asked, “where do you think your feelings about the wrongness of divorce originated? Do you think you had them at birth? Do you think that humans have built-in feelings, like built-in taste buds, that tell them how to distinguish right from wrong? Your buds tell you what tastes salty, sweet, sour, or bitter. Do your feelings tell you what proves right or wrong?”

The young divorcée laughed. “You make it sound pretty silly. No, I don’t suppose I have inborn feelings about right or wrong. I had to learn to feel as I do.”

Seeing a good opening, I rushed in where less directive and less rational therapists often fear to tread. “Exactly,” I said. “You had to learn to feel as you do. Like all humans, you started life with tendencies to learn, including tendencies to learn strong prejudices—such as those about divorce. And what you learned you can unlearn or modify. So even though you don’t hold fundamentalist faith in the immorality of divorce, you could have easily picked up this idea—probably from your parents, schoolteachers, stories, or movies. And the idea that you picked up, simply stated, says:

“‘Only bad people get divorces. I got a divorce. So I must qualify as a bad person. Yes, I must acknowledge my real rotten-ness! Oh, what a no-good, awful, terrible person!’”

“Sounds dreadfully familiar,” she said with a rather bitter laugh.

“It certainly does,” I resumed. “Some such sentences as these probably started going through your mind—otherwise you would not feel as disturbed as you do. Over and over again, you have
kept repeating this stuff. And then you have probably gone on to
say to yourself:

"Because I did this horrible thing of getting a divorce, I
deserve damnation and punishment for my dreadful act. I deserve
to feel even more miserable and unhappy than when I lived with
that lousy husband of mine!"

She ruefully smiled, "Right again!"

"So of course," I continued, "you have felt unhappy. Any-
one who spends a good portion of her waking hours thinking of
herself as a terrible person and how much she deserves misery
because of her rottenness (notice, if you will, the circular thinking
involved in all this)—any such person will almost certainly feel
miserable. If I, for example, started telling myself right this minute
that I had no value because I never learned to play the violin, to
ice-skate, or to win at tiddly-winks—if I kept telling myself this
kind of bosh, I could quickly make myself feel depressed.

"Then I could also tell myself, in this kind of sequence, how
much I deserved to feel unhappy because, after all, I had my
chance to learn to play the violin or championship tiddly-winks,
and I had messed up these chances. And what a real worthless
skunk this made me! Oh, my God, what a real skunk!"

My client, by this time, seemed highly amused, as I satiri-
cally kept emphasizing my doom. "I make it sound silly," I said.
"But with a purpose—to show you that you act just as foolishly
when you start giving yourself the business about your divorce."

"I begin to understand what you mean," she said. "I do say
this kind of thing to myself. But how can I stop? Don't you see
quite a difference between divorce, on the one hand, and violin-
playing or tiddly-winks, on the other hand?"

"Granted. But has your getting a divorce really made you any
more horrible, terrible, or worthless than my not learning to play
the fiddle?"

"Well, you'll have to admit that I made a serious mistake
when I married such an irresponsible person as my husband. And
maybe if I had behaved more maturely and wisely myself, I could
have helped him to grow up."

"OK, agreed. You did make a mistake to marry him in the
first place. And, quite probably, you did so because you behaved
immaturely at the time of your marriage. All right, so you made a
mistake, a neurotic mistake. But does this mean that you deserve
punishment the rest of your life by having to live forever with
your mistake?"

"No, I guess not. But how about a wife's responsibility to her
husband? Don't you think that I should have stayed with him and
tried to help him get over his severe problems?"

"A very lovely, and sometimes even practical, thought. But
didn't you tell me that you tried to help him and he refused even
Thinking Yourself Out of Emotional Disturbances

to acknowledge that he had disturbances? And didn’t you say that
he strongly opposed your going for any kind of therapy during
your marriage, let alone his going for help, too?”

