

# Albert Ellis and the Pursuit of Happiness

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 fulfillment in life . . . As a result of my self-experimentation and of my gratifying success in overcoming my public speaking and my social phobias, I even wrote a manuscript when I was in my twenties and not yet decided to become a therapist: *The Art of Not Making Yourself Unhappy* . . . At the age of 40, I went back to ancient philosophers, the Greeks and Romans and modern-day 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.<sup>15,17,19</sup>

Over the past 60 years, an approach to modern-day living has evolved. This approach not only shows how the distinctly human mental faculty of *rationality* can help most everyone to be less unhappy and emotionally miserable when faced with adversities, unfortunate, or frustrating events, but also how they can live an enjoyable, pleasurable, fulfilled, and happy life.

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*Rationality and the Pursuit of Happiness: The Legacy of Albert Ellis*

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When employed in counseling and therapy, the approach is called *rational emotive behavior therapy*. It was created by Albert Ellis as a new way of helping people who experience significant emotional distress and interpersonal problems. As a guide for people with and without emotional difficulties, who seek greater happiness and fulfillment, the approach is called *rational living* and Albert Ellis was the first to write about it in the 1960s.

The new, rational approach to modern-day living, which shall be referred to throughout this book as REBT, involved Albert Ellis teaching people that they are the center of their own universe, who are largely in control of their own destinies and, in particular, who can control their own emotional well-being.

REBT, then, has dual goals: 1. To help people overcome their emotional blocks and disturbances, and 2. To help them grow according to their own goals and designs, to become more fully functioning, more self-actualizing and happier than they would otherwise be.<sup>5</sup>

REBT is one of the most influential forms of counseling and psychotherapy in the world. As this book shows, REBT is being applied to a myriad of personal problems and areas of everyday living including addiction and substance abuse, adolescent and child problems, anger, assertion, communication, education, executive leadership, health, law and criminality, love and marriage, medicine, parenting, religion, self-discipline, sex, and sport.

*Principles of rational living* are the essential ingredients of a philosophy of personal happiness that Ellis provides for people to help them to live enjoyable, enriched, satisfying and pleasurable lives. Millions of people have profited from these principles that have helped them to think, feel and act in ways that aid their search for happiness. Ellis' well-known self-help books have sold millions of copies worldwide including his best seller, *A New Guide to Rational Living*, first published in 1961 written with Robert Harper and re-written in 1975.

Over many years of writing, public lecturing, and professional conferencing, Ellis offered guidance for the general public on how to utilize their innate capacity 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 counselors and therapists with a focus on helping people with mental health problems.

One of the unique and appealing aspects of Albert Ellis is that he discusses both the philosophy of happiness and the psychology of and therapy for emotional misery in a way that can be readily understood. When REBT is practiced as a form of counseling or therapy, it is very educational without relying on the extensive use of psychological jargon. Rather than analyzing early childhood experiences and intra-psychic conflict amongst the id, ego, and superego, Ellis spends his time with people in therapy showing them how to use a very simple scientific method called the ABCs of REBT (see Chapter 3) in

order to think more scientifically and flexibly about themselves, others, and the world.

Ellis' insights into the human psyche are often quite humorous, witty, colorful, ribald, and provocative. He has discovered over the years that humor is a key to helping people since emotional problems frequently come from people taking themselves, others, and the world too seriously.

One of Ellis' truly outstanding contributions is that, in his efforts to help people live happier more productive lives, he has developed a theory which helps explain why people have difficulty achieving happiness and self-fulfillment. In REBT, Ellis offers basic insights into human nature. He reveals in a way no other contemporary philosopher or psychologist has done that it is not only the irrationalities of the outside world that create the conditions for people's emotional distress and unhappiness, but also that because people are human, everybody inherits a natural biological tendency for *irrationality* which leads them to upset themselves about the unavoidable and inevitable irrationalities in our world.

