Albert Ellis: Unsung hero of positive psychology†

Michael E. Bernard*a, Jeffrey J. Frohb, Raymond DiGiuseppec, Marie R. Joyced and Windy Dryden*e

aMelbourne Graduate School of Education, The University of Melbourne, Level 3, Alice Hoy Building, Parkville, Victoria 3010, Australia; bDepartment of Psychology, Hofstra University, 210 Hauser Hall, Hempstead, NY 11549, USA; cDepartment of Psychology, St. John’s University, 8000 Utopia Parkway, Queens, NY 11439, USA; dQuality of Life and Social Justice Research Centre, Australian Catholic University, Locked Bag 4115, Fitzroy, Victoria 3065, Australia; ePACE, Goldsmiths University of London, New Cross, London, SE14 6NW, UK

(Received 11 February 2010; final version received 30 May 2010)

The contributions of Albert Ellis to the understanding of human happiness including his suggestions for living a happier life have not been represented in the field of positive psychology. This article presents Ellis’ theoretical constructs associated with his conception of happiness (dual nature of human psyche, self-actualization, purpose and goals of life and short- and long-term happiness). Eleven of Ellis’ rational principles of living (e.g. self-interest, self-direction, self-acceptance, commitment to absorbing activities, hedonism) are presented. When consistently applied in practice, they may help people to experience frequent positive affect, less frequent and intense negative emotions and high life satisfaction. It will show how Ellis’ ABC-DE scientific method can be used with individuals to lessen unhappiness. Suggestions are provided for research into associations between rationality and happiness as well as the impact of different rationality-based interventions on happiness.

Keywords: rationality; irrationality; happiness; positive psychology; rational emotive behaviour therapy; Albert Ellis

At the age of 16, I studied philosophy as a hobby, long before I ever thought of becoming a psychotherapist. I was particularly interested in the philosophy of human happiness. So I started devising ways for people – notably myself – to reduce their emotional upsets and increase their sense of fulfilment in life . . . At the age of 40, I went back to ancient philosophers to see what they said about misery and happiness. Because of my passion for philosophy and especially for the philosophy of happiness, my early books on REBT not only told people how to ward off misery and neurosis but how to be self-fulfilled and more actualizing in their love, marriage and family affairs. Albert Ellis (1994)

Introduction

Over the past 60 years, a rational approach to happiness in modern-day living has evolved. This approach illuminates how the mental faculty of rationality can help people to not only be less unhappy when faced with adversities and unfortunate or frustrating events, but also can contribute to people living enjoyable, pleasurable, fulfilled and happy lives.

As a guide to happiness for people with and without emotional problems, Albert Ellis first wrote about rational living in the 1960s. Principles of rational living (rational beliefs) are the essential ingredients of a rational philosophy of personal happiness that Ellis provided for people to help them to live enjoyable, enriched, satisfying and pleasurable lives (Bernard, 2010). Millions of people have profited from the principles that have helped them to think, feel and act in ways that aid their search for happiness. Millions of copies of Ellis’ well-known self-help books dealing with rational living and happiness have been sold worldwide.

When employed in counselling and therapy, the approach is known as rational emotive behaviour therapy (REBT; Ellis, 1962, 1994) and was created by Albert Ellis as a new type of therapy for helping people who experience significant emotional distress, interpersonal difficulties and other disorders (e.g. substance abuse) to overcome problems and to live more fulfilled lives. REBT has dual goals: (1) to help people overcome their emotional blocks and disturbances and (2) to help people grow according to their own goals and designs, to become more fully functioning, more self-actualizing and happier than they would otherwise be (Ellis & Becker, 1982). Today, Albert Ellis is recognized as one of the most popular and significant figures in the field of counselling and psychotherapy in the world.

*Corresponding author. Email: m.bernard@unimelb.edu.au
†Albert Ellis was born on 27 September 1913 and died on 24 July 2007.

