

# SHOWING PEOPLE THEY ARE NOT WORTHLESS INDIVIDUALS

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Perhaps the most common self-defeating belief of disturbed people is their conviction that they are worthless, inadequate individuals who essentially are undeserving of self-respect and happiness. This negative self-evaluation can be tackled in various ways — such as by giving them unconditional positive regard (Carl Rogers), directly approving them (Sandor Ferenczi), or otherwise giving them supportive therapy (Lewis Wolberg). I prefer, as I have indicated in my books *Reason and Emotion in Psychotherapy* and *How to Stubbornly Refuse to Make Yourself Miserable About Anything — Yes, Anything!*, an active- directive discussion of the clients' basic philosophy of life and teaching them that they can view themselves as okay *just because* they exist, and *whether or not* they are competent or loved. This is a central teaching of rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT).

As may well be imagined, I often have great difficulty in showing people that they are merely *defining* themselves as worthless. For even if I show them, as I often do, that they cannot possibly empirically prove that they are valueless, they still may ask, “But how can you show that I *do* have value? Isn't that concept an arbitrary definition, too?”

Yes, it is, I freely admit: For, philosophically speaking, *all* concepts of human worth are axiomatically given values and cannot be empirically proven so (except by the pragmatic criterion that if you *think* you're worthwhile — or worthless — and this belief “works” for you, then you presumably become what you think you are). It would be philosophically more elegant, I explain to people, if they would not evaluate their *self* at all but merely accept its existence while only evaluating their *performances*. Then they would better solve the problem of their “worth.”

Many people resist this idea of not evaluating themselves for a variety of reasons — particularly because they find it almost impossible to separate their selves from their performances and therefore insist that if their *deeds* are rotten *they* must be *rotten* people. I maintain that no matter how inefficient their *pro-ducts* are, they are still an ongoing *process*, and their process or being (as Robert Hartman and Alfred Korzybski have shown) simply cannot be measured the way their pro-ducts can be.

I have recently added a cogent argument for convincing people that they are much more

than their acts. Instead of only showing them that their *self* is not to be measured by the criterion used for assessing their performance, I also demonstrate how their (or anyone's) *good* creations are not a measure of their self.

"Did you ever realize," I ask a person, "that almost all emotional disturbance comes from inaccurate or unoperational definitions of our terms about ourselves and our deeds and that it could be minimized if we would force ourselves vigorously to define our self-descriptions?"

"How so?" she usually asks.

"Well," I reply, "let's take Leonardo da Vinci. We usually call him a *genius* or even a *universal genius*. But that's nonsense—he of course wasn't anything of the sort."

"He wasn't?"

"No. To call him—or Michelangelo, or Einstein, or anyone else—a *genius* is to indulge in slipshod thinking. Leonardo, admittedly, had *aspects of genius*. That is, *in certain respects* and for a *specific era of his- tory* he did remarkably well."

"But isn't that what a genius is — one who does unusually well in certain ways?"

"That's what we carelessly say. But, actually, using the noun *genius* clearly implies that a person to whom this title is given is *generally* an outstanding performer; and of course no one, including Leonardo, is. In fact, he did many silly, asinine things. He fought with several of his patrons and frequently depressed himself and made himself very angry. So he often behaved stupidly and uncreatively — which is hardly what a true genius should do. Isn't that right?"

"Well— uh— perhaps."

"Moreover, let's even consider his best work— his art. Was he really a thoroughgoing genius even in *that* respect? Were all, or even most, of his paintings great examples of color *and* composition *and* draughtsmanship *and* contrast *and* originality? Hardly! Again, if the truth is admitted and accurately described, we'd better admit that only *certain aspects* of Leonardo's art were masterful; his work *as a whole* was not."

"Are you saying, then, that there are *no* real geniuses?"

"I definitely am. Nor are there any heroes or heroines, any great people. These are fiction, myths which we fallible humans seem determined to believe in order to ignore the fact that we presently *are*, and probably will always be, highly inefficient, mistake-making animals. So if we want to be sensible, we'd better honestly admit that there *are* no geniuses or extraordinary *people*; there are merely individuals with exceptional deeds. And we'd better sensibly evaluate their acts rather than *deifying*— or, as the case may be, *devilifying*— their personhoods. People are always *human*, not gods or devils. Tough!— but that's the way it is."

So I now continue, demonstrating as best I can to people that they will never, except by

overgeneralized definition, be a hero or an angel — or a louse or a worm. Does this new tack always convince them that they are not the worthless, hopeless slob they usually think they are? Hell, no! But it has so far proved to be a useful tool in rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT).

