

## Albert Ellis' cognitive theory

### introduction :

**Albert Ellis** (September 27, 1913 – July 24, 2007) was an American psychologist and psychotherapist who founded rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT). He held MA and PhD degrees in clinical psychology from Columbia University, and was certified by the American Board of Professional Psychology (ABPP). He also founded, and was the President of, the New York City-based Albert Ellis Institute. He is generally considered to be one of the originators of the cognitive revolutionary paradigm shift in psychotherapy and an early proponent and developer of cognitive-behavioral therapies.

Based on a 1982 professional survey of American and Canadian psychologists, he was considered the second most influential psychotherapist in history (Carl Rogers ranked first in the survey; Sigmund Freud was ranked third).<sup>[3][4]</sup> Psychology Today noted that, "No individual—not even Freud himself—has had a greater impact on modern psychotherapy."

### 1. Overview of some Ellis principles:

#### a) Detect and modify cognitions:

At age 19, Ellis read the Stoics. When he becomes disillusioned with his practice as a psychoanalyst, Ellis will remember that, for these philosophers, the most important instrument of psychological change is the manipulation of the way of perceiving and interpreting events. It will then focus on our ability to actively modify thoughts. He will never stop repeating this famous maxim of Epictetus: "What troubles men is not things, but judgments relating to things". Ellis can thus be considered the father of "cognitive therapy" – an expression

which was first used by the other main architect of this approach, Aaron Beck, in the 1960s. The central idea of Ellis lies in his formula “You feel the way you think”. He reformulated the behaviorist diagram “A-B-C” (Antecedents – Behavior – Consequences) in the terms: “Activating event – Belief system – emotional and/or behavioral Consequences”. Here is one of his illustrations .

At point A an event occurs: you have a job you like and you are suddenly fired. At point C, you feel completely depressed, you stay at home, you don't look for a new job. Because the emotional and behavioral consequences (C) follow almost immediately the activating experience, you believe that Cause C. You say to yourself: "I lost my job and that plunges me into despair."

However, these conclusions are not inevitable. C is not automatically produced by A. C depends on B (Beliefs), your beliefs about A. It is you who determine emotional and behavioral consequences, through the fact that you adhere to a system of beliefs and values developed since childhood.

If you think you absolutely need this job and you keep telling yourself, “I need it again. It's impossible for me to live without him. His loss is terrible”, you will experience in C radical frustration, anger or hatred, or even despair and depression.

If you say to yourself, “I loved this job and wish I had kept it. His loss upsets me, but too bad, it's not the end of the world", you will tend to feel only disappointment, regret or irritation.

If you focus on the negative aspects of this job and you say to yourself, “Okay, basically this job was starting to lack interest. This is an opportunity to do something else,” you will feel indifference or perhaps even relief.

In a word, according to Ellis, “individuals largely control their destiny through their adherence to beliefs and values.”

**b) Identify and reduce “musts”:**

Another idea dear to the Stoics is that part of our misfortunes comes from the strength of our desires. To suffer less, it is important to renounce absolute desires. This idea is found in Karen Horney, who spoke of “the tyranny of musts (it must, I must)” .

Ellis found that the beliefs underlying many disruptive ideas are rigid imperatives (“I must control myself in all circumstances,” “Others must always treat me with respect,” etc.). These imperatives lead, by their unrealistic nature, to dramatizations (“it's awful”), condemnations of oneself (“I'm bad”) or of others (“they're bastards”) and, if these situations are repeated , defeatism or depression. Ellis often made this pun: “Musturbation is an infinitely more pernicious type of behavior than masturbation.”

According to Ellis, a large number of neuroticizing injunctions can be reduced to the following three categories :

(a) I must do everything I do well and I must always be esteemed by others, otherwise I am worthless.

(b) Others must treat me with care and kindness, exactly as I want them to treat me, otherwise they must be severely judged and punished.

(c) The environment should be such that I get everything I want, comfortably, quickly, easily. Nothing can happen that I don't want, otherwise life is terrible, the world is rotten and I absolutely can't stand it.

**c) Encourage experimentation with actions**

Ellis says that at the age of 19 his life was overshadowed by two phobias: the fear of public speaking and of addressing young women. To get rid of it, he carried out “shame-attacking exercises”. He tried to find every possible opportunity to speak in groups. He regularly went to parks to sit near a single woman and strike up a conversation. At dozens of such meetings, women quickly left, but three-quarters, says Ellis, “agreed to chat about their knitting, birds, a book and many other things.” None vomited, none called a police officer and I did not die”

Ellis and Beck, the pioneers of cognitive therapies, recognized the importance of action to “deeply” modify thinking habits. Thus Ellis writes: “In the final analysis, self-talk is not enough. In many cases, it is in your best interest to force yourself, to push yourself forward, into action. Often you have the power to organize your own acts of courage: going to the boss's office, asking an attractive person to dance, pitching your publishing project to an editor. You can force yourself into action, repeating it for a long time, over and over again, until this action becomes easier and easier, and even pleasant” [17]. Ellis thus came to modify the name of his method, inserting the qualifier “behavioral”. In a 2001 interview, when asked “how would you like to be remembered,” he responded: “as one of the founders of cognitive-behavioral therapies” [18]. This is how it took its place in the history of TCC. Any well-trained behaviorist today has internalized many of his ideas.

**d) Repeat and make effort:**

Ellis points out that many toxic beliefs are effectively replaced by others only through hard work, specifically the following behaviors: “(a) contesting and challenging them, forcefully and repetitively; (b) forcing oneself to stand firm despite the pain and turmoil that comes when one strongly contradicts them; (c) try to experience other emotions about them or their effects (e.g. trying to feel happy about quitting instead of clinging to the idea that it's terrible to quit by the suffering of abstinence); (d) act against them in a direct and vigorous manner” [19].

**e) Tolerating painful emotions:**

Ellis warns against what he called “secondary disorders” or “second-tier disorders,” the disturbances that result from the dramatization of “primary disorders.” He writes: “People demand freedom from problems and control over their emotional destiny. As a result, they become anxious because of their anxieties, they become depressed at the thought of their depressions, they blame themselves because they have their tantrums. [...] Almost all humans behave in a crazy way: not only do they trouble themselves for innumerable reasons, but they worry needlessly about the troubles that result from them” [20].

Experimental research has confirmed that it is difficult and often counterproductive to attempt to directly modify mood or strong emotion, at least in stressful situations. [21] This fact has been put at the center of "emotion therapy". acceptance and commitment” (ACT), which is now fashionable.

To learn more about situations in which it is important to tolerate painful emotions: <http://www.pseudo-sciences.org/spip.php?article2696>

#### **f) Accept yourself globally:**

The Polish philosopher Alfred Korzybski developed the idea (in *Science and Sanity*, 1933) that “through the use of the “being” of identity, we easily manage to disturb ourselves, torment us, terrorize us, discourage us; or else we become absolutists, dogmatizers” [22]. Ellis placed a lot of emphasis on this design. He wrote: “From the moment we made this discovery, we have increasingly helped our clients to consciously change their semantic usage, thereby modifying the way they think, feel and act. [...] For example, when a customer says: “I'm a sad man for being so incompetent” or “I treated Smith badly, I'm a bastard”, we help them replace these statements with: “It is very regrettable to act incompetently, but that does not make me a sad sir”, “I behaved immorally and reprehensibly when I treated Smith so badly, but we cannot legitimately judge that I'm a bastard.” [...] You can more easily improve your situation if, instead of declaring: “My parents are the support