One of the rational beliefs Ellis has identified as being central to rational living is "acceptance." As will be shown, people who do not accept reality as it presents itself and who instead, demand or insist that conditions in the world (world war, economic insecurity, political bastardry, organized crime) absolutely *should* not and *must* not exist will usually *overly* upset themselves about these conditions. Their extreme emotionality, in turn, will make them *less* able to change obnoxious and accept realistic conditions and to live happily even when they cannot change them.

## The Early Life and Times of Albert Ellis

How did I take my physical troubles (chronic nephritis) and restrictions? Pretty damned well. I disliked them but remained a happy child. I think I was happy *because* I coped well. I practically never whined and cried. I accepted what I couldn't change. I *created* good substitute enjoyments – mainly mental ones. I habituated myself . . . to coping mechanisms. By taking the challenge of doing so, I thereby mostly *enjoyed* my coping. My reasons for being happy, however, stemmed not only from my congratulating myself because I coped so well. The coping *itself* stopped me from being miserable – as rational coping statements (and philosophies) usually do.

Coping statements *themselves* also often lead to happiness – because they include alternate plans. Thus I told myself, "Yes, this damned nephritis is a restricting problem and bad. But it's not *too bad* or *terrible*. And though hospitalized for it, I'll learn some new things about myself and look forward to future health." With this kind of rational coping, I unpessimistically looked forward to real enjoyments and was not merely unmiserable but happy. This is because I didn't blame myself, Albert, for my condition, nephritis. Then my natural tendency for being happy – which I think I definitely had – as both my father and mother had, gave me the leeway to shine through.<sup>22</sup>

Albert Ellis was born of Jewish parents in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in September of 1913. At a young age he moved to New York City and was raised on the streets of the Bronx. He was the eldest of three children having a brother, Paul, two years his junior and a sister, Janet, who was four years younger. In his 2004 book, *Albert Ellis: Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy – It Works for Me – It Can Work for You*, he discussed his relationship with his parents and how he coped with what he termed their “abysmal parental neglect.” Ellis stated that his father was a travelling salesman who experienced minimal success at different businesses. According to Ellis, he gave his children only minimum attention and affection and was often away from home during their early childhood. Ellis described his mother as self-centered whose emotions ran hot and cold. She appeared to express strong but unsubstantiated opinions, rarely listened to the opinion of others, and was thrown out of school in sixth grade for compulsive talking. According to Ellis’ recollection, his mother was emotionally unempathic and emotionally detached from all her children.

As a result of his mother’s neglectful parenting, Ellis indicated that he assumed some of the responsibilities for looking after his younger brother and sister included getting them up and dressed for school each morning. During the Depression, all the Ellis children took on part-time jobs to help the family cope economically. These responsibilities he discharged efficiently without being disturbed about them.

Of some significance was Ellis’ poor health during his childhood. He suffered from severe headaches and was also hospitalized with tonsillitis, which led to severe strep throat requiring emergency surgery. He had eight hospitalizations between the ages of five and seven. He suffered from nephritis (inflammation of the kidney) and was hospitalized for almost a year. During this year, his mother and father visited him infrequently. He reported that he successfully coped with feelings of rejection, loneliness, and separation using a variety of coping techniques including rational thinking (e.g., “I don’t like this. I wish my parents would visit me more and that I would have other visitors too. How frustrating – but it won’t kill me.”).

I would really have to start working myself up to be miserable. I’d have to work hard at it, to practice again, disturbing myself. These days, I almost automatically go after self-disturbances and quickly eliminate them. Not squelch, suppress or repress them – I really mean really eliminate. And because I have so little time and energy to expend at making myself miserable, I derive considerable pleasure, enjoyment, and sometimes sheer bliss out of my life. What more can one ask?<sup>22</sup>

### **Albert Ellis’ (Generally) Pleasurable and Happy Personal Life**

Instead of making myself incensed, I used REBT to make myself very displeased with his *behavior*, but not angry at *him* by telling myself,

“Too bad that he has lied, cheated, and procrastinated, but that rotten behavior doesn’t make him a *bad person*.”<sup>22</sup>

Ellis put REBT and principles of rational living to good effect throughout his life. Using REBT, he managed to cope with his own issues of dating, mating, separating, work, and dealing with life’s frustrations including other people’s unprincipled, irrational behavior. He admits to battling problems with anger throughout his life when people acted stupidly, immorally and in response to “horrible” world conditions. He literally forced himself to practice what he preached in REBT by learning to accept the sinner but not the sins and thereby to refuse to feel enraged.