## **DISCUSSION BY**

### **DR. BINGHAM DAI:**

1. This approach does not help a person to work through his original experiential bases for his sense of worthlessness;
2. It tends to encourage people to avoid responsibility for the guilt that may be involved;
3. It overemphasizes the therapist's intellectual prowess and may enhance a client's sense of inadequacy;
4. It fails to stimulate a client's own potentialities for health or to make use of his own ability to think through his problems; and
5. One has reason to doubt that an individual's sense of personal worth can really be enhanced by the sort of arguments presented here. Since this is claimed to be a report of effective psychotherapeutic techniques, perhaps the reader may want to see some evidence of the effectiveness which is entirely missing.

## **REPLY TO DR. DAI**

### **BY DR. ALBERT ELLIS:**

Dr. Dai's discussion of my paper is brief but highly pertinent. Let me see if I can briefly answer it.

1. No, my approach does not help people work through their original experiential bases for their sense of worthlessness; and in my estimation it is only an un-verified (and almost unverifiable) assumption that it is necessary or even desirable to do this. Whatever the *original* cause of their self-depreciation, the *present* cause is largely their belief that they are *still* slob because they are, and *should* and *must not* be, imperfect. I think that they were born with a predisposition to think this nonsense and then were raised to give into this predisposition. No matter! They *are* capable of giving it up — or else psychotherapy of any sort is useless. The belief that they can only change their ideas about their worth by understanding the *complete origin of these ideas* is only a theory, hardly a fact.
2. Teaching people that they are worthwhile just because they exist does not encourage them to avoid responsibility for any im-moral act they may have committed. On the contrary, by showing them that they are not bad *people*, even if some of their *acts* are wrong, encourages them to be responsible for their acts, to admit that they have been mistaken, and to focus on changing their behavior for the better in the future. Guilt or self-blame encourages repression and depression. Unconditional self-acceptance (USA) *even*

- when one is fallible encourages honest confession and greater responsibility in the future.
3. Clients who feel more inadequate because their therapist displays intellectual prowess do so precisely because they falsely believe that they are worthless if someone else, even their own therapist, excels them. The technique advocated in REBT teaches them that they are never no good, no matter how bright their therapist (or anyone else) is. It thereby helps appreciably to decrease their feelings of inadequacy.
  4. It is Dr. Dai's hypothesis that teaching people how to think straighter fails to stimulate their own potentialities for health or make use of their own ability to think through their problems. The entire history of education would tend to show otherwise. If Dr. Dai were correct, every client (and every high school and college student) should be left to muddle through on his or her own rather than be helped to acquire various kinds of helpful knowledge.
  5. Dr. Dai is quite right in asking for evidence of the effectiveness of my briefly stated technique. I can only say that I have now used it on about 20,000 clients; that about 20 percent seemed to be little affected by it and 80 percent seemed to be significantly helped. One young female patient was so greatly helped by a single session consisting almost entirely of this kind of material that she seemed to surrender her deep-seated feeling of worthlessness, got out of a severe state of depression, and began to function much better in her love life and her work.

Case histories, however, are not very good evidence for the efficacy of any kind of psychotherapy, because the "effectiveness" is mainly evaluated by the therapist, who is obviously biased in favor of her or his methods. Moreover, only "successful" cases are usually presented, while less successful ones are commonly omitted.

Psychotherapy research, however, studies groups of clients who have been treated with one method of therapy and another control group who were not treated or with whom therapists used another method. REBT, along with Aaron Beck's cognitive therapy (CT), Donald Meichenbaum's cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), Arnold Lazarus' multimodal therapy (MT), and several other similar kinds of treatment that follow some of the main principles and practices of REBT have been tested in over 2,000 studies of people with anxiety, depression, and other aspects of self-deprecation. The great majority of these studies have shown that REBT-oriented techniques have significantly helped people to feel less worthless and more self-accepting.

Try REBT and see for yourself! This brief article only describes a few of its methods. Others will be found in the books and tapes listed at the end of this pamphlet, most of which can be obtained from the Albert Ellis Institute in New York.

For starters, however, let me repeat in more detail two of the main REBT solutions that

you, as an individual, can use to make yourself feel worthwhile or that you, as a therapist, facilitator, or teacher can teach others to help them achieve unconditional self-acceptance (USN):

1. Decide to define yourself as a “good” or “worthwhile” person just because you exist, just because you are alive, just because you are human. For no other reason or condition! Work at — that is, think and act at — unconditionally accepting yourself *whether or not* you perform “adequately” or “well” and *whether or not* other people approve of you. Acknowledge that what you *do* (or don’t do) is often mistaken, foolish, or immoral, but still determinedly accept *you*, your *self*, with your errors and do your best to correct your past behavior.

