



ABCDE Model

In 1957 American psychologist Albert Ellis created what he called the ABC Model as part of a therapy he called Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy, or REBT (Ellis, 1957). Ellis revised the ABC model in 1996 (Ellis, 1996) and again in 2001 (Ellis, 2001). REBT was a precursor to what is known as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and is still widely used as a tool in CBT treatment. While it is commonly referred to as the ABC model, it is also called the ABCDE model.

Ellis based some of his thinking on the Stoic philosophers, including Epictetus, who said: “People are not disturbed by things, but by the views they take of them.” Ellis believed that we create irrational beliefs based on our reaction to events. He created the ABCDE model to help others work through what he called their dysfunctional or irrational beliefs (since then, others have substituted the term *irrational* with *unresourceful* or *limiting*, as some people may view the term irrational as shaming or aggressive).

A is the **A**ctivating event, situation, memory, or thought.

B is the **B**elief that one forms about themselves, people, or the world.

C is the **C**onsequence of the belief in terms of feelings, emotions, reactions, and behaviors.

Ellis argued that there are rational beliefs and irrational beliefs. I’d prefer we use the terms resourceful beliefs and unresourceful beliefs. Recall from our work on beliefs, beliefs are a feeling of certainty. Beliefs can change based on our state of mind, and based on what we focus on. The belief of, “I can do this!” may be empowering and useful, or it could be delusional and harmful. It depends on the context. The belief of “I can fly” got Wilbur and Orville Wright to build a plane. That same belief of someone standing on the top of a building with no parachute could get them killed.

D is for **D**isputing the irrational belief

E is for the **E**ffective behavior or action you’d prefer to take, or the **E**ffect of holding a more resourceful belief.



Typically when we have an activating event, we go straight to the consequence. That is, we feel something immediately. Our sympathetic nervous system gets activated and we go into fight, flight, or freeze mode. That's because our emotional brain (limbic system) is a tiny bit faster than our cognitive brain. That is why, for example, we pull our hand away from a hot stove before we consciously process that it is hot. Or why we go down a pattern of reacting before we really think it through. Our beliefs, then, drive an unconscious reaction. But by looking at it in the full light of day, we can determine if that belief is really true. If not, we can dispute it and rewire our response (consequence) to the situational trigger (activator).

Here is an example.

Activating event – your partner picks up their phone while you are talking with them.

Consequence – you tense, you may huff, and shake your head. Your inner voice says, “I can’t believe (s)he is doing this AGAIN!!!”

Belief – I’m not important. Work is more important than me.....

Dispute – Do you really believe that work is more important than you? Does your partner *always* do this? Are there times they don’t do this? Could it be that it is a bad habit, and the real issue is a behavior shift versus a value statement?

Effective behavior – Instead of getting mad and believing you are unimportant, you can share your feelings: “Honey, I really like it when we can talk interrupted. We get so little time together and I really value it. Can we agree to put our phones away during dinner?”

For the next 7 days, keep a journal of activating events. Write down the activating event (A), then what the consequence (C) was for you. Then see what your belief (B) was. Don’t write down what you’d like it to be (remember, these are often unresourceful and potentially inaccurate beliefs), rather, write down what you are really feeling, even for a fleeting moment. Then come up with ways to dispute (D) the belief, and practice seeing, feeling, and hearing what your new effective (E) behavior could be. Remember, you have a pattern of going into an unresourceful state, so you need to give your brain a new pathway to take. The more you practice it, the more quickly you can adapt to a new more resourceful and empowering behavior.



Day 1

A:

B:

C:

D:

E:



Day 2

A:

B:

C:

D:

E:



Day 3

A:

B:

C:

D:

E:



Day 4

A:

B:

C:

D:

E:



Day 5

A:

B:

C:

D:

E:



Day 6

A:

B:

C:

D:

E:



Day 7

A:

B:

C:

D:

E:



References

- Ellis, A. (1957) Rational psychotherapy and individual psychology. *Journal of Industrial Psychology*, 13, 38-44.
- Ellis, A. (1996). Responses to criticisms of rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT) by Ray Digisuseppe, Frank Bond, Windy Dryden, Steve Weinrach, and Richard Wessler. *Journal of Rational-Emotive and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy*, 2, 97-121.
- Ellis, A. (2001). *Feeling better, getting better, staying better: Profound self-help therapy for your emotions*. Impact Publishers.