His evolving philosophy of rational happiness helped him to overcome shyness and become assertive in his search for pleasure and satisfaction in his relationships with others. To begin, Ellis helped himself overcome most of his extreme feelings of desperation and possessiveness he brought to his relationships, as can be seen below when he talks about his first wife, Karyl.

Suddenly, I saw the way out of my dilemma. It was not my strong *desire* for her that gave me so much trouble when it was not thoroughly fulfilled. No, it was my *dire need* for her love. I foolishly believed that she absolutely had to return my feelings in kind; and that and only that would solve our problem. Well, that was horseshit! I saw that I could, if I wished, keep my powerful desire, urge and love for Karyl – and I could simultaneously give up my *need, demand* and insistence that she feel exactly the same way I did. That was an astonishing thought, I could love without needing!<sup>21</sup>

For someone predominantly motivated to work and be creative, Albert Ellis had full and, in several instances, long-standing and pleasurable love relationships. He was married three times and had two partners in living together arrangements (in his thirties with Gertrude and with Janet Wolfe for over 30 years beginning in his fifties). When he was 90 years of age, he married for the third time Debbie Joffe. Over this period of time, REBT helped him deal with dating, mating, and to cope with his divorces. He helped rid himself of any sexual hang-ups he had by unshamefully accepting himself when engaged in a variety of adventuresome, pleasure-seeking behavior (e.g., frotteurism) that did not harm the welfare and wellbeing of different partners.

While Ellis admits to having been born and reared with a strong propensity to make himself anxious and with relatively normal neurotic tendencies to depress himself when things were going badly (e.g., breaking up with Gertrude), he was able to use REBT to overcome feelings of anxiety and depression as well as his anger.

Over the years, he used REBT to handle a myriad of problems that stood in the way of his happiness including coping with parental neglect, his parents’ divorce, failing in his love affairs, failing at writing (numerous manuscripts rejected by publishers), censorship of his work (his first PhD thesis at Columbia

University; books banned in various US states) and poor health (e.g., diabetes, poor eyesight, hearing impairment, hospitalizations).

I think I can say that I am one of the relatively few people in the United States, and, perhaps in the entire world, who has not had a seriously miserable day since I created REBT in 1955. I find it almost impossible to feel intensely depressed, hostile, or upset for more than literally a few minutes at a time.<sup>21</sup>

## **Albert Ellis' Professional Life was Self-actualized**

Ellis earned a master's degree in clinical psychology from Columbia University in 1943 and a doctorate of philosophy from the same university in 1947. He actively practiced clinical psychology and psychotherapy from 1943 and held several important psychological positions including Chief Psychologist of the New Jersey State Diagnostic Center, Chief Psychologist of the New Jersey State Department of Institutions and Agencies and was a psychological consultant to several organizations including the Veterans Administration and the New York City Department of Education. He was the founder and Executive Director of the Albert Ellis Institute (formerly the Institute of Rational-Emotive Therapy) in New York City, a non-profit educational foundation that trains psychotherapists, runs an active psychological clinic, conducts self-help workshops, and disseminates books, audiovisual, and other materials on REBT.

Albert Ellis is one of the leading figures in modern psychology and is comparable to Sigmund Freud and B.F. Skinner in his tremendous ability to make friends and gain supporters and likewise arouse opponents and detractors. He was ranked as one of the “most influential” psychologists by both the American and Canadian psychologists and counselors' professional associations.

Albert Ellis has written or edited 75 books and monographs that have sold millions of copies. Some of his best-known books include *How to Live With a Neurotic*, *Sex Without Guilt*, *The Encyclopaedia of Sexual Behavior*, *The Art and Science of Love*, *Sex and the Single Man*, *Reason and Emotion in Psychotherapy*, *Overcoming Procrastination*, *A New Guide to Rational Living*, and *Anger: How to Live with and Without It*.