2. Don’t give *any* kind of global, generalized rating to your *self*, your *essence*, or your *being*.

Only measure or evaluate what you think, you feel, or you do. Usually, evaluate as “good” or “healthy” those thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that help you and the members of the social group in which you choose to live and that are not self-defeating or antisocial; and rate as “bad” those that are self-defeating and socially disruptive. Again, work at changing your “bad” behaviors and continuing your “good” behaviors. But stubbornly refuse to globally rate or measure your *self* or *being* or *personhood* at all. Yes, at all!

Will USA solve all of your (or your clients’) emotional problems? Most likely not, because rational emotive behavior therapy sees you and other people as having three basic neurotic difficulties: (1) Damning or deprecating your self, your being, and thereby making yourself feel inadequate or worthless. (2) Damning or putting down other *people* for their “bad” behaviors and thus making yourself enraged, hostile, combative, or homicidal. (3) Damning or whining about conditions under which you live and thereby producing low frustration tolerance (LFT), depression, or self-pity.

If, as this article suggests, you work at achieving unconditional self-acceptance (USA), you will have an easier time also achieving un-conditional acceptance of others (but not of what they often do!). And you can achieve unconditional acceptance of poor external conditions that you do your best to change but are clearly not able to change. For anger at yourself sometimes comes first and is basic to rage at other people and at the world. Thus, if you demand that you *absolutely must* do better than others do at work, relationships, or sports, you will tend to strongly hate yourself when you don’t perform as well as you presumably must. But because damning yourself leads you to feel highly anxious and/or depressed, and because you may easily horrify yourself about having such feelings by insisting, “I *must not* be anxious! I’m no good for being depressed!” — you will then feel anxious *about* your anxiety, depressed *about* your depression, and will be *doubly* self-downing.

Sensing this, you may choose to think, instead, “Other people *must not* make me fail, and *they* are no good!” If so, you will make yourself enraged at these others. Or you may think, “The conditions under which I live are so lousy, and *must not* be. It’s *awful* that they are so bad! I *can’t* stand it!” You will then create low frustration tolerance (LFT).

So conditional self-acceptance and consequent feelings of worthlessness may encourage (1) damning yourself for your failures, (2) feelings of severe anxiety and/or depression, (3) downing yourself for having these disturbed feelings, (4) defensively damning others who “make” you fail, and (5) defensively damning conditions that are “responsible” for your failing. Quite a kettle of (rotten) fish!

Feelings of worthlessness are not worth it. You largely bring them on yourself, and you can choose — and help your clients choose — to replace them, when you behave “badly,” with healthy feelings of sorrow and regret. Then, as a “goodnik” rather than a “no-goodnik,” you are in a much better position to change what you can change. By unconditionally accepting yourself you increase your chances of being able to change harsh reality or, as Reinhold Niebuhr said, to have the serenity to *accept*, but not to *like*, bad conditions that you cannot change.

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*Albert Ellis, Ph.D. is President of the Albert Ellis Institute in New York City, and author of over 800 articles and over 60 books.*

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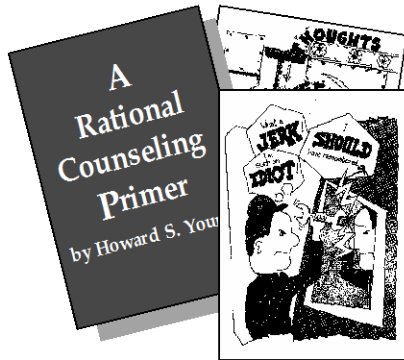
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### **AUDIOTAPE**

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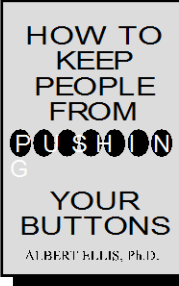
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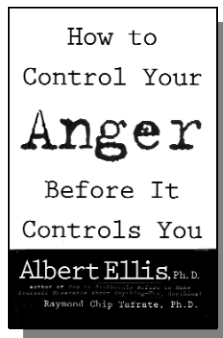
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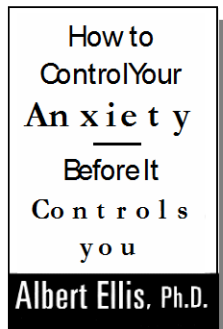
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