Most of the following material is from Clayton E. Tucker-Ladd’s *Psychological Self-Help*, at [http://mentalhelp.net/psyhelp](http://mentalhelp.net/psyhelp). I have made some changes to the text to help you connect it more easily to the course. His book offers many other practical life-skills, the proper application of which can enhance the quality of our lives. Two goals of having you read and reflect on the following material, and to have you complete the project on emotions are to help you see how critical thinking can be immediately applied to your own life, and to help you to take charge of your emotional/mental health, and enhance its quality. Critical thinking applies not only to academic papers, which you will not be writing beyond your formal education, but also to all of your daily irrational beliefs and sloppy thinking that contribute to your own unhappiness.

**CHALLENGING IRRATIONAL IDEAS**

Our thoughts influence our feelings. If you think people won't like you, you feel disappointed and withdraw socially. If you think nothing will work out well for you, you feel sad or passive and won't try. If you think you must have help to do something, you may feel inadequate and be dependent. If you think you are stupid and incompetent, you may feel worthless and be indecisive and self-critical. No doubt there are connections between thoughts and feelings and/or actions. Rational-Emotive therapy is built on the belief that how we emotionally respond at any moment depends on our interpretations--our views, our beliefs, our thoughts--of the situation. In other words, the things we think and say to ourselves, not what actually happens to us, cause our positive or negative emotions. Thus, as Albert Ellis (1987) would say, "Humans largely disturb themselves... your own unreasonable, irrational ideas make you severely anxious, depressed, self-hating, enraged, and self-pitying about virtually anything--yes, virtually anything." This is a very old idea.

As a man thinketh, so is he.

* -The Bible

Men are not worried by things, but by their ideas about things. When we meet difficulties, become anxious or troubled, let us not blame others, but rather ourselves, that is: our idea about things.

* -Epictetus, about 60 AD

It is very obvious that we are not influenced by "facts" but by our interpretation of the facts.

* -Alfred Adler

If the theory is true that irrational ideas cause most of your intense, long-lasting, unwanted emotional reactions, then there is a simple solution: **change your thinking**! Actually that may not be as easy as it sounds but that is exactly what Rational-Emotive therapy tries to do. It identifies the patient's unreasonable thoughts and immediately confronts or challenges these problem-producing ideas so that the patient will think differently--see things in a different way--and, thus, feel differently. Thus, this therapy involves **critical thinking**, **arguments**, **logic**, and education--essentially insisting that the person be rational and scientific. If you don't have a therapist, you can try to persuade yourself that certain thoughts are unreasonable.

What kind of ideas are irrational and make us upset or "sick"? Ellis and Harper (1975) described ten common irrational ideas, such as "everyone should love and approve of me," "I must be competent; it would be awful to fail," "when bad things happen, I am unavoidably very unhappy and should be," "it is terrible when things don't go the way I want," and so on (see step one below). There are hundreds of such ideas that transform, for some people, life's ordinary disappointments into terrible, awful catastrophes. Preferences that are quite reasonable are made in our minds into absolutely unreasonable shoulds, musts, and demands that are very upsetting. Molehills become mountains. We talk
ourselves into emotional traumas; yet, the upset person thinks the external events, not his/her thoughts, are upsetting him/her. Ellis called this mental process "awfulizing" or "catastrophizing." It is described as a factor in depression in chapter 6.

What is rational thinking? First, as Carl Rogers said, "the facts are friendly." We must face the truth; that's rational. Secondly, if we view reality as a determinist (see next method), we will tell ourselves that "whatever happens is lawful, not awful." Everything has a cause(s). The connections (called laws) between causes and effects are inevitable, the nature of things. So, when something happens that you don't like, don't get all bent out of shape, just accept that the event had its necessary and sufficient causes (and try to change it the next time). Thirdly, Ellis urges us to constantly use the scientific methods of objective observation and experimentation, i.e. the systematic manipulation of variables to see what happens. For example, if you think no one would accept a date with you, Ellis would give you an assignment to ask out five appropriate, interesting people. If your belief (that no one will go out with you) proved to be correct with those five people, then Ellis would direct you to start manipulating variables, e.g. how can your appearance or approach be improved, how can you pick more receptive "dates" to approach, and so on, and observing the outcome. In short, we accept what is happening and what has happened as lawful, as the natural outcome of immutable but complex laws, and not as terrible, awful events that we or someone should have prevented. And, while we can't change the past, we can learn to use these "laws of psychology" to help ourselves and others in the future. What we can't change in the future, we can accept.

To understand any strong, troublesome emotion, you need to see clearly three parts of your emotional experience:

[PART 1] The actual upsetting physical-social situation and event, what you and others did, and the outcomes. Example: boyfriend and you argued about what to do this evening, watch football or visit your family. He got his way.

[PART 2] The thoughts, wishful images, and self-talk you had before, during, and after the event, but especially just before feeling bad. This includes what you had originally hoped [expectations] would happen and how you now wish it had worked out. Examples: he doesn't even listen to my needs; I really wanted him to have a good time with my family so we can go more often; he is so hung up on sports, I hate them; he should let me have my way half the time; I don't want to stay home, but I can't visit my family alone; when he dismisses me, I'd rather just read a book and fall asleep.

[PART 3] Your emotional reactions about or to the event and the outcomes. Examples: I feel frustrated when I try to communicate to him; I'm hurt and furious because my needs are dismissed; I resent his self-centeredness; I'm scared my marriage is not going to last.

But, without some instruction, we don't recognize that some of our thoughts (part 2) may be irrational or unreasonable. Therefore, my description of this method begins with a careful explanation of irrational thoughts, then more rational thinking is described. With these concepts in mind, it will be easier for you to select either a troublesome emotion (3) or an upsetting situation (1), and then go looking for your irrational ideas and unfulfilled expectations that really produce your overly intense emotions.

Purposes

It is necessary to distinguish between reasonable and irrational emotions. Obviously, fears of reckless driving, an irate person, electrical wires, VD and AIDS, etc. are realistic and not irrational. It is also appropriate to temporarily feel disappointment, sadness, or regrets after a loss or a failure. One will temporarily feel irritation and frustration after someone has cheated or lied about him/her, even though one realizes that the person who did you wrong had his/her reasons. You would have preferred that things had worked out differently, but it is not reasonable to "cry and scream" that it shouldn't have happened or to "rant and rave" that you can't stand it. Intense reactions, when carried on excessively
long, become irrational over-reactions. At least to some extent these extreme emotions are based on or augmented by irrational thoughts that can be eliminated.

[GOALS] To reduce or prevent intense, prolonged, irrational anger, anxiety, depression, guilt, feelings of inferiority or worthlessness, jealousy, dependency, and other such emotions.

To learn more rational ways to view life, more honest ways to evaluate oneself, and more reasonable expectations to have of oneself and others.

To recognize that we cannot understand ourselves or others without knowing the "internal environment," i.e. how the person views or interprets the situation and what the person is saying to him/herself.

**Steps**

**STEP ONE: Identify your irrational ideas.**

Until recently it was thought that only 10 or 12 common irrational ideas caused most of human misery (Ellis & Harper, 1975). Now, it is thought that there are thousands of misery-causing false ideas (Ellis, 1987), a few of them are very obviously irrational but many are subtle and more convincing (but still either false, or very unlikely, or badly supported). As these ideas are described, think about your own daily thoughts, attitudes, and self-talk. To what extent do you think this way?

It is necessary for me to describe several irrational thoughts because we differ very much in terms of how we think. You will not have all the harmful thoughts that I describe; you may have only two or three, but they could be enough to make you miserable. Unfortunately, you will have to skim all the ideas below to find the few that are giving you trouble. Here are the common, fairly obvious irrational ideas described by Albert Ellis which create unwanted emotions:

1. Everyone should love and approve of me (if they don't, I feel awful and unlovable).
2. I should always be able, successful, and "on top of things" (if I'm not, I'm an inadequate, incompetent, hopeless failure).
3. People who are evil and bad should be punished severely (and I have the right to get very upset if they aren't stopped and made to "pay the price").
4. When things do not go the way I wanted and planned, it is terrible and I am, of course, going to get very disturbed. I can't stand it!
5. External events, such as other people, a screwed-up society, or bad luck, cause most of my unhappiness. Furthermore, I don't have any control over these external factors, so I can't do anything about my depression or other misery.
6. When the situation is scary or going badly, I should and can't keep from worrying all the time.
7. It is easier for me to overlook or avoid thinking about tense situations than to face the problems and take the responsibility for correcting the situation.
8. I need someone--often a specific person--to be with and lean on (I can't do everything by myself).
9. Things have been this way so long, I can't do anything about these problems now.
10. When my close friends and relatives have serious problems it is only right and natural that I get very upset too.
11. I don't like the way I'm feeling but I can't help it. I just have to accept it and go with my feelings.
12. I know there is an answer to every problem. I should find it (if I don't, it will be awful).

Note all the "things-should-be-different" ideas mentioned or implied in these statements, including one's own helplessness. Our desires or preferences become "musts" or demands. Much of this self-talk suggests an underlying cry that things should be different, almost like a child's whine that the situation is awful, "I hate it," and it must be changed. Perhaps the common ridiculous notion that "you can be anything you want to be" also contributes to these unreasonable expectations. No one can be anything they want to be! A rock star? A Olympic champion? President? The person loved by
the next door neighbor? Sometimes "if you just try hard enough" is subtly added to "you can be anything..." to make it more believable (like the subtle ideas below) but then a person's modest efforts become the inadequate support for a demand: "I worked so hard, it really ticks me off that I only got a 'C' or didn't get a raise."

How many of these 12 irrational ideas are similar to your own self-statements? How many sound pretty reasonable to you? The more of these irrational ideas you believe, the more likely you are to be upset and have unreasonable feelings. However, just one irrational idea may be all you need to become distraught. Furthermore, Ellis (1987) has recently suggested that one reason why people keep on getting upset (even after reading Ellis's books and having Rational-Emotive therapy) is that they have rejected most of the obvious irrational ideas but retained some of the subtle ones:

1. Of course, I can't totally please everyone all the time, but I must have approval of certain people because I have been rejected and hurt... because I was spoiled with lots of love as a child... because I really try hard to please... because I feel so upset when I'm not approved... because I only want a little approval... because I'm a special person... and so on.

2. I know I can't be perfectly competent all the time in every area, but I must succeed on this project because I want to excel so badly... because I really try hard and deserve it... because I have done so well in the past (or failed so often)... because I am handicapped and feel so worthless when I fail... because I have special abilities... and so on.

3. Oh sure, it is foolish to expect to be treated fairly in all ways by everyone all the time, but they must be fair to me in this case because I am considerate of others... because people have always treated me fairly (or unfairly) in the past... because I am at a disadvantage and can't take care of myself... because I'm furious and they have absolutely no reason to do this to me... and so on.

You can see how a clearly irrational idea sounds more believable when embellished by these pseudo-psychological explanations. However, such statements are still crazy, unreasonable expectations or thoughts that can and do upset us. How do we acquire these beliefs? We fail to evaluate or evaluate incorrectly the meaning, truth, and support of our beliefs. We fail to see that the negative consequences arise from our irrational self-talk (i.e., sloppy causal thinking); we over-look our lack of ability and determination (i.e., lack of any deep self-knowledge); we deny that our strong feelings and needs help convince us we are right (when we are wrong); we fail to see that our strong emotions, like anger, fears and weakness, are frequently reinforced (chapters 5, 6, 7 & 8); we sometimes think it is healthy or appropriate to feel strongly and "never forget," we aren't aware of our defense mechanisms (chapter 5 and self-deception in methods #1 & #2); we may acquire emotional responses without words, e.g. via conditioning and modeling (chapter 5); we prefer to change the situation rather than our thinking (get a divorce rather than deal with our anger, flunk out of school rather than cope with our overwhelming need for fun); we escape but don't solve our problems by drinking, socializing, involvement with activities and cults, dieting, taking medication, etc.; we convince ourselves we can't really change (and, therefore, don't try very hard). Thus, irrational thinking becomes the easy way out: I can just insist that things should go my way. And scream about injustice when things don't go my way. That way, I don't have to take responsibility for controlling my life.

Finally, Transactional Analysis and Cognitive therapy have described a number of other self-messages that are illogical and unhealthy (Butler, 1981):

1. Driver messages: Be perfect, hurry up, try hard, please others, be strong, and so on, reflecting unrealistic or unjustified demands that interfere with our natural preferences and inclinations (see chapter 9).

2. Stopper messages: (unjustified ideas that "stop us in our tracks" or "shoot us down" and keep us from trying..
   (a) Catastrophizing -- "If I said something stupid, it would be terrible." "If he/she rejected me, it would be awful." (Unjustified predictions.).
   (b) Self-put-downs -- "I'm so dumb... boring... ugly... weak... selfish... demanding... bossy... irresponsible..." (Inaccurate descriptions.).
   (c) Unjustified self-
restricting statements: "I'll speak up providing no one's feelings will be hurt." "I'd give an opinion if I had all the facts." "I'd approach him/her if I could think of something witty to say." (d) Unjustified rules -- "Don't be yourself; they won't like you." "Don't be different... don't be like your father... like a sissy... like a pushy boss... like an egghead professor."