He has also published hundreds of articles in popular magazines including *Coronet*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Forum*, *Mademoiselle*, *Pageant*, *Parade*, *Penthouse*, *Playboy*, *Psychology Today*, *The Realist*, and *The Independent*. A significant amount of his writings has been translated into more than twenty languages with several of his books selling widely in many countries.

In addition to his publications, audio and video cassettes have also brought REBT messages to the general public and some of these have also been best-sellers including “How to Stubbornly Refuse to Be Ashamed of Anything,”

“Twenty-one Ways to Stop Worry,” “A Garland of Rational Songs,” and “Twenty-two Ways to Brighten Up Your Love Life.”

Ellis has also had many special articles written on him published in many leading newspapers and magazines including the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Baltimore Sun*, *Toronto Globe*, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, *People Magazine*, and *Psychology Today*.

The main reasons for Ellis’ significant public and professional reputation over a half century are his professional and scientific achievements in the fields of psychology, psychotherapy, and philosophy. In 1985, Ellis was honored by the American Psychological Association with its major award for Distinguished Professional Contributions to Knowledge. Over the years he received special awards as a Distinguished Psychologist, Scientific Researcher, and Distinguished Psychological Practitioner from many professional organizations including the American Academy of Psychotherapists, Society for the Scientific Study of Sex, American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists, the Academy of Psychologists in Marital and Family Therapy, the Association for the Advancement of Behavior Therapy, the American Psychopathological Association and the American Counseling Association.

One of the recognitions Ellis is most proud of is the Humanist of the Year Award bestowed upon him in the early 1970s by the American Humanist Association.

Ellis’ scientific standing can be seen in the over 500 articles he has published in psychological, psychiatric, and sociological journals. He is one of the most cited authors in modern psychology.

Aside from his writing, Ellis popularized REBT over the years through his appearances on hundreds of radio and talk shows, including *Good Morning America*, *The Today Show*, *The Dick Cavett Show*, *Phil Donahue*, *Merv Griffin*, *Mike Wallace*, *David Susskind* and on ABC, NBC, and CBS News. Ellis was a prominent public speaker and charismatic leader who gave over two thousand lectures throughout the United States and overseas.

In his late eighties, Ellis continued to be one of the world’s most active individual and group psychotherapists. During the final three decades of his life he saw over six thousand clients and regularly conducted more than eighty individual sessions and a half-dozen or so group therapy sessions each week at the Albert Ellis Institute which is located in New York City (Manhattan) at 45 East 65th Street. He actively supervised the training of several hundred therapists a year and was one of the main teachers and supervisors of the Albert Ellis Institute’s training programs that are still regularly held in New York, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas, and other leading American and European cities. Ellis is famous for his Friday Night Workshop Therapy demonstrations conducted at his Institute where, for 40 years, he has publicly worked with over two thousand volunteers. He also gave many live demonstrations of REBT at his other professional and public workshops over the years.

Over the past six decades, both the theory and practice of REBT including his consideration of rational living has evolved and been refined largely through

Ellis' work. For a good many years, Ellis was alone in writing major treatises on REBT but in recent years a good many books for the professional have been published. REBT has reached the stage today where it provides a clear understanding and identification of the self-defeating aspects of our thinking as well as specific techniques for modifying our thinking, feeling, and behavior, so that we are more readily able to achieve our goals in life.

## **Ellis Speaks Common Sense**

One of the appealing qualities of REBT is that its basic assumptions make good intuitive sense and, in fact, many people (including ancient philosophers as well as past and contemporary well-known psychologists) have independently figured out and created aspects of REBT.