“Yes, he did. The mere mention of the word psychologist or
marriage counselor sent him into a fit of temper. He’d never think
of going or even letting me go for help.”

“The main thing you could have done, then, would have in-
volved playing psychotherapist to him, and in your state, you’d
hardly have proved effective at that. Why beat yourself down?
You made a mistake in marrying. You did your best to do some-
ting to rectify it after marriage. You got blocked, mainly by your
husband, but partly by your own feelings of severe upset, on
both counts. So you finally got out of the marriage, as almost any
reasonably sane person would have done. Now what crime have
you committed? Why do you insist on blaming yourself? You
think, erroneously, your unhappy situation makes you miserable.
But does the situation—or what you keep telling yourself about this
situation?”

“I begin to see your point. Although my marital situation
never has felt good, you seem to say that I don’t have to give
myself such a hard time about it. Quite a point of view you have
there!”

“Yes, I like it myself—and often use it in my own life. But
now if we can only help you to make it your point of view, not
because I hold it but because you figure out that it really will
work better for you, not even a poor marriage and an as yet
difficult divorce situation will faze you. In fact, if I can really help
you to adopt this viewpoint, I can’t imagine anything that will
ever bother you too much.”

“You really mean that, don’t you?”

“Mean it, hell—I believe it!”

And so, to some extent, did this young divorcée, after
another few months of rational-emotive therapy. Whereas she pre-
viously kept telling herself how far from ideally and how horribly
she behaved for not achieving this ideal, she now began to substi-
tute problem-solving, internalized sentences for her old self-
beatings. In one of her last conferences with me, she said: “You
know, I looked into the mirror yesterday morning and said to
myself, ‘Geraldine, you behave like a happy, fairly bright, increas-
ingly mature, growingly efficient kid. I keep getting mighty fond
of you.’ And then I laughed with real joy.”

“Fine,” I said. “But don’t lead yourself up the path of rating
you, Geraldine, highly because you act so much better. For then
you will have to rate yourself lowly, once again, if and when you
act worse. Try to stick to: ‘I like behaving so much better’ rather
than ‘I like me for doing this good behavior!’”

“Yes, I see what you mean,” she replied. “I feel glad you
warned me about that. Rating myself I unfortunately do most easily. But I'll fight it!"

This client discovered that her feelings did not derive from her unsuccessful marriage or her divorce but from her evaluations of herself in regard to these "failures." When she changed the kinds of thoughts (or internalized sentences) she fed herself, her emotions changed from depression and despair to sorrow and regret—and these appropriate negative feelings helped motivate her to change the conditions of her life. Not all clients, like Geraldine, see so quickly that they cause their own depressed feelings about divorce and decide to accept themselves. Sometimes they may require months or years of therapy before they come to this decision. But persistence, on their and their therapist's part, certainly helps!

If humans theoretically can control their negative thoughts and feelings, but in actual practice they often refrain from doing so and keep experiencing unnecessary misery, the question arises: Why? What blocks them from thinking effectively and emoting appropriately?

The main barriers to effective thinking and emoting include:

1. Some people have too much stupidity to think clearly.
2. They possess sufficient intelligence to think straight, but do not know how to do so. Or (3) they have enough intelligence and education to think clearly but act too disturbed or emotically to put their intelligence or knowledge to good use. As we have noted in two of our previous books, How to Live with a Neurotic and Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy: 36 Systems, neurosis essentially consists of stupid behavior by nonstupid people.

Otherwise stated: People afflicted with neurotic behavior have potential capabilities but do not realize how self-defeatingly they act. Or they understand how they harm themselves but, for some irrational reasons, persist in self-sabotaging behavior. Since we assume that such people have potential capabilities, rather than have inborn stupidity, we also assume that their emotional problems arise because either they do not know how to, or know how but do not try to think more clearly and behave less self-defeatingly.

If so, what can they do? In the next chapter we shall try to show how to recognize and attack neurotic behavior.