ISSN 1743–9760 print/ISSN 1743–9779 online
© 2010 Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/17439760.2010.498622
http://www.informaworld.com
This article addresses two issues related to the work of Albert Ellis. First, a perception persists within the field of positive psychology that the work of Albert Ellis is primarily about emotional misery reduction. Martin Seligman (personal communication, 21 December 2008) has indicated that as a result, Ellis’ influence has not been felt, except indirectly, in positive psychology. This article seeks to correct the perception of the field of positive psychology concerning the contribution of Albert Ellis to the understanding of the psychological architecture of human happiness.

Second, this article will document Ellis’ rich contribution to the promotion of human happiness and, in particular, how rational principles and associated practices can help people live pleasurable and fulfilled lives. It is hoped that Ellis’ rationality-based happiness interventions will become recognized and studied to see if they make a distinctive difference to the science of positive psychology as well as to the lives of everyday people.


Over many years of writing, public lecturing and professional conferencing, Ellis offered guidance for the general public on how to utilize their innate capacities for rationality to live happier and more fulfilled lives. He founded the Institute for Rational Living in New York City to serve this function. At the same time, he operated the Institute for Rational Emotive Therapy (formerly the Institute for the Advanced Study of Rational Emotive Psychotherapy) that provides training for counsellors and therapists including REBT for managing and solving their emotional problems that block their happiness.

Defining constructs of Albert Ellis’ approach to happiness

The dual nature of the human psyche

One of Ellis’ unique insights is the duality of human psychological functioning. He theorized that all human beings have dual biological tendencies that operate in opposition to one another and that explain much of the way the mind operates including how people think, feel and act. There is the self-defeating tendency he called irrationality as well as the self-enhancing tendency he referred to as rationality (Ellis, 1962, 1973, 1988, 1994, 1999, 2004a). The rational side of people’s psychological functioning guides them in their pursuit of happiness and self-fulfilment.

The irrational dimension of psychological functioning is characterized by high negative emotionality (e.g. anxiety, depression, anger, self-pity, guilt) and self-defeating behaviour (e.g. aggression, avoidance, procrastination, substance abuse). The cognitive aspects of irrationality are dogmatic, rigid, unscientific irrational beliefs and associated irrational thinking that Ellis referred to as absolutizing or musturbation (e.g. Ellis, 1962, 1994). Generally, when people think irrationally about adverse situations and events and, as a consequence experience extreme anger, anxiety and depression, they express their preferences, desires and wishes as demands, commands, shoulds, needs, oughts and musts (e.g. ‘Because I prefer success, approval and/or comfort, I must be successful, loved and/or comfortable’; ‘I must have what I want’). Ellis proposed a biological tendency of all humans to greater or lesser extents to think illogically as seen in their absolutizing. Thinking in absolutes is generally illogical. It does not logically follow that because someone prefers or desires a set of conditions to exist, they must exist. Ellis also proposed additional irrational thinking processes that derive from absolutizing including awfulizing (blowing the badness of events out of proportion), I can’t-stand-it-itis (low frustration tolerance) and global rating of self, others and the world.

To summarize Ellis’ position on happiness, he believed that by developing people’s potential for rationality through their practice of rational principles of living (e.g. self-direction, commitment to creative and absorbing pursuits, hedonism, risk taking and experimentation, problem solving), they will likely experience pleasure including positive affect in the short-term and satisfaction of life’s goals (achievement, love, minimum of pain and maximum of pleasure) in the long-term. Ellis expressed the view that while everyone has the potential for rationality, the potential requires cultivation. Ellis also firmly believed that given people’s irrational propensity for experiencing emotional problems about life’s inevitable hassles and misfortunes, they can benefit from a scientific, cognitive restructuring method, such as the ABC-DEs of REBT for managing and solving their emotional problems that block their happiness.
expressed in preferential ways of desiring and seeking goals and dealing with life’s obstructions and hardships. Ellis’ aim in therapy as well as his advice for all people seeking happiness and fulfillment was for people to maintain strong preferences for what they desire and value including happiness, while refraining from believing that they must have what they want. Giving up demanding beliefs often has the effect of people working harder to achieve what makes them happy. Believing that one is entitled to things that one wants can make attempts to achieve them irrelevant.