A lot of people use the basics of REBT because they realize, after they learn a little about it, that they independently discovered parts of it themselves. That's one thing about REBT I like in particular. I've been promoting it ever since I invented it in 1955. And I realized when I invented it that I derived it from philosophy. I've always been interested in philosophy. After creating REBT, I went back and reread some philosophy, including Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. Then I went around the country talking to people, mainly professionals in the beginning. I'd go out to the midwest, to the west, or north to Canada and fairly frequently psychologists would come up to me and say, "You know, Dr. Ellis, I really like this stuff and the reason I like it is I've been doing something like it for years." They hadn't even read philosophy but they figured it out in their own lives or with their clients. They saw that it's not the things that happen to us that upset us, it's our *view* of these events, which is what Epictetus said 2,000 years ago. On their own, they had been practicing a form of REBT. Then I did some more reading and found that Paul Dubois wrote two books on persuasive therapy in 1907. He was a Swiss psychiatrist who was unusually rational. Aaron T. Beck, who apparently didn't know about my earlier writing, started publishing similar cognitive and rational material in 1963. Then I saw a few years later, when I kept reading the literature, that if you read Freud, Jung, Reich, Perls, and especially Adler, that they *all* to some extent used rational persuasion. But only Adler acknowledged this while the others rarely did. I started realizing that if their clients improved, it was because these analytic and experiential therapists would throw in a lot of cognitive therapy and not acknowledge doing so. If clients got better they'd say it was because they talked about their goddamned mothers.

It really wasn't because they talked about their mothers, because even when they did so their therapists would say "Well, your mother did you

in, and she said you were a shit. But why do you now *believe* her?” They pointed out “Why do you have to stay attached to your mother?” Now that’s rational, but these therapists refused to give credit to the rational methods they used.

So everybody who is reasonably sane – philosophers, psychologists, therapists, etc. – do use considerable REBT. But they don’t acknowledge it and barely recognize what they’re doing. (Ellis public lecture)

## The Dual Nature of the Human Psyche

Recognize that you were born and raised with very strong tendencies to be self-actualizing as well as self-defeating. You are able to think straight, to be realistic and logical, and to figure out better solutions for yourself and others. But you are also prone to go for short-range rather than long-range gain. See yourself as a “normal” individual who has some destructive behaviors but who can lead a happy existence in spite of them.<sup>17</sup>

One of the most unique insights of Ellis 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, 2004). It is the rational side of people’s psychological functioning that guides them in their pursuit of happiness and self-fulfillment.

The irrational dimension of psychological functioning is characterized by high negative emotionality (e.g., anxiety, depression, anger, self-pity, guilt) and self-defeating behavior (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 *musterbation* (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 said there is 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 as it does not logically follow (non-sequitur) that because someone prefers or desires a set of conditions to exist, they must (or must not) 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*.

Emotional misery, unhappiness, and avoiding important tasks of daily living obstruct the pursuit of happiness. Unfortunately, according to Ellis, the irrational side of the human psyche is often a stronger, more dominating influence than the rational side.

It's very interesting that leading psychologists, such as Carl Rogers and Abe Maslow, point out correctly that we all have inborn self-fulfilling tendencies: tendencies to reason, to actualize, and to change ourselves. But they are most reluctant to admit that we also have self-defeating tendencies.<sup>18</sup>

REBT assumes, then, that all humans are born with two basic tendencies, which operate side by side throughout the life span and which appear to work in opposite ways to each other. The first is the self-actualization tendency that involves the gradual unfolding of people's innate potential as they achieve greater self-acceptance and learn more about themselves and their possibilities. The second tendency is irrationality and involves people's tendency to think in overly subjective, absolutistic, rigid, unclear, inaccurate, and self-defeating ways about themselves, other people, and the world.

Ellis has always tried to help people to reduce their disturbances and increase their happiness and fulfillment by helping them to use their rational faculties to minimize their emotional miseries and to engage in the actions that bring them pleasure, satisfaction, and fulfillment. Given the biological nature of irrationality, Ellis has written about the impossibility of anyone attaining perfect mental health.