3. Illogical thinking: [all the fallacies and the inappropriate applications of the skills taught in PHIL 201.]
(a) False or unfounded conclusions -- "If she doesn't love me, no one will." "He smiled, I think he is turned on by my body." "He/she loves me so much, he/she will make the changes I want him/her to make." "I won't be able to find a job and support myself, it's hopeless." "I know they are making it hard for me, that makes me mad." Eric Berne realized that some people tend to respond again and again with the same emotional response, say self-criticism, pessimism, or anger. He called this reoccurring emotion the patient's "racket." The racket--an emotion based on faulty thinking--has become a basic part of your personality.
(b) Misattribution (sloppy causal reasoning)

The next step is introduces the idea of irrational (improper justified) thoughts that cause unwanted emotions. It is a giant leap from recognizing these irrational ideas to getting rid of them. In fact, Ellis says we never learn to think straight all the time. How many wrong ideas most of us retain is not known yet. Certainly, a better understanding of rational, adaptive thinking would help all of us. In the following steps, we will study ways to detect and correct your own unique, well hidden, wrong and disturbing ideas.

STEP TWO: Try to find more rational sentences to say to yourself.

Like replacing bad habits with good ones, your irrational thoughts must be replaced with more rational ones. For each of the 12 obvious irrational ideas listed in step 1, there is a more reasonable way to look at the situation: (Note: You may have to refer back to the original irrational idea to understand these rational ideas.)

1. It is not possible for everyone to love and approve of us; indeed, we cannot be assured that any one particular person will continue to like us. What one person likes another hates. When we try too hard to please everyone, we lose our identity, we are not self-directed, secure or interesting. It is better to cultivate our own values, social skills, and compatible friendships, rather than worry about pleasing everyone.

2. No one can be perfect. We all have weaknesses and faults. Perfectionism creates anxiety and guarantees failure (chapter 6). Perfectionistic needs may motivate us but they may take away the joy of living and alienate people if we demand they be perfect too. We (and others) can only expect us to do what we can (as of this time) and learn in the process.

3. No matter how evil the act, there are reasons for it. If we put ourselves in the other person's situation and mental condition, we would see it from his/her point of view and understand. Even if the person were emotionally disturbed, it would be "understandable" (i.e. "lawful" from a deterministic point of view). Being tolerant of past behavior does not mean we will refuse to help the person change who has done wrong. Likewise, our own mean behavior should be understood by ourselves and others. When people feel mistreated, they can discuss the wrong done to them and decide how to make it right. That would be better than blaming each other and becoming madder and madder so both become losers.
When *is* anger justified? Some say never. Some say only when all four of these things are true: You didn't get what you wanted, you were owed it, it was terrible you didn't get it, and someone else was clearly at fault. If any of the four can't be proven, confront your unreasonable anger. If you are sure they are all true, then be assertive (not aggressive) with the person at fault (Ellis, 1985b).

4. The universe was not created for our pleasure. Children are commonly told, "You can't have everything you want." Many adults continue to have that "I want it all my way" attitude. The idea is silly, no matter who has it. There is nothing wrong, however, with saying, "I don't like the way that situation worked out. I'm going to do something to change it." If changes aren't possible, accept it and forget it. An ancient idea is to accept whatever is. A recent book urges to want what we have, to be grateful for it, and not to desire more and more (Miller, 1995).

5. As Epictetus said, it is not external events but our views, our self-talk, our beliefs about those events that upset us. So, challenge your irrational ideas by applying your critical thinking skills. You may be able to change external events in the future and you certainly can change your thinking. Remember no one can *make* you feel anyway; you are responsible for your own feelings.

6. There is a great difference between dreadful ruminations about what awful things might happen and thinking how to prevent, minimize, or cope with real potential problems. The former is useless, depressing, exhausting, and may even be self-fulfilling. The latter is wise and reassuring. Keep in mind that many of our fears never come true. Desirable outcomes are due to the laws of behavior, not due to our useless "worry." Unwanted outcomes are also lawful, and not because we didn't "worry."

7. As with procrastination, avoidance of unpleasant tasks and denial of problems or responsibilities frequently yields immediate relief but, later on, results in serious problems. The life style that makes us most proud is not having an easy life but facing and solving tough problems.

8. People *are* dependent on others, e.g. for food, work, clothing, love, etc., *but* no one needs to be dependent on one specific person. In fact, it is foolish to become so dependent that the loss of one special person would leave you helpless and devastated.

9. You can't change the past *but* you can learn from it and change yourself (and maybe even the circumstances). You *can* teach an old dog new tricks. Self-help is for everyone every moment.

10. It is nice to be concerned, sympathetic, and helpful. It is not helpful and may be harmful to become overly distraught and highly worried about other people's problems. They are responsible, if they are able adults, for their feelings, for their wrong-doing, and for finding their own solutions. Often there is little you can do but be empathic. Avoid insisting on rescuing people who haven't asked you for help.

11. This helpless, hopeless "I-can't-change" attitude is contradicted by most of the therapeutic and self-help literature. There are many ways to change unwanted feelings (see chapters 5, 6, 7, 8 & 12). On the other hand, there is merit in "being able to flow with your feelings" in certain circumstances. Being unable to feel or express certain emotions is a serious handicap but correctable. Being dominated by one's emotions--a slave to your emotions--is also a serious but correctable problem. As long as our emotions are sometimes destructive and irrational, it is crazy to unthinkingly "follow our feelings." Only our thinking, reasoning brain can differentiate between joyous, facilitating feelings and harmful, misguided emotions.

12. Wrong! There is no one perfect solution but there may be several good alternatives. Try one, see what happens (observe the causal laws at work), and try again if your first idea doesn't work. Perfectionism causes problems, including taking too much time, becoming too complicated, causing undue anxiety, and lowering our self-esteem.
Instead of insisting that things must or should be different, instead of believing people and the world are awful, instead of demanding perfection, instead of feeling helpless, instead of denying reality, there are better attitudes:

Accept reality: Say to yourself, "It would have been better if ________ hadn't happened, but it's not awful, it was lawful." Or, "That's the way it is. I'll make the best of it."

1. Learn from past failures how to improve the future: "It didn't happen even though I wanted it to. So, now I'll get down to work and plan how to make things work out better next time. Where's my psychology self-help book?"

2. Accept responsibility for your feelings: "No one can make me feel any way. But, I can change how I feel. Okay, I can't be perfect, I'll just do my best and stop beating myself." "I" statements remind us that we alone are responsible for our feelings (see method #3 in chapter 13).

3. Realize that worry is useless: "All this fretting isn't doing any good. I'll make a plan--maybe desensitization and role playing--and see if that works." "I've worried about this matter long enough; worry isn't doing any good. I'll work on some other problem I can do something about." "I've been in pain long enough; he/she isn't worth all this misery; I've got to get on with life."

4. Tell yourself that it is better to face facts than live a lie: "I'm not going to handle this situation well unless I am realistic. I need to see my faults. I need to consider long-range goals as well as having fun today."

5. Recognize the difference between a fact and an inference: The difference is well illustrated by the saying "unloaded guns kill." The belief that a gun is unloaded is an inference when we have not now properly verified whether or not it is in fact loaded. Here are other examples of inferences, each one of which is vulnerable to all kinds of counterexamples: (a) Bill didn't call me today, that means that he is mad at me; no one seems to be noticing me, so I must be unattractive today. (b) I got a 'D' on my first English paper, which proves that I'm hopeless as a writer. When you draw conclusions (especially ones that upset you), ask simple questions to test the meaning, support and truth of your reasons. To test the meaning: "Do I really know what I mean when I present these reasons? Are they really clear and precise enough for me to draw my intended conclusions, and for me to actually test the truth of my reasons? To test the support: "Are my reasons sufficient for my conclusion?" "Are there any counterexamples, and how likely are they?" "Am I committing any fallacies?" "Is the form of my reasoning valid?" To test truth of my reasons: "What is the evidence for and against my reasons?" To test the truth of the conclusion: "What the evidence against this conclusion?"

6. Challenge your beliefs.

7. Question your overgeneralizations --"I felt he never showed any interest in me, but he does ask about my classes and eats lunch with me." "It seemed like she was always complaining but I've started noticing that she hardly criticizes at all for an hour or two after I have done something for or with her." "I used to think women didn't know much about politics and international affairs but Louise, Kathy, and Paula are very knowledgeable and interesting." "Just because I haven't gotten a good job yet doesn't mean that finishing college and working as an aid in a nursing home has been a total waste of time." "Just because I have a pimple on my chin doesn't mean I'm ugly or totally unattractive in every way."

8. Counter "driver" messages with "allower" messages: "I don't have to be perfect or always on top." "It's OK to be emotional, take my time, respect myself." See scripts in chapter 9.

9. Counter self-put-down, "witch" messages which hold you back: "Why not approach that attractive person over there even if I find out she/he is going with someone or even if she/he eventually thinks I'm forward... odd... boring?"

Several books concentrate on controlling your self-defeating thoughts and upsetting feelings or beliefs. Some of the better ones are David Burns's (1980), Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy, McKay & Fanning's (1991), Prisoners of
Belief, and Lazarus, Lazarus, & Fay (1993), Don't Believe It! Many people like Wayne Dyer's (1976) best selling, Your Erroneous Zones, but mental health professionals think it encourages self-centeredness and shallow thinking (Santrock, Minnett & Campbell, 1994). Many other books are cited at the end of this method.

This is an important step--learning to think rationally and seeing the sources of your irrational ideas--but your emotional responses are not likely to immediately change. You may rationally see why you shouldn't be depressed, angry, panicky, etc. long before the gut responses fade away (as a result of the cognitive changes or, if necessary, other self-help methods, such as deconditioning).

STEP THREE: Identify the feelings and the circumstances in which you experience unwanted emotions. Write each upsetting situation on the top of a 3 X 5 card.

The irrational ideas discussed in step 1 may have sounded familiar. If so, perhaps you can start observing and tracking your irrational self-talk, and in that way discover what emotions are generated by these thoughts. However, it is usually more practical to start by identifying the times and situations in which you have unwanted feelings --fears, worries, fatigue, guilt, pessimism, resentment, shyness, regrets, loneliness, jealousy, envy, passivity, conformity, sadness, etc. In the next step, we will go looking for the irrational ideas you might be telling yourself that could produce the unwanted emotions. In this step, however, we are simply identifying the emotions and situations we would like to change.

The task is to ferret out irrational ideas but the surface symptoms--the emotions--are much easier to see than the underlying thoughts--the irrational ideas. Therefore, look for and write down on a 3 X 5 card each unwanted feeling and the situation, interactions, thoughts and/or fantasies associated with that feeling. Do this whenever you have exaggerated, prolonged, or possibly unjustified emotional reactions, whenever you are frustrated and think things "should" be different, whenever you respond differently than others do, whenever you have emotional responses you don't understand or don't like, whenever you feel pushed by your own internal pressures and so on.

Obviously, different people respond differently to the same situation. Surely some of these emotional differences are due to how these people see the situation differently and how they talk to themselves about the situation. Do the ways you respond differently from others reveal some of your partially hidden ideas? What do you say to yourself when breaking up with someone? when failing to do as well as you would like? when starting a difficult new project? when being criticized? when you feel something is awful? Negative feelings reflect negative self-talk. Changes in feelings usually follow changes in views or ideas. Make a practice of noting when your emotions change and then (in the next step) looking for your internal judgments and self-talk in these situations. Your ideas may explain your feelings.

When you feel the need to escape, e.g. "I want to get out of here" or "I need a drink," it is possible that your self-talk is creating this urge to act or this internal pressure. Maybe you are driving yourself too hard with "be perfect," "try harder," and "don't show your anger" self-instructions. Look for these thoughts. Likewise, when we avoid our work and procrastinate by eating, drinking, cleaning, watching TV, etc., we may be telling ourselves lies, such as "I can easily do it tomorrow," "I'll work after watching TV," "I won't do it right," "I can't learn all that stuff--it's useless anyway" or "They will probably make fun of my work." Who wouldn't try to avoid all those negative self-evaluations by escaping into some other activity? Who wouldn't use excuses if we didn't question their validity?

STEP FOUR: Explore the underlying rational and irrational ideas in each situation. Challenge your crazy ideas and decide on more rational ways of thinking. This is "cognitive restructuring."

Take all your 3 X 5 cards with a brief description of the situation on the top and arrange them in order of severity. Beneath the description, draw a line down the middle of the card. The right side will be used later for more rational ways of looking at it. On the left, list the irrational ideas possibly causing this unwanted emotional reaction. A review of the common irrational ideas and the driver, self-critical, and illogical messages described in step 1 should help.
Or, once you have (a) identified the general emotion (anger, fear, sadness) that classifies your specific emotion (e.g., disappointment fall under sadness: you interpret a situation as a loss of some kind because it does not conform to your reasonable/unreasonable expectations), use the general cognitions underlying these general emotions to guide you to the specific thinking that led to the emotion. The general cognition underlying sadness is the belief that something is lost, and irretrievable. The more the loss is believed to be significant, the greater the sadness. If something believed to be significant is also believed to be lost or absent for a certain amount of time, the greater the amount of time it will be absent, the greater the sadness. Bear in mind that sometimes losses are in fact significant, and so in such cases the emotion of sadness is quite reasonable. But if we exaggerate the loss, we create the excessive sadness is unreasonable: we in fact worsen our own emotional reaction. For instance, the facts are that you did not get the desired grade of “A”. You emotion is one of sadness. So you need to ask yourself what do you interpret as being a loss in this context, and then to use your critical thinking abilities evaluate that interpretation/belief. If you got a C, and you jump to the conclusion that you will not become whatever it is you are dreaming of becoming, the loss consists of not becoming what you want to become. Of course there are lots of counterexamples against that inference, and together they are very probable (e.g., What if it’s only a minor test? What if you can repeat the course and learn from your mistakes? What if you really don’t need an A for this course to major in what you want? Etc.) There is also the belief, underlying this sadness, that if you do not become what you dream of becoming, your worth as a human being is somehow diminished – another example of a loss. Such beliefs really need to be identified, refuted, and completely rejected.

In other words, whenever you have an unwanted emotion, go looking for the possible underlying general cognition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotions</th>
<th>GENERAL Cognitions underlying the emotions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>Something is interpreted to be (1) threatening, and (2) one does not have the means to handle the threat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadness</td>
<td>Something is interpreted to be (1) a loss, and to be (2) irretrievable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>Something is interpreted as violating a personal, or social, or moral rule or expectation to which they should conform.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joy</td>
<td>Something is interpreted as a gain.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here are specific examples of the general emotions of sadness, anger, fear, and joy:

**SADNESS:** gloominess, moodiness, depression, grief, rejection, regret, shame, guilt, sorrow, etc.

**ANGER:** offended, insulted, furious, enraged, annoyed irritated, indignant, mad, vexed, resentful, etc.

**FEAR:** worry, concern, shyness, timidity, anxiety, dread, apprehension, terror, alarm, etc.

**JOY:** glad, pleased, gratified, content, cheerful, jovial, delighted, ecstatic, jubilant, elated, etc.

Don't expect it to *always* be easy to pin point the exact irrational ideas involved. (This is itself is an unjustified belief that would contribute to your frustration!) First of all, you may have repeated a wrong idea so many times you believe it is totally right. Examples: "I am fat." "I can't express myself." "Women can't fix cars." "I must do better than my brother." "I'm not attractive." Butler (1981) says the question is not "Is my self-talk true and realistic?" (because you frequently can't answer that), but rather you should ask yourself, "Is my self-talk helping or hurting me?" Example: It is not helpful
to tell yourself, "She dumped me for Joe because I'm inferior to him" but it could be helpful to say, "Thinking I'm inferior may or may not be true, but, for certain, it is hurting me. I need to think differently. Let's see. If I learned to be more attentive to others, more fun-loving, and less self-critical, girls would probably like me better."

Butler also contends that we start to question and discard our irrational, negative ideas as we recognize more and more how these ideas are harming us. So, she asks her clients to consider the damage done in terms of (1) hurtful feelings, (2) troublesome behavior, (3) low self-esteem, (4) strained relationships, and (5) high stress or poor health. Obviously, repeatedly seeing the damage done by our own thoughts helps us see the importance of changing our thinking.

While Butler seems to disagree, I suspect we can frequently see the errors in our thinking if we stop and ask ourselves, "What is the evidence for this belief?" We can recognize some of our subtle irrational ideas and then challenge them. We can hear our internal predictions of failure ("you can't do that"), our demands that other people be different ("they shouldn't neglect me"), and so on. We can learn to say "That is a silly, harmful way to think, so stop it!" Then we can think of more positive, constructive ways of thinking (see last and next step). Butler suggests writing down what you say (or think) to yourself before and while you are upset. Seeing the thoughts in writing also helps you see the irrationality.

Cognitive therapists have developed several methods for challenging irrational ideas that mess up our lives (McMullin, 1986). Here are some:

Try to think of several counterexamples against your inferences. Suppose someone comments that you are getting flabby around the middle. You are hurt, ashamed, and, at first, conclude that you are unattractive, maybe even gross looking. Here are some counterexamples against that inference: (1) Maybe other people don't see me that way, (2) he has a weight problem himself and is projecting his own sense of unattractiveness, (3) he is angry because he thought I had been flirting with his girlfriend, (4) a little fat doesn't matter very much to me, and that (5) his feedback can spur me start a diet now.

Be careful to avoid alternative explanations that are just as unsupported as the ones you first entertain and make you miserable. Adopting an alternative explanation that is unsupported but that makes you feel good is just as unreasonable as sticking to the first unreasonable one that comes to mind and made you feel bad. Thinking irrationally to make ourselves feel good simply reinforces our irrational thinking. For example, if a rejected lover first infers "I wasn't good looking enough" or "I'm boring", and feels sad, but tries to avoid the sadness by adopting the equally questionable beliefs, "She/he was afraid of sex" or "He/she wouldn't like anyone for long", the rejected lover is just reinforcing escapist and irrational thinking. More objective, "clinical" explanations may be easier to take. "I don't have friends because I don't try" hurts less than "because I'm not a likable person," but adopt that thinking only if it is true and justified.

Suppose a friend one day seems cold and irritated. You infer that he/she is mad at you, probably because you had done something with another friend the night before or because you hadn't called him/her for a couple of days or maybe because she had heard some gossip about you. All of these thoughts are rather useless speculation. The facts are that you often do things with other friends and it is common for the two of you to not call for a couple of days. What gossip could he/she have heard, you haven't done anything unusual. Here are some counterexamples to your inference: Maybe he/she was just in a hurry; maybe he/she was mad at someone else. It could be a million things. Don't get carried away by your speculation. Ask him/her if you misread the situation or if you had done something to upset hem/her.

Some people are catastrophizers, always making negative interpretations, making mole hills into mountains, minor setbacks into crushing defeat, tiny slights into total war, and so on. If you are one, try thinking of the best and the worst possible outcome in a situation you are concerned about. Guess which is most likely to happen. Then observe what actually happens and see if, in the course of time, you can become more accurate in estimating what the outcome will be in many situations.
Try to understand the origin, dynamics, and validity of your harmful thinking. Ask yourself questions like,

- "Where did this harmful idea come from?"
- "Is this belief true or false? What is the evidence?"
- "When do you remember first having this harmful belief?" "How did you feel?"
- "Why did you feel (inadequate... cocky... unloved) as an adolescent?"
- "Does feeling insecure have much to do with your continuing to live at home? ...staying with the same boy/girlfriend? ...staying in the same job?"
- "What attitudes do secure people have in this situation?"
- "What am I saying differently to myself when I'm not upset in similar situations?"
- "Why does this belief exist?" (McMullin (1986) says some irrational ideas help us feel safe, e.g. "most people are stupid" helps us feel smart, "you are a nerd if you don't drink" helps establish rapport with our drinking buddies, "it's my fault" helps us believe we are a good, responsible person, and so on.)

Another interesting strategy to understanding negative thinking is to imagine, for the moment, that your dire thoughts are true. Then, ask yourself, "If that were true, what would that mean to you? Why would that upset you?" Flanagan (1990) gives this example: a student in counseling was worried because his professor had criticized him and probably thinks he is a poor student. The therapist always asks the above question, "If that were true, why would that upset you?" Student: "It would mean I am a bad student, he is an expert." Therapist: "If that were true, why would that upset you?" Student: "It would mean I was a failure." Therapist repeats the same questions. Student: "It means I have to leave school." Therapist: "If that were true, why would that upset you?" Student: "Everyone would know I failed." Therapist repeats the same question. Student: "It would mean I was a total failure. There would be nothing for me to do." Thus, the student's reactions to these questions imply the underlying assumptions that are so upsetting: (1) any criticism of me is right, (2) my worth is determined by success in school, (3) a professor criticizes me and the world falls apart and I'm useless, (4) others will not accept my weaknesses--I must be perfect, (5) everyone must respect me, (6) if I fail in school, I will fail at everything. With this kind of thinking, it is no wonder we make mountains out of molehills.

A similar way to discover the impossible demands you may be imposing on yourself is to ask "Why?" repeatedly (Flanagan, 1990). Example: suppose you wanted to but couldn't turn down a friend's request for a favor. Why? "Because I felt uncomfortable saying no." Why? "Because I should be helpful." Why? "Because we should all try to accommodate others." Why? "Because everyone should be happy." Why? "Because being sad wastes time and that's wrong." Why? "Because you should be accomplishing something." Why? "Because I feel guilty wasting time and my mood gets down." Why? "Well, I should be productive and in a good mood all the time." Notice all the "shoulds" in this line of reasoning that lead to a ridiculous statement.

If you can understand the ramifications of your thoughts and the true underlying problems, it will help a lot when you are developing arguments against your irrational ideas.

You can prepare and practice in advance arguments designed to counter fears, self-putdowns, anger, impossible goals, and so on. Sometimes, it is even helpful to get mad at the stupid idea that is causing you trouble. Examples: There are so many beautiful and interesting people to meet, it is really foolish to let my shyness lead to all this frustration and loneliness. It is stupid to think that the only way to be happy is to be very successful... beautiful... a real man... a perfect lover and parent... because there is so much more to a full life (and, besides, these demanding goals create many problems).

By recording in a journal how well each argument works in real situations, you can find out which ideas or views help you most to avoid upsetting thoughts. Use what works.

Instead of arguing against a pessimistic attitude, one can focus on thinking rationally and replacing negative words with positive words. For instance, we can think of ourselves as having learned to be the way we are, instead of labeling ourselves as "sick," "weak," "crazy," or "mentally ill." However, our new self-description must be accurate and
well-founded, otherwise we could just be using faulty thinking that makes us feel good, and the pleasant consequences would just reinforce our faulty thinking. It requires continuous conscious effort and daily practice to make these changes. Other examples of re-labeling or reframing a negative trait:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative words or outlook</th>
<th>Positive words or outlook</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wishy-washy</td>
<td>Open minded, flexible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loud mouth, egotistical</td>
<td>Expresses honest opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sloppy, lazy</td>
<td>Casual, carefree, relaxed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socially shy, scared to talk</td>
<td>I have an opportunity to meet people, have fun, and exchange ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treated unfairly</td>
<td>A chance to stand up for my rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Made a mistake</td>
<td>A chance to learn something. Remember, Babe Ruth struck out a record 1330 times while hitting 714 home runs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Beyond the question of accuracy of your views, examine carefully the usually implicit justification you give to the importance, significance, weight to you attribute to situations, consequences, people, or their judgments of you. Examples: Suppose you asked someone out and he/she turned you down. There are several possible reasons for being rejected that do not have negative implications for you, e.g. he/she is interested in someone else at the moment. But let's just suppose for a moment that he/she did actually think you were a creep. You should still ask yourself, "So what?" Does he/she know much about you? No, so why give any weight to his/her superficial impression? Does that impression make you a creep? Of course not. Does that impression imply that no one will ever want to go out with you? No. Suppose you are not able to make "A's" and "B's" in chemistry and physiology. Ask yourself, "So what?" Does that mean you won't become an MD? Maybe. Does it mean that your life will be meaningless? No. In short, ask yourself, "Is this situation really so awful?" Look 10 years ahead. Compare this "awful" situation with a serious problem, such as a relative or loved one dying, losing your sight, etc. Ask yourself, "Am I making too much out of this?"

The most effective technique may be to find a basic value you believe in that is well justified and that counters the harmful irrational belief. Examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Harmful belief</th>
<th>Contradicting value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I always fail.</td>
<td>I can't control the outcome, only how hard I try, and the attitude I take towards the outcomes. (Inspiring stories of success through hard work might help overcome a defeatist attitude. But we must careful what we generalize from them.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They won't like me, if I am different.</td>
<td>My religion tells me what is right and wrong, so I'd rather be liked by God and Jesus or Mohammed than by these critical friends.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He left me for a young, pretty woman. It's terrible.</td>
<td>I'm a caring, interesting, intelligent person, too bad he was hung up on looks. (Reading about gratifying careers and/or second marriages might help this person turn from the past to the future.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want lots of &quot;things.&quot;</td>
<td>Being a loving person with a gratifying family life and close friends is much more important than</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
working 10 to 12 hours a day so I can buy things. 
The more we possess, the more we are possessed!

Finally, keep in mind that the upsetting irrational ideas may no longer be conscious or may not even exist at all. For example, it seems possible that irrational ideas originally produced the unwanted emotions, but in the process of being repeated over and over in association with a specific situation, these ideas may have become abbreviated or unconscious. Nevertheless, it may be helpful to explore what the original irrational ideas might be and then develop a more rational outlook and plan (this is an unproven method, in contrast to desensitization). For example, one may have become shy by using self-talk like "they won't like me" or "I'm not attractive." Shyness might be gradually overcome by supportive self-talk, "I can find interesting things to talk about" and "Being a caring person will make up for my weaknesses." (But such cognitive changes would probably need to be accompanied with behavioral changes in order to counteract the likely learned timid behavior.)

The crux of this method is the recognizing, questioning, challenging, and changing each irrational idea. The new thinking is based on facts. You are your-own-scientist, checking out your own ideas. It is an unending process; rational people must constantly monitor their beliefs about the past and expectations about the future, repeatedly asking, "What is the evidence?"

After you have identified the irrational ideas underlying several of the emotions and situations described on your 3 X 5 cards, you will probably find the same kind of thinking errors showing up in several situations. Are you unduly self-condemning? Are you overly critical of others or the world? Are you perfectionistic and pushing yourself too hard? Are you bitching about the way things turn out (the laws of nature)? Are you a specialist at exaggerating the awfulness? This is valuable information about your way of thinking because it will guide you to finding more rational (factual) and constructive (encouraging) ways of thinking.

Write some well supported, rational self-talk on the right side of the 3 X 5 cards. Your arguments against your own irrational thoughts can be a few words, e.g. "Ridiculous!" or "Where's the proof?," a sentence, e.g. "People will be more impressed with how much fun I have playing ping-pong than with how well I can slam," or a complex philosophy, e.g. "My goal in life is to be a good psychologist, that is inconsistent sometimes with having fun, being popular, agreeing with important people, etc."

Refer to step 2 for rational ideas if you need to, but you must understand and justify your own self-talk that counters hurtful ideas. Your ideas and views need to be expressed in your own words; they should encourage you to face the facts, accept yourself, and be gentle with yourself and others. Method #1 will help you deal with self-critical thoughts. If you give yourself a lot of upsetting "Be Perfect" or "Hurry Up" or "Try Harder" or "Don't Be Emotional" messages, develop some "Allower" messages: It's okay to make mistakes, to take my time, to act on my feelings, to assert myself, to be average, etc. Give yourself "unconditional positive regard" by replacing the impossible "shoulds" and critical judgments with (a) recognition of your specific accomplishments and (b) the development of a workable self-improvement plan. Examples: if you get 95% on a test, don't fret about the 5% you missed, praise yourself for the 95% you knew. If you feel terrible about breaking your diet, work out a better plan that is easier to follow and allows for mistakes.

It is not easy for an emotional self-agitator to become a self-calmer. It takes work, hours and hours of work. If you cannot think of rational, self-supportive views for certain situations, talk with a friend or a counselor. Accumulate a list of the arguments and ideas that effectively reduce your negative emotions. Keep on improving the challenges to your irrational ideas; it is a life-long task.

**STEP FIVE:** Imagine being in the upsetting situations. Talk rationally to yourself, letting the rational ideas override the irrational ideas. Continue until you feel better.

Start with a mildly disturbing situation or feeling. Say to yourself, "I know where those feelings are coming from and these emotions are too intense! I'm making too much out of this. It makes more sense to look at it this way (fill in the rational ideas from the 3 X 5 card)." It may seem strange at first to have this intellectual argument between your irrational ideas and your rational ideas, but keep trying. The unwanted emotional response will fade away and, as that happens, your belief in the rational ideas will be strengthened. Move on to imagining situations that evoke stronger emotions. Learn to
change your intense, "awful" emotional reactions to more reasonable reactions: overwhelming depression becomes sadness or regrets, rage becomes irritation or a wish that things had been different, and so on.

This procedure, called Rational-Emotive Imagery. It provides practice at attacking irrational ideas and reducing the unwanted emotions. It is preparation for real life in which you can start telling yourself rational things as an irrational emotion begins.

**STEP SIX: Anticipate emotional responses. Attack every irrational idea as it occurs. Insist on behavioral changes too. Accept what you can't change.**

This method is to be applied every minute of every day; otherwise, the irrational ideas will return and gather strength. Just like the therapist does, whenever you start to feel upset, ask yourself, "What crazy idea am I telling myself now?" Insist that you think factually and rationally. **You must also behave more rationally!** Albert Ellis gives "homework assignments." For example, you may realize your fear of flying is irrational. That isn't enough. You have to fly--several times. You must start doing the things that have been upsetting you--getting turned down for a date, speaking up at meetings, going out without make up, getting a "C," standing up for your rights, etc.

Staying rational is a life-long preoccupation. There are many obstacles: negative views are very resistive to change; the old "do's and don'ts" are very powerful; the belief that "I will be okay if I can only reach some lofty goal" is hard to shake; the idea that "I can't change" is an enormous barrier; if new thoughts are tried out, the internal perfectionist may say, "You are messing up this new self-talk; you'll never learn; besides, it won't help much anyway." You have to keep slugging away at irrational ideas month after month. Positive self-talk has to become automatic. To be in shape intellectually, like being in shape physically, requires work, but it becomes easier as you practice it on a daily basis. Many people give up before the job is done.

**Time involved**

Just understanding the basic idea may reduce certain irrational emotions rather quickly. Working through the above steps, however, will take several hours plus time each day to counteract the unwanted emotions as they occur and to do "homework" that contradicts the irrational ideas. Actually, what happens is that eventually your point of view and style of thinking changes; this change requires conscious questioning of one's reasoning many times each day. As stated above, being rational requires constant vigilance every time the brain works. If you have some particularly harmful irrational ideas, it may take a few minutes of forceful arguments against those ideas occasionally for a year or more in order to change your thinking (McMullin, 1986).

**Common problems**

The first objection to this method is that several people insist that it is rational to want everyone to love and approve of you or to want to always be successful or to want evil to always be punished. Ellis would say, "If you want to be unhappy, go ahead believing these ridiculous ideas." [Note that Ellis is addressing the consequences of the belief, not its justification. However, some of the beliefs we adopt that contribute to our distress are not exactly descriptive claims that can be easily refuted by examining the facts. They can be called **attitudinal claims**: claims that express an attitude toward something. For example, the conditional statement, “If life gives you a lemon, make lemonade”, is very likely intended to express an attitude rather than facts, though it does presuppose psychological facts about the audience to which it is intended to apply. In such cases, the consequences of attitudinal claims is definitely relevant in assessing the reasonableness of those claims.] Think about it this way: it would be nice if everyone were always considerate, competent, successful, and loved, but to actually expect or, more precisely, demand that these ideal conditions exist all the time is foolish because it simply sets us up to be frustrated many times. It is possible to have high aspirations and still accept failure and shortcomings when they inevitably occur.

Other problems with this method are, as discussed above, that the irrational ideas are hard to detect and reject in some cases. They may not actually exist. In addition, some strong emotions are reasonable and unavoidable, but in time the continuation of the emotion becomes irrational. Suppose you have been deceived by an unfaithful lover, it is hard to tell yourself, while experiencing intense pain, that this kind of self-serving deception is a fairly common and even rational and understandable behavior from the deceiver's viewpoint. Such logical reasoning doesn't make the pain go away. Your pain (or grief or anger) isn't unreasonable at this point, for the loss of your lover is genuine; it is an inevitable emotional
reaction to the loss and hurt. When does the pain-grief-anger become unreasonable—after one month? two months? three months? six months? after one year? after three years? (I say two months is enough suffering!)

Dr. R. L. Wessler (1992) of Pace University has recently accused Ellis's form of Rational-Emotive therapy of dogmatically imposing a view of the world on the patient without much consideration of why the patient sees the situation as he/she does. For instance, when a client in other forms of Cognitive Therapy says he/she couldn't pass a college course, the therapist is likely to simply suggest the client check out that expectation in reality. The Cognitive Therapist wouldn't instantly and bluntly call that expectation of failure an "irrational," crazy idea. (In this instance, the client might be right.) But when a client of a Rational-Emotional therapist says "I'd die if I didn't make all A's," the follower of Ellis would immediately challenge that idea as irrational (and actual death does seem improbable). The RET therapist's focus isn't on the patient's background that results in thinking that getting all A's is crucial; the focus is on getting the patient to see that the expectation of all A's in all circumstances is an unreasonable demand. It certainly is a dogmatic and dynamic approach for the RET therapist to say that it is unreasonable to insist that someone must love you or that you must get an "A." But is the client actually irrational, wrong, or stupid, when he/she insists that the world must be different than it is? I think so (see next method).

The final problem is that many of us are not willing or able to do the extensive work necessary to clear up our irrational thinking. It is easy to say that professional help may be needed, but realistically if we won't clean up our own thinking, are we likely to do the work and pay for a therapist as well? So, what does this lack of motivation say about the effectiveness of self-change?

**Loving What IS!**

Can we easily question our own thoughts? Often not. Rational-Emotive and Cognitive Therapies are professional techniques usually utilized by well trained professional therapists. However, Rational-Emotional professionals have written up their methods hundreds of times as self-help techniques. The problem is that in their practice the professional therapists can be quite directive and assertive, even bluntly and repeatedly confronting and challenging the patient’s irrational ideas. The Rational Emotion therapist may tell a specific patient that his/her specific thought “is an irrational idea,” “is the kind of thinking that causes depression or anger,” etc. The Cognitive therapists are a bit gentler but just as specific and say “now, how can we test the validity of that idea,” or “let’s collect some data to see how you feel after you have such thoughts.” In books these authors present arguments and cases that illustrate the harmfulness of certain general ideas but in bibliotherapy they can’t zero in repeatedly on the reader’s specific ideas that seem to be causing unwanted emotions. Instead, they can suggest ways to question your own reasoning and ways to look at the situation differently. But if you don’t diligently think about those questions over and over, your thinking and beliefs may change very little.

For example, it is suggested that you ask yourself questions similar to these: (1) Do my thoughts or beliefs help me or cause me problems over time? (2) Do my beliefs fit with known facts and reality? (3) Is this specific belief logical—does it make sense? For example, you might want very badly to succeed, but does having that need mean you must succeed? No. Rational ideas should be helpful, realistic, and make sense. If your ideas (beliefs) aren’t rational, then one should find ones that are.

A recent book, written by a person who claims to have had no knowledge about Rational-Emotive or Cognitive therapy, provides some techniques that challenge the kind of ideas that frequently lead to unpleasant, disturbing emotions *(Loving What IS, Byron Katie, 2002)*. Most of her case illustrations of applying these methods (questions to ask yourself) come from a workshop or lecture circuit where she does public interviews in which she rather assertively challenges the interviewee’s beliefs and ideas, much like some therapists do. So, it is not known how effectively text-based self-questioning corrects our trouble-causing irrational thinking. Maybe it is necessary to have an “authority” challenging our way of thinking. Anyway, here is Katie’s approach:

1. Describe in detail the situation or aspects of a relationship that bothers you. Include such things as—Who angers or disappoints you? What don’t you like about the other person? How do you want them to change…to be different? What do you need or want from them? What do you especially dislike about them? What do you want to never experience with them again? Be negative and judgmental. In other words, how are you telling yourself that things “should” or “must” be different?

2. Once it is clear what you think about the situation and what you want to be different, then ask these questions challenging the validity of your demands…your “shoulds” or “musts”: Is my understanding of the situation true? How can you be absolutely sure your beliefs and views of the situation are true or the only way it can be understood? Example: Suppose your spouse or your boss seems to not understand you as well as you think he/she should, so you ask yourself “Is
it true he/she should understand me better?” Don’t just have a knee-jerk reaction…think deeply about it. “Are you certain you have communicated well or completely to him/her?” “Is it certain that it is in his/her best interests to understand me perfectly?” “Is there some important payoff to them when they don’t understand you?”

3. When you think things should be different but the changes just don’t occur, how do you feel? What emotions do those unfulfilled thoughts or wishes trigger in you? Anger? Revenge? Tension? Self-criticism? Hopelessness or do you become determined to change the other person? Does your train of thoughts increase stress or bring calm into your life?

4. Picture in your mind what your life would be like if you didn’t have these thoughts about how these changes really must happen. What if you were with this person and didn’t have the thought that he/she should be or MUST be more understanding or different? Would things be better or worse? Would you be a different person?

As you can see, these questions are aiming at the same points as Rational-Emotional therapists, namely, you are responsible for your own upset feelings because feelings result from your thinking, especially your “shoulds” and “musts.” Therefore, you need to start questioning your demands that things be different from what they are, i.e. that the world should have unfolded and must unfold the way you want it to be. This is irrational thinking, the world obeys its laws, not your wishes. If you change your thinking, you will focus on less demanding and more realistic expectations—then you will be less upset with yourself, with others, and with how life unfolds.

Katie has another mental exercise that can be helpful; she calls it “the turnaround.” What you do after seriously considering the questions above, is to ask yourself to consider carefully if the truth lies in other directions different from your (upsetting) thinking or beliefs. Examples: instead of believing “Julie doesn’t understand me; she is mad at me and she shouldn’t be,” perhaps you might gain some insight by asking “Was I first mad at her?” or “Am I angry with myself because I don’t understand myself? Or because I haven’t made myself clear to her? Or because I can’t understand why Julie feels the way she does?” Other questions: “Could it be that she actually shouldn’t be understanding of me?” “Do I really have to have her understand me?” “Am I less understanding of her than I could be?” There are many turnarounds to ask. Often a little truth is found in each turnaround question. The goal is to accept whatever is going to happen, however the world unfolds.

Turnarounds can be revealing, disclosing facets of your inner self and your feelings that are usually hidden. These are valuable insights. Examples: if you are thinking “she ignores me,” then turn this around to think seriously about: “she likes me” or “she wants me to be more independent” or “I ignore her” or “I ignore myself” or “I am very needy and want her attention badly” or “I resent her relating with someone else” and so on. If you are thinking “John shouldn’t work…drink…complain…watch TV…withdraw…so much,” then ask yourself or say “John should …do these things…” or “I like when John…does these things,” or “I shouldn’t…do these things,” or “I like to…do these things,” or “I am very critical when I do…these things,” or “My mother used to bitch about these things,” or “John does these things to get away from me;” or “John does these things instead of doing more upsetting things,” etc. This is an exercise in flexible, diverse thinking.

My experience has been that many people have a difficult time correcting their own thinking. It is no surprise that we tend to believe what we think; we do that even when we have Alzheimer’s and know our thinking is frequently confused and in error. So, challenging the validity of our own thinking or beliefs which arouse unwanted emotions is a difficult task.

Advantages and dangers

The advantages of this method are its (1) potential speed and directness, (2) conceptual simplicity, and (3) applicability to almost every emotion. There are no known dangers when attacking your own irrational ideas, but as you can see, there are many benefits.