**Self-actualization**
Ellis asserted that biologically, all humans are born with a drive to develop their innate potentialities (Ellis, 1994). The drive, which Ellis and other humanistic psychologists refer to as the self-actualizing instinct or tendency, results in high levels of happiness and satisfaction when people discover areas of living where they can express their unique talents and aptitudes and achieve fulfillment. Increased happiness and freedom from disturbance can be achieved because all humans are born with constructive and creative tendencies and are born with the ability to sharpen and increase their self-fulfilling tendencies (Ellis, 1973).

Ellis indicated that to more fully actualize themselves, people had better choose to work at achieving more growth, development and happiness. More fully functioning people can consciously choose the goal of becoming more self-actualized. According to Ellis, self-actualization involves the pursuit of excellence and enjoyment; whichever people choose to desire and emphasize.

**The purpose and goals of life**
What people choose to do in life is naturally enough associated with the overall goals and purposes they have for living. Ellis proposed the following goals and purposes as those that most human beings in western societies would accept for themselves. For Ellis, the most general and far-reaching goals people have are to live a long and happy life. According to Ellis, the attainment of these two goals is facilitated when three conditions exist: (1) people are achieving to the best of their abilities in their chosen field of work endeavours or in areas of life that they find interesting and absorbing, (2) people are involved in satisfying and loving relationships with significant others (partner, family, friends and social group) and (3) people experience a minimum of needless pain and emotional misery as well as a maximum of comfort and pleasure.

Ellis recognized that many different life strategies or personal philosophies can determine how people realize these goals and purposes. Which ones work best for the individual is an empirical question.

**Short-term and long-term happiness**
In the recent years, well-being researchers have studied **hedonic happiness** (pleasure seeking, avoidance of pain). Hedonic happiness is close in meaning to ‘subjective well-being’ and consists of the three components of: (1) frequent positive affect, (2) infrequent negative affect and (3) high life satisfaction (e.g. Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). Ellis would say that the exercise of rationality through the application of principles of rational living helps people to attain the three aspects of subjective well-being. People are likely to experience higher degrees of life satisfaction through deployment of rational principles in daily living, including people creatively experimenting and discovering what brings them pleasure, what activities they enjoy and which pursuits bring them satisfaction and fulfillment. As a means of reducing negative affect, people learn how to use the REBT scientific method for cognitively restructuring irrational to rational beliefs. He has also said that rationality helps people to self-manage and direct the process of self-actualization frequently resulting in people living life to its fullest.

Ellis encapsulates happiness as striving for the long-range pleasure of tomorrow as well as the short-range satisfactions of today (Ellis & Harper, 1962, 1975). In the short-term, Ellis’ happiness takes on the hallmarks of hedonic happiness as he encourages people to have fun, enjoyment and experience pleasure without emotional misery when confronted with life’s muddles and puddles.

In his early days, perhaps Ellis was most known for his pioneering work in sex and helping liberate people from conventional attitudes towards sexual experience. He advised people not only in therapy but also in his many self-help books (e.g. *The American Sexual Tragedy* (Ellis, 1954/1966), *Sex without Guilt* (Ellis, 1958, 1965), *The Art and Science of Love* (Ellis, 1960/1969) on sexual gratification including different ways to become sexually excited and to achieve orgasm.

Ellis was equally if not more interested in helping people achieve satisfaction and fulfillment in the long-term. For Ellis, long-term happiness is a by-product of people achieving their goals and purposes in life; namely, (1) using strengths of character and personality traits, including rationality to achieve and excel at work (employment) and in other endeavours (hobbies), (2) relying on social competences and rationality to experience loving relationships that endure with one or more significant others including partner/spouse, family and close friends and (3) deploying personal, coping resources, including rational self-talk and
coping skills in order to only experience minimum periods of heightened, negative emotionality and stress.

Rational principles of living

How can you make yourself happy? Increased happiness and freedom from disturbance can be achieved, because all humans are born with constructive and creative tendencies and born with the ability to sharpen and increase their self-fulfilling tendencies. (Ellis, 1988)

Ellis identified a number of rational principles that help people to solve emotional and practical problems and to seek out experiences and people that lead to happier and more fulfilled lives.

Rational principle 1: Self-interest

According to Ellis, sensible and emotionally healthy people tend to be first or primarily interested in themselves and to put their own interests at least a little above the interests of others (Ellis & Bernard, 1985). They sacrifice to some degree for those for whom they care – but not overwhelmingly or completely. Ellis maintained that everyone has a right to be happy and to search for pursuits and experiences that are pleasurable to them in the short-term and fulfilling in the long-term.

Ellis believed that the attainment of happiness was more likely to be achieved from individuals becoming absorbed in pursuits that bring them pleasure in the short- and long-term and not from defining the purpose of their lives as serving the needs of others. He exhorted people to explore life, in order to experience the enjoyments and satisfactions that accompany the involvement in activities that may have little to do with meeting the needs of others (e.g. stamp collecting).

Rational principle 2: Social interest

According to Ellis, emotional health and self-actualization had better always include people being concerned about the present and future welfare of others. Although Ellis stressed the inalienable right of all humans to their own personal happiness, he espoused a form of rational morality consisting of two basic rules: (1) be kind to yourself, and (2) do not harm others (Ellis & Becker, 1982). First, he encouraged people to follow through on their natural and self-actualizing desires and to pursue individual and personal freedom without feeling guilty. Second, he encouraged people to be ethically responsible in their pursuit of happiness so that their individual actions do not hurt others or interfere with their rights to being treated with respect nor harm society.

Ellis accepted that social interest and involvements abet personal happiness. Some of the most fulfilling aspects of people’s lives are when they make concerted efforts to become involved in helping other people realize their potential.

Rational principle 3: Self-direction

Ellis was clear that it is risky for people to hope for and expect that other people (family, partner) or the organization (employers, schools or governments) will be responsible for their happiness. Ellis noted that others are not infrequently self-concerned and engage in self-interested and sometimes unfair and inconsiderate behaviour that can thwart the happiness of others. As a result, he was all for people thinking about how best to be happy as well as to realize that there is no law of the universe that says that anyone deserves to be happy. Ellis asserted that there is no point in waiting around for happiness.

To become more self-directed, Ellis indicated that people can decide to actively plan for those experiences and pursuits that they forecast will bring them greater short- and long-term pleasure and happiness. He advised people in his therapy sessions, public lectures and books to examine their current and anticipated future lifestyle and make decisions about those activities they are engaged in that bring them displeasure and see, sometimes through negotiation with significant others, if they can be shared or eliminated.

Rational principle 4: Self-acceptance

According to Ellis, self-acceptance is a rational belief that liberates people to grow. By eliminating the rating of self as much as possible, people can greatly reduce their anxiety and feelings of inadequacy and as a result feel free to make mistakes and risk rejection from others, in their quest for discovering what they truly enjoy doing.

Ellis stressed that human beings are not rateable, as there exists no universally accepted standard for judging human worth (e.g. Ellis, 1962, 1988, 1994). Nonetheless, people continue to rate themselves (and others) using arbitrary definitions of good and bad. Ellis rejected any notion of a universalistic definition of what it means to be a good or bad person, and adopted the position that while it is beneficial for people to measure and evaluate their own traits and behaviours, it is not sensible to use their performances or other’s opinions of them as a basis for globally rating themselves. Ellis consistently discussed
the importance of people enjoying themselves rather than proving themselves.

Rational principle 5: Tolerance of others

There is little question that Ellis believed that people who are tolerant of others display high levels of social intelligence. This is displayed in two ways. First, they are aware of the many and varied positive characteristics in people who come from diverse cultures and different backgrounds. This awareness includes looking beyond specific disagreeable behaviours of individuals and groups and being open-minded in considering their strengths.

Second, people who are tolerant of others display what Ellis called unconditional other-acceptance. They do not make overall judgements of people’s worth based on their behaviour, customs, characteristics or ideology.

Ellis discussed that all human beings are fallible, mistake-makers who from time-to-time act in ignorant ideology. Ellis endorsed the Christian position of accepting all sinners but not their sins. He said that people could then choose in a non-disturbed way to disengage themselves from people whose behaviour they find immoral and harmful or to firmly try to induce them and even penalize them to change their behaviour. However, having friends, lovers and companions requires relating to fallible people. Rejecting people because of their flaws from close relationships will leave one alone, as all people are fallible. Rage, hostility and aggression stem from intolerance that is at the core of most bigotry including racism, sexism and ageism.

In his explication of tolerance, Ellis (2004b) also helped people refute the notion that because the world is so full of human suffering including cruel violence and terrorism that it is a totally despicable place and people cannot continue to live in it and be happy at all.

Rational principle 6: Short-term and long-term hedonism

Ellis has been criticized for being crassly hedonistic (seeking pleasure and freedom from pain) and for teaching people to enjoy themselves at the expense of their deeper, or more rewarding commitments (to others). This view is false. Despite helping people to alleviate emotional distress and to pursue activities that bring immediate gratification and short-term pleasure, one of the main principles of rational living espoused by Ellis is the Stoic principle of long-range rather than short-term hedonism.

Ellis observed that well-adjusted people seek both the pleasures of the moment and those of the future, and do not often court future pain for present gain.

People are hedonistic, that is, happiness-seeking and pain avoidant, but they assume they will probably live for quite a few years and that they had better think of both today and tomorrow and not be obsessed with immediate gratification (Ellis & Bernard, 1985).

Ellis discouraged people from doing things the easy way, but rather counselled them to do things the more rewarding way that oftentimes require the delay of gratification which in the short-run is often more difficult.

Rational principle 7: Commitment to creative, absorbing activities and pursuits

Without question, one of the most important insights Ellis offered on happiness is the importance of becoming involved in creative and vitally absorbing pursuits and activities. A journey for all people to take that increases the likelihood of happiness is discovering those activities that offer immediate pleasure and enjoyment in their doing and, when pursued over an extended period at work, in relationships and avocationally, result in satisfaction and fulfilment (Ellis & Harper, 1975). Ellis identified three main forms of vital absorption: (1) loving or feeling absorbed in other people, (2) creating or getting absorbed in things and (3) philosophizing or getting absorbed in ideas.

In the short-term, Ellis considered happiness synonymous with the feelings of enjoyment and pleasure. As indicated earlier, Ellis is known for his pioneering work in sex and helping people discover how they may enjoy sexual experiences. He also encouraged people to experience life to its fullest in diverse areas of their potential interest to see what they would find stimulating, exciting and, yes, pleasurable. In his book with Irving Becker A Guide to Personal Happiness, Ellis provided areas of potential enjoyable activities and pursuits for people to explore including aesthetic appreciation, exercising, food activities, handicraft activities, martial arts, mechanical activities, outdoor activities, performing arts, relaxing activities, socializing, sports, travelling, writing activities and volunteering.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) discusses ‘flow experience’ activities in which people become so intensively or flowingly involved that they derive unusual fun or joy. These activities are similar to what Ellis calls a ‘vital absorbing interest’ often adding to their enjoyment.

Rational principle 8: Risk taking and experimenting

In Reason and Emotion in Psychotherapy (Ellis, 1962, 1994), Ellis wrote that self-actualization and long-term hedonism are assisted when people experiment with many tasks and projects to discover what they really want and do not want. In order to achieve maximum
involvement in life including heightened, deepened and new enjoyments, Ellis counselled that people keep risking new defeats and failures.

Ellis encouraged people to design risk-taking activities where they believe there is a high likelihood of failure to help them combat their fear of failure and performance anxiety. People can design risk-taking activities to prove to themselves that failure is not the end of the world and that they can stand to fail. Risk-taking activities also help people to extend their usual, daily experiences and by moving out of their comfort zones, increase the opportunity and likelihood that they will find new interesting experiences that bring pleasure.

Rational principle 9: High frustration tolerance and will power

Because of human inertia as well as the irrational proclivity for emotional difficulties, Ellis called for will power and high frustration tolerance as the trait or rational belief that can help people to achieve happiness. By ridding themselves of frustration intolerance and other irrational beliefs and their emotional problems, people are better able to engage their intellect in planning for how best to live their lives (Ellis, 1999). Ellis defined high frustration tolerance as preferring but not demanding that life provides you with what you want comfortably and easily and knowing that in order to achieve pleasant results in the long-term, you sometimes have to do unpleasant things in the short-term.

Ellis differentiated between having the will and having will power to work on becoming happier. ‘Will’ means having or making a choice or decision. People choose to do (or not to do) something or they make a decision to do (or not to do something). The ‘will’ to change (to be less upset about someone’s behaviour; to try out new, potentially rewarding activities) only means people decide to change – and then they may or may not work very hard at doing so. However, ‘will power’ is different and harder than merely expressing the ‘will’ to change for with ‘will power’ people not only have the power to make the decision but they follow it up in practice. Ellis recognized that the achievement of any goal, whether accomplishing a skill or forming a close relationship requires hard work and effort.

Rational principle 10: Problem solving

Ellis was a realist concerning life. He would often state the obvious. When people create goals to achieve in areas of work, relationships and comforts, these goals create and bring with them many practical problems to solve. How to get a good education? Where to find a suitable mate? Which profession should be chosen and how shall success be achieved? What recreations are enjoyable and worthy of people’s time and effort?

Ellis provided guidance in the problem solving process by identifying two types of problems people experience when confronted with obstacles that block their goals.

Practical problems are those that people experience with reality. Common examples are sub-standard work performance (e.g. failing a test; not achieving monthly performance goals) and interpersonal difficulties and challenges with family, friends, and at work (e.g. partner giving their partner a hard time, colleague not following through on a commitment, manager treating you disrespectfully, rejection including the ending of a relationship, meeting someone new). Ellis encouraged people to do their best to solve their practical problems and provided many methods that are widely employed in business, industry, management and education.

Emotional problems are generally those extreme emotional reactions (e.g. panic, depression, self-hatred, rage) about a reality problem with something or someone. Ellis indicated that once people recognize a reality problem, they can try to solve it or they can choose to make themselves extremely upset about it. For Ellis, emotional problem solving means ongoing use of his ABC-DE model including the disputing and changing of irrational beliefs and self-talk.

Rational principle 11: Scientific thinking and flexibility

In constructing his view of the rational mind, Ellis was enamoured with the work of the psychologist Kelly (1955), who pointed out that people are born as natural scientists.

Ellis agreed with Kelly that the scientific method of setting up plausible hypotheses and then experimenting and checking to uphold or disprove them is probably the best (but not the only) method for discovering ‘truth’ and understanding ‘reality’ (Ellis, 1994). Furthermore, Ellis asserted that science is not only the use of logic and facts to falsify a theory, science is also continually revising and changing theories and trying to replace them with more valid ideas.

Science is flexible rather than rigid and open-minded rather than dogmatic. Ellis called on people’s inherent capacity for scientific thinking to play a central role in determining how to go about living their lives. Using experimentation and self-questioning, people may objectively go about rejecting and confirming ways to think feel and behave that are self-enhancing.

Ellis held that anti-scientific, irrational thinking is a main cause of unhappiness and that if people are scientific and flexible about their desires, preferences
and values, they can refuse to become desperately unhappy. They can think: ‘I strongly prefer to have a great career and loving partner’ but will not dogmatically and unscientifically insist, ‘I must have a great career and lover’ and when they do not, conclude ‘I am a totally worthless and rotten person because I have not achieved and am not loved the way I should be’.

Ellis showed people how to use the ABC-DE scientific method to dispute irrational beliefs (‘Where is the evidence I’m a loser?’ ‘Where is it written in the universe that I must be loved and approved of all the time?’) to start thinking rationally again.

**REBT and the healthiness of negative emotions**

In a seminal edited book on the goals of psychotherapy, Mahrer (1967) reviewed his contributors’ chapters and noted that two types of psychotherapeutic goals emerged from their writings: (1) to overcome psychological disturbance and (2) to promote psychological growth. Building on this, Dryden (2008) argued that REBT therapists deal with different psychological issues in the following preferred order: (1) disturbance issues (where clients are disturbing themselves about an adversity at ‘A’ in the ‘ABC’ framework), (2) dissatisfaction issues (where clients have largely overcome their disturbance but are dissatisfied about the continued existence of the adversity at ‘A’), and (3) development issues where clients have either changed ‘A’ when it could be changed or adjusted constructively to ‘A’ when it could not be changed and are ready to focus on matters relating to promoting their development.

In this scheme, it is apparent that REBT therapists distinguish between psychological healthiness and happiness. We argue that it is difficult for people to be happy when they are actively disturbing themselves about an adversity and thus, a prime goal here is to help them address their disturbance by identifying, disputing and changing their irrational beliefs and helping them to develop alternative rational beliefs instead.

When people are helped to do this successfully, they then feel healthily bad, rather than unhealthily disturbed about the adversity at ‘A’. Such healthy bad feelings (based as they are on rational beliefs) then motivate people to address the adversities about which they previously disturbed themselves, and to change those that can be changed and adjust constructively when such adversities cannot be changed. Once people have addressed these dissatisfaction issues, they are best placed to be helped by their REBT therapists to work towards greater happiness.

The question remains whether a person can be helped to be happy when he is actively disturbed about an adversity or even when he is actively dissatisfied about an adversity. The REBT position is that it is certainly possible for a person to be relatively happy when in a dissatisfied state (although not about the adversity in question), while it is improbable for that person to be happy when in a disturbed state. Let us illustrate this point with an example of Ellis’ scientific, cognitive re-structuring method (the ABC-DEs of REBT) that helps people to become less upset and desperately unhappy about adversity and misfortune.

Norman has come to therapy because he is depressed and anxious about his recently acquired tinnitus. Before he developed this condition, Norman was an avid train-spotter, an activity that gave him much happiness. Since developing tinnitus, he had stopped this activity in case he was exposed to sudden loud noises that he feared might worsen his condition. Well-meaning friends had encouraged Norman to resume his pastime, which he did, but his disturbed feelings of anxiety and depression prevented him from enjoying train-spotting. Norman then depressed himself about his failure to enjoy an activity that had previously brought him much happiness. The REBT view is that unless Norman addresses effectively his disturbance he has little chance of being happy.

Let us now imagine that Norman seeks REBT for his anxious and depressed feelings (emotional consequences – ‘C’). His REBT therapist would help him to identify his irrational beliefs (‘B’), challenge and change the irrational beliefs (disputing – ‘D’) that underpinned his anxiety and depression about his tinnitus (activating/adverse event – ‘A’) and his depression (‘C’) about not enjoying train-spotting when he last went, and would help him to construct a set of alternative rational beliefs (rational effects ‘E’) and to act in ways that are consistent with these rational beliefs. Norman would thus feel concerned and sad that he had tinnitus rather than anxious and depressed about it, but he would still go train-spotting even if he did not enjoy it as much as he did pre-tinnitus. He would feel sad, but not depressed about this reduced enjoyment.

REBT theory (Dryden, 2008; Ellis, 1994) holds that concern and sadness are examples of healthy negative emotions as contrasted with anxiety and depression, which are seen as unhealthy or disturbed negative emotions. Healthy negative emotions are based on rational beliefs which make clear what the person desires, but does not demand. In this case, after challenging his irrational beliefs, Norman prefers not to have tinnitus and thus he is concerned and sad about having it, but he does not demand that he must not have it but accepts the condition as part of his life. Thus, he does not feel anxious and depressed about having it. These healthy negative emotions and the rational beliefs upon which they are based are deemed to be constructive responses to an adversity and help
the person acknowledge the badness of the adversity and thence change it if it can be changed and come to a healthy adjustment if it cannot be changed. In Norman’s case, he could not directly change his tinnitus, but with expert help, trial and error and a set of rational beliefs, he learned what he could and could not do to avoid further damaging his hearing. As a result, Norman was able to focus on the pleasures of train-spotting free from the disabling effects of his previously held irrational beliefs and the disturbed feelings of anxiety and depression that they helped to create.

Norman’s new rational beliefs about his adversity helped him to feel happy again when he engaged in his favourite pastime. He was not as happy as he was before he developed tinnitus, because the condition itself and some activities that he chose to avoid because they would probably damage his hearing reduced his happiness. However, the important thing is that he experienced far more happiness than he did when he held a set of irrational beliefs about tinnitus and its consequences.

This example shows three things: (1) when a person does not face an adversity at ‘A’, then he is free, theoretically at least, to engage fully in meaningful activities and, thus, experience happiness when thus engaged; (2) when a person faces an adversity at ‘A’ and holds a set of rational beliefs at ‘B’, then he experiences a set of healthy negative responses at ‘C’, which allows him to deal constructively with the adversity (i.e. to change it if it can be changed or adjust to it if it cannot be changed) and thus engage in meaningful activity, but, perhaps, not as fully as when the adversity is absent, thus, the person does still experience happiness, but is not as happy as in the previous scenario; and (3) when a person faces an adversity at ‘A’ and holds a set of irrational beliefs at ‘B’, then he experiences a set of unhealthy and disturbed negative responses at ‘C’ which prevents him from dealing constructively with the adversity and thus significantly interferes with his engagement in meaningful activity with an accompanying significant reduction or eradication of happiness.

In REBT, Ellis proposed that the ‘E’ (new rational effect/beliefs) not only helps people to experience healthy negative emotions and to be less unhappy in the face of adversity, the ‘E’ is also the attitudinal gateway to greater and long-lasting happiness.

Research perspectives

Ellis and REBT have always been scientific. Ellis lamented that because the Albert Ellis Institute was not affiliated with a university, he was unable to attract research funding and dissertation students to test his hypotheses about the role of rationality and irrationality in human happiness and misery.

A recent representative study (Froh et al., 2007) investigated the relationship of irrational beliefs (not rational beliefs) and interpersonal relationships to life satisfaction employing a combined sample of psychotherapy and college undergraduates. Results indicated that interpersonal relations mediated the association between global irrationality and life satisfaction. The authors concluded that individuals with higher levels of irrationality were more likely to experience relationship difficulties, subsequently engendering lower life satisfaction.

The following research questions which are based on Ellis’ conceptions of happiness help illuminate for positive psychology researchers new areas for investigation.

- What is the relationship between principles of rational living (e.g. self-interest, self-acceptance, social interest, hedonism, commitment to absorbing pursuits) and people’s happiness?
- Do different principles of rational living contribute differentially to happiness?
- For people with high negative affect, does the rational intervention of using the ABC-DE model for managing emotional misery including the challenging and changing of irrational beliefs increase happiness and pleasure?
- Does the rational intervention of putting into practice one or more of the principles of rational living (e.g. self-acceptance) increase happiness? Is it more effective to intervene in those areas of rational living that the person practices the least?
- Does the rational intervention of increasing a person’s participation in vitally absorbing, intrinsically motivating activities lead to increased happiness?
- Does the rational intervention of practical problem solving lead to enhanced satisfaction and enjoyment?
- Does the rational intervention of using techniques for overcoming procrastination lead to increased happiness?
- Do rational interventions (e.g. engaging in vitally absorbing activities, problem solving, anti-procrastination techniques) contribute equally to increased levels of happiness or is one more effective than the others? Do they have unique or additive effects on happiness?

Caveat

As a dyed-in-the-wool scientist and realist, Ellis took the position that people had better be optimistic but not unrealistic about their potential for greater
happiness through rationality. Rationality is no miracle cure but people can have confidence it may work. Issues surrounding people’s developmental capacity for change, the extent of their emotional problems and their current life circumstances no doubt operate to moderate the impact of rationality in the pursuit of happiness.

Positive psychologists continue to search for and develop conceptual understandings of the individual psychological traits that contribute to happiness and the good life. This article advances this search by highlighting the distinctive and, perhaps, unrecognized contribution of the human faculty of rationality and rational beliefs, such as self-acceptance and high frustration tolerance to the delimitation of happiness-creating psychological strengths. Moreover, we hope that the research questions posed in the article concerning the potential benefits of the ABCs of REBT and applying principles of rational living squarely fits within the current interests of positive psychology that are focused on discovering new, scientifically validated happiness interventions.

Acknowledgements
The authors thank Martin Seligman (personal communications, 21 December 2008; 24 January 2010), who suggested that this article be written in order for Albert Ellis’ distinctive contribution to positive psychology be recognized: ‘He (Ellis) was a great psychologist and I would like him to have his due place … he is an unsung hero of Positive Psychology’.

References