### **Nature–Nurture**

You always bring yourself and your innate tendencies to your environment. Many environmentalists and psychologists are too prejudiced to acknowledge that you have an innate tendency to be gullible and suggestible and to take your environment too seriously. If not, why did you *listen* to your parents? Even if we say that you were impressionable because you were young and couldn't think for yourself, why did you continue to believe crazy early teachings? Let's face it, Barnum was right and you were a sucker to begin with. Even if you were lucky enough to be raised without parents, you'd *invent* your disturbing beliefs: that you *need* love and achievement; that others *must* treat you fairly and kindly; and that life *has to be* easy. These nutty ideas stem from profound innate tendencies which your parents help exacerbate, but which they don't create – except biologically, with the wrong genes. (Ellis public lecture)

Whether irrationality is inherited biologically or whether it results from specific early learning experiences that have been conditioned in people's minds through years of self-indoctrination is still to be proven.

Ellis, who spent over sixty years studying the characteristics of people's thinking, concluded that irrationality is largely an imperfection of our mental apparatus, an intermediate stage, perhaps, in the evolution of our logical reasoning capacities. He argued persuasively that although the environment in which people are raised can influence the way they think, people bring with them, even from day one, ways of interpreting what they experience in that environment.

Ellis also raised the question of how the same home environment can produce children who differ so greatly in characteristics. Some children who are born into very loving families turn out the "wrong way" in spite of home support. One child may take a parent's constructive comments to heart whereas his or her sibling experiences the same comments as water off a duck's back. Similarly, some children born into harsh and rejecting families develop into very happy and fulfilled people because of some rational "instinct" which enables them to maintain some personal distance from the unpleasant aspects of their home environment. Ellis reasons that the only way these differences in children can occur is if children are born with thinking tendencies that predisposes them to interpret their environment in certain rational or irrational ways.

Ellis also argues that the biological tendency for irrationality explains why people so frequently think, feel, and act in ways that they know prevent them from achieving their basic goals in life and the fulfillment of their potential. If their irrational thinking was exclusively learned from the environment (parent, teachers, media) then by rights, especially given its self-defeating nature, this thinking should be relatively easy, given sufficient practice, to unlearn. However, as any of us can observe from our own experience in trying to think and act rationally and break unwanted habits such as smoking, excessive drinking, or procrastination, there seems to be some force or urge that prevents us from readily changing. The strength of our irrationality in the face of its self-defeating nature is part of the evidence Ellis uses to hypothesize a biological basis to irrationality.

Why are you crazy enough to believe your nutty, screwed-up father, who tells you you've got to do well in everything that you do? You probably have that tendency yourself and therefore you're prone to agree with your perfectionistic father. (Ellis public lecture)

## **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 proposes the following goals and purposes as those that most human beings in western societies would accept for themselves.

Ellis proposed that the most general and far-reaching goal people have and share in common is to live a long and happy life. According to Ellis, the attainment of this goal is facilitated when three conditions (or sub-goals) exist: (1) People are achieving to the best of their ability in their chosen field of work endeavor that they find interesting and absorbing; (2) People are involved in satisfying and loving relationships with significant others (partner, family, friends, social group); and (3) People experience a minimum of needless pain and emotional misery as well as a maximum of comfort and pleasure.

Ellis recognizes that there are many different life strategies or personal philosophies that determine how people go about realizing these goals and purposes. Which one works best is an open question. That is, it is impossible to say in any final, absolute sense, which approach will be most beneficial for an individual.

Ellis' theory on the pursuit of happiness is not entirely objective and value free. Once the goals of long life, happiness, success, comfort, and love are chosen and Ellis sees these general purposes as matters of choice rather than as absolute givens – then Ellis proposes “best” ways for people to think, feel, and behave including principles of rational living (see Chapter 4). Whether these ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving work for most of the people most of the time can be determined.

## Happiness

Strive for the long-range pleasure of tomorrow as well as the short-range satisfactions of today.<sup>10</sup>

Ellis' guide to rational living encourages people to experiment with their life-style and make choices based on personal knowledge and discovery that would bring them higher levels of excitement, passion, pleasure, and zest in the short-term as well as pleasure, satisfaction and fulfillment in the long-term.

Creative, intensely absorbing activity, proves one of the mainstays of happy, human living.<sup>15</sup>

Ellis has said that while some people may experience significant pleasure and enjoