

## ABC HOMEWORK – For Mood Disorders

The "ABC's" are an exercise from [REBT](#), which is a form of *cognitive behavior therapy* that is simple enough and effective enough to be used by anybody and -- it works.

The "ABC" is an exercise that helps us to stop being victimized by our own thinking.

A common example is the issue of someone else's behavior "making us angry." Anger is a common emotion, but very damaging in how it makes you feel (and its impact on how others feel.)

This is a very common way of expressing something and we hear it often, but in fact it distorts the situation it attempts to describe. *A more accurate description of "someone making me angry" is to say that I feel angry about their behavior. They are not making me anything- they are simply behaving in a way that I am getting angry about. I notice their behavior and then I become angry. The responsibility for the anger is mine, not theirs.*

This can sound strange at first, but dealing with problematic anger and frustration this way works. It is generally irrational and self-defeating to get all worked up about someone else's behavior.

Think about anger for a moment. Someone does something you do not like. You have a "right" not to like it. You have a "right" to share your dislike with them. *But where does it follow that since you do not like it, they therefore SHOULD not do it? Do you own them, control them, are they your possession?*

*You have a very rational preference that they change their behavior and then you take this preference and escalate it to a DEMAND, as if you were granted supreme power by someone to rule how people should and should not behave.*

In addition, their behavior is governed by how they think and feel at that time and *is consistent with their thoughts*. In fact, *their behavior at that moment can not be anything different that it is (Reality Based)*. You don't like it, and you wish it were different, but it is consistent with their thinking. You may still be left with a practical problem, "how do I get them to change their behavior?" But then you become problem solving instead of problem focused.

The result is that you may still feel annoyed or irritated about their behavior, but not angry or enraged. You simply have changed your very irrational DEMAND to a very rational Preference. The less intense emotion will allow you to become much more creative in trying to convey your feelings to the other person with an attempt to get them to change. Once you downgrade the DEMAND to a simple PREFERENCE, the heat is turned down and you can function again. After all, it's now only a preference!

**ABC** is used to analyze the situation and change our thinking about it so that without trying to change external reality, we can feel better about it.

This doesn't mean that we should never try to change external reality- sometimes it is appropriate- it's when it isn't an appropriate or effective response that we can choose to have a different response instead in order to feel better. While the ABCs are for use to help with any emotional upset, anger is the example we'll use here.

To use this exercise for yourself, just pick any situation where you were angry about someone's behavior and take a look and see what it is you are thinking about it that is DEMAND-ing and irrational, and change it into something more rational- a PREFERENCE.

It is irrational to demand that people behave in the way we want them to! Here is an example using drunk people making a lot of noise late at night as they pass by outside where I live.

- **A. (Activating event)** Drunk people outside, making some noise.
  
- **B. (irrational Belief (iB) I have about A)** They MUST NOT make any noise.
  
- **C. (Consequences of having those beliefs about A)** When noisy drunk people pass in the street outside late at night and wake me up. I Feel angry. It feels bad. I lie awake feeling angry and upset and don't get back to sleep for a long time.
  
- **D. (Dispute the irrational Beliefs (iB's) in B by turning them into questions and answers)** WHY shouldn't they make any noise- where is that commandment written in stone? Where is the evidence? Again, who made you Supreme Ruler of the Universe dictating how people Should or Must act?
  
- **E. (Effective new thinking- substitute something rational instead of B)** Drunk people are often noisy, but it's no BIG deal. I don't like it, but I can damn deal with what I don't like. Maybe I will touch base with them in the morning (when they are sober).

**I will CHOOSE to not upset myself about this**, and I may even stop even noticing it because I am no longer demanding it be different than it obviously is (Reality Based).

When this happens I will say "Ah, the drunk people who pass in the night" and maybe go back to sleep.

You can make an **ABC exercise** really short;

A. (Activating situation) Drunks walking past outside, making some noise.

B. (irrational Belief (or IB)I have about A) They SHOULDN'T make any noise

C. (Consequences of having those beliefs about A) I Feel angry, etc.

D. (Dispute the irrational Belief/s in B) WHY shouldn't they make any noise?

E. (Effective new thinking) Drunk people do make noise, it's what they're good at- it's like a natural talent for them. I will CHOOSE to not upset myself about this.

And you can do this on many situations that bother you and reclaim your peace of mind, just look for the DEMAND and turn it into a PREFERENCE.

Here's another one... **A. (Activating situation)** I tried to do something and failed **B. (irrational Belief I have about A)** I must always be successful **C. (Consequences of believing B)** I feel bad, depressed, etc. **D. (Dispute the Irrational Belief in B)** Where is it written in stone that I must I always be successful? **E. (Effective new thinking to replace B)** I would prefer always to be successful but let's be realistic- that isn't very likely, is it- I am human and humans are fallible, therefore do not succeed in everything they attempt. If success is important, then I will work harder recognizing that failure may occur again.

**That's it- that is how to do ABC's.** Try this technique with something that is bothering you. Try to keep it as simple as you can while you get used to the ideas involved.

Be aware of "*should-ing*" and "*musturbation*" (these simply mean the occurrence of problem-causing "should" and "must" DEMANDS in your thinking).

**Here are some things you might think or believe, *in which case these could be your "iB"s (Irrational Beliefs):***

- I MUST NOT feel overwhelmed with responsibilities I CAN'T STAND IT when I feel (bored, sad, lonely, whatever)

- People MUST not take me for granted
- Other people SHOULD behave in the way I want
- I SHOULD be able to have a drink I NEED a drink ("NEED" is often interpreted as MUST HAVE- be aware of such invisible MUSTS)
- They MUST see it my way
- I MUST NEVER display weakness
- The sun MUST shine tomorrow
- People who do bad things MUST ALWAYS be punished etc.[]

Try to **find some Activating situations, Irrational beliefs and Consequences of your own** and do this exercise with them. **Often it is easier to start with the C- the Consequences of the A and B and work back to see what they were.**

*Whenever you feel upset it can be a useful exercise to see if an ABC can be done on the situation and your thinking about it. You never know, you might just feel better. Get into the habit of doing this regularly and you might feel a lot better overall.*

And do please note; this is a tool not just a theory. Success with this (and other) cognitive techniques is dependent on your writing out your own examples and making it part of the way you think.

Before you begin, here are some common irrational beliefs to watch out for:

### **IRRATIONAL BELIEFS**

1. The idea that it is a dire necessity for adults to be loved by significant others for almost everything they do--Instead of their concentrating on their own *self-respect, on winning approval for practical purposes,* and on loving rather than on being loved.
2. The idea that certain acts are awful or wicked, and that people who perform such acts should be severely damned --*Instead of the idea that certain acts are self-defeating or antisocial,* and that people who perform such acts are *behaving* stupidly, ignorantly, or neurotically, and would be better helped to change. People's poor behaviors do not make them rotten individuals.
3. The idea that it is horrible when things are not the way we like them to be-- Instead of the idea *that it is too bad, that we would better try to change or control bad conditions so that they become more satisfactory,* and, if that is not possible, *we had better temporarily accept and gracefully lump their existence.*

4. The idea that human misery is invariably externally caused and is forced on us by outside people and events Instead of the idea that neurosis is largely *caused by the view that we take* of unfortunate conditions.

5. The idea that *if something is or may be dangerous or fearsome* we should be terribly upset and endlessly obsess about it--

Instead of the idea that one would better frankly face it and render it non-dangerous and, *when that is not possible, accept the inevitable.*

6. The idea that it is easier to avoid than to face life difficulties and self-responsibilities --Instead of the idea that *the so-called easy way is usually much harder in the long run.*

7. The idea that we absolutely need something *other or stronger or greater than ourself on which to rely* --Instead of the idea that it is better to take the risks of thinking and acting less dependently.

8. The idea that we should be thoroughly competent, intelligent, and achieving in all possible respects --Instead of the idea that we would better do rather than always need to do well, and *accept ourself as a quite imperfect creature, who has general human limitations and specific fallibilities.*

9. The idea that because something once strongly affected our life, *it should indefinitely affect it* --Instead of the idea that we can learn from our past experiences but not be overly-attached to or prejudiced by them.

10. The idea that we *must* have certain and perfect control over things --Instead of the idea that the world is full of improbability and chance and that *we can still enjoy life despite this.*

11. The idea that human happiness can be achieved by inertia and inaction --Instead of the idea that *we tend to be happiest when we are vitally absorbed in creative pursuits, or when we are devoting ourselves to people or projects outside ourselves.*

12. The idea that we have virtually no control over our emotions and that we cannot help feeling disturbed about things --Instead of the idea that we have real control over our destructive emotions if we choose to work at *changing the "musturbatory" hypotheses which we often employ to create them.*

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, what now follows is a more reasonable way to look at the situation:

(Note: You may have to refer back to the irrational beliefs in order for each of the below to make sense.)

1. **It is not possible for everyone to love and approve of us;** indeed, we can not 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. *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.*
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.
5. **It is not external events but our views, our self-talk, our beliefs about those events that upset us.** So, challenge your irrational ideas. 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 lifestyle 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, 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.**
10. **This helpless, hopeless "I-can't-change" attitude is not in keeping with modern-day self-help and therapeutic methods.** There are many ways to change unwanted feelings. 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."**

12. Wrong! **There is no one perfect solution but there may be several good alternatives.** Try one, see what happens (observe the 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.**

There is a **connection between ineffective patterns of thinking and anxiety and depression!** Keep some records this week. You will know it is time to **write something down when you're experiencing some emotional distress.**

<h2>THE ABC WORKSHEET</h2>
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**EXAMPLE:**

<b>ABC of Emotional and Behavioral Problems (Adapted from Ellis &amp; Dryden, 1997)</b>		
<b>A Activating Event (Complete this section second)</b>	<b>B Belief</b>	<b>C Consequence</b>
Describe the situation about which you felt disturbed.  An A can be internal or external.  An A can refer to an event in the past, present, or future.	<b>iBs (Irrational Beliefs) (Complete this section third)</b>  Look for <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dogmatic Demands (musts, absolute shoulds, oughts)</li> <li>• Awfulizing (It's awful, terrible, horrible)</li> <li>• Low Frustration Tolerance (I can't stand it, I can't bear it)</li> <li>• Self or Other Damning (bad, worthless, unworthy)</li> </ul>	<b>Unhealthy Emotions/Behavior (Complete this section first)</b>  <input type="checkbox"/> Anxiety or Depression <input type="checkbox"/> Anger <input type="checkbox"/> Guilt <input type="checkbox"/> Shame or Embarrassment <input type="checkbox"/> Hurt or Jealousy <input type="checkbox"/> Lashing Out <input type="checkbox"/> Compulsive Behaviour (overeating, etc.)
	<b>Disputing (Complete this section fourth)</b>	

	<input type="checkbox"/> Is it true? Where is the evidence to support the existence of my irrational belief? Is it consistent with reality? <input type="checkbox"/> Is it logical? Does it logically follow from my rational belief? <input type="checkbox"/> Is it helpful? Where is holding this belief getting me?	
	<b>rBs (Rational Beliefs)</b> <b>(Complete this section fifth)</b>	<b>Healthy Emotions / Constructive Behavior</b> <b>(Complete this section sixth)</b>
	Strive for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Non-Dogmatic Preferences (wishes, wants, desire)</li> <li>• Evaluating Badness (it's bad, unfortunate)</li> <li>• High Frustration Tolerance (I can stand it, I can bear it)</li> <li>• Self-Other Acceptance (Fallible human being concept)</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/> Concern <input type="checkbox"/> Sadness <input type="checkbox"/> Annoyance <input type="checkbox"/> Remorse <input type="checkbox"/> Disappointment <input type="checkbox"/> Regret <input type="checkbox"/> Assertive Behavior and Communication <input type="checkbox"/> Constructive Problem Solving

On the [ABC worksheet](#), it looks like you're working backwards, because you're beginning in the last column. Now that we're looking at the chart, I bet you can see how it makes sense to begin with the emotion or the Consequence because that is probably what you notice first. So, first, you must give the emotion a name. It might be anxiety, anger, guilt, depression, or...you get the idea.

After you've identified the emotion or the Consequence and put it in the C (Unhealthy Emotions) box, go back and describe the situation you were in (in the A box). Record where you were, who was there, what was going on, and so on. This is the A on your chart.

Then, go ahead and consider all of the things that occurred to you when you were in the situation (in the B, Irrational Beliefs, box). Write down all of the things you were saying to yourself. This is the first B in your chart, the Irrational Beliefs. At this point you will be able to see how it makes sense in your head; if you were really having those thoughts, it only stands to reason that they would go together with the emotions you felt (in the Unhealthy Emotions box).

Now that you've got it all down on paper, you can really examine those thoughts. Ask yourself some questions. *Is this stuff true to the best of my knowledge?*

*Does it help me to think this way?* Make some notes in the B box under Disputing.

Now that you've subjected those thoughts to some examination, come up with some alternatives and record them in the B box under Rational Beliefs. These are thoughts that are going to help you rather than hinder you. They have to be true; you can't tell yourself a bunch

of happy lies, because no part of you will ever believe them. These Rational Beliefs must possibly be true, although they were not the thoughts that first occurred to you.

Just as your original Irrational Beliefs led quite naturally to the Unhealthy Emotions, the new Rational Beliefs will lead to a more constructive reaction. If you really believed those alternative Rational Beliefs, what would your new emotional reaction be? Make some notes in the C box, under Healthy Emotions.

Your goal in this chart is to **First, notice the negative emotion you feel (Unhealthy Emotion). Then, link those emotions to what was going on (Activating Event)**, and how you interpreted what was going on (*Irrational Beliefs*).

Your job is to then critically examine your interpretation (**Disputing**). If it doesn't hold up, or does not work for you, **come up with some interpretations that are workable (Rational Beliefs)**. Finally, see how the new interpretations (Rational Beliefs) would naturally lead to a more tempered, effective, and appropriate emotion (Healthy Emotion)

*Learning this technique is a critical step in the path to enduring happiness!*

**Keep in mind the following:**

1. Don't blame others for making you unhappy. Take responsibility for making yourself happy.
2. *Give yourself permission* to make yourself happy-even if in so doing, others make themselves unhappy.
3. Make time for yourself to do things which bring you pleasure and enjoyment in the short-term.
4. *Do things for others* and your community without expecting anything back in return.
5. Sacrifice short-term pleasures and put up with short-term discomforts in order to achieve longer-term gains.
6. Accept the fallibility of others and yourself.
7. *Don't take things personally.*
8. *Take a chance* even when you might fail at things at work or in your personal relationships.
9. Don't become overly-concerned with what people think about you and what you are doing.
10. *See uncertainty as a challenge-do not be afraid of it.*

Print out copies of the empty worksheet page (next) to practice disputing various emotional upset situations in YOUR life.

<b>ABC of Emotional and Behavioral Problems</b>		
<b>A</b> Activating Event (Complete this section <b>second</b> )	<b>B</b> Belief	<b>C</b> Consequence
	<b>iBs (Irrational Beliefs)</b> (Complete this section <b>third</b> )	<b>Unhealthy Emotions/Behavior</b> (Complete this section <b>first</b> )
	<b>Disputing</b> (Complete this section <b>fourth</b> )	
	<b>rBs (Rational Beliefs)</b> (Complete this section <b>fifth</b> )	<b>Healthy Emotions / Constructive Behavior</b> (Complete this section <b>sixth</b> )