

Emotional Disturbance and Its Treatment in a Nutshell

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I have long been convinced that people become and remain "emotionally disturbed" largely because they do not clearly define what their "disturbance" is and what they can do to minimize it. I have done my best to put the theories of Rational-Emotive Therapy¹ or Rational Behavior Training into simple English, so that they can be easily applied and tested (Ellis, 1962 1971, 1972, 1973; Ellis and Harper, 1973). But I keep looking for better methods of explaining to people what they do to disturb themselves and how to change so that they not only become un-upset but also much less upsettable. My latest and simplest explanations may be summarized this way:

First of all, practically all "emotional disturbance" stems from *demanding* or *whining* instead of from *wanting* or *desiring*. People who feel anxious, depressed, or hostile don't merely *wish* or *prefer* something, but also *command, dictate, insist* that they achieve this thing. Typically, they *demand* that they be outstandingly achieving and/or greatly approved by others; and they thereby *make themselves* disturbed when they fail to achieve these

demands. Or they *insist* that others treat them considerately or fairly; and they *create* feelings of severe anger or hostility when others do not. Or they *dictate* that life and the world be easy, enjoyable, and unfrustrating; and they *manufacture* overrebelliousness, self-pity, and inertia when conditions are difficult.

Just about every time you feel disturbed or upset—instead of merely displeased, frustrated, or disappointed—you are stoutly convincing yourself that something is *awful* rather than *inconvenient* or *disadvantageous*. You frequently believe (1) "*It is awful* that I am imperfect and am disapproved!" (2) "*It is terrible* that you are treating me less than ideally!" or (3) "*It is horrible* that the world is so onerous and ungratifying!"

When you *awfulize* or *catastrophize* about reality, you are setting up an unverifiable, magical, unempirical hypothesis. For to hold that anything is awful, terrible, or horrible—rather than unfortunate, unpleasant, or painful—is to hold (1) It is *all* bad and can have *no* good in it; (2) it is more than

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1 The editor is practising this approach and feels very convinced of its utility.

bad or disadvantageous; (3) because it is unpleasant, it *should not, must not* exist; (4) you cannot *stand* its existence; (5) you *have* to be utterly miserable or destroyed about it; and (6) you are a *worthless person* if you cannot immediately change yourself, others, and the universe so that this *awful* thing no longer exists. All these hypotheses are definitional and cannot be proven or disproven. They essentially represent demons which you invent and then run your life by. And once you devoutly believe in them, they will create anxiety, guilt, feelings of worthlessness, depression, and hostility.

The simple and effective solution to the problem of human disturbance? Obviously: exorcise the demons. Give up the demandingness and whining and return to healthy desiring and preferring. Undefine the "awfulness" and "terribleness" of noxious stimuli and fully acknowledge that nothing in the whole universe is more than very inconvenient and disadvantageous, and that there is no reason why pains and displeasures *should not, must not* exist.

Humans, in other words, can eliminate their feelings of horror, hopelessness, and hostility (and retain their appropriate feelings of disappointment and annoyance) if they will truly join the human race, give up all—and I mean all—pretensions of being superhuman, of encountering gods or devils, or of living in a perfectly easy, immediately gratifying world. If they practice remaining rigorously in empirical reality, strongly desiring and actively working to improve that reality but not grandiosely *dictating* that it be otherwise than it indubitably is, they can reach a point

where they automatically rarely upset themselves and therefore rarely have to counteract their *awfulizing*.

Emotional disorder tends to stem from some form of two simple words: "It's awful!" or "How horrible!" or "It's terrible!" If you rigidly hold these ideas about anything, you will be basically upsettable and often disturbed. If you want to eliminate your disturbance, you can substitute two other simple words: "Tough luck!" "Too bad!" or "How unfortunate!" As long as you really think through and believe—and not merely parrot—the confirmable meaning behind these words (namely, that it is too bad that people and the world are imperfect but that's tough, that's the way it is and that's the way it may even continue to be), you will tend to be undisturbable—and then often more interested in working to change obnoxious reality. Does this seem too simple or too easy? Don't take my word for it. Try it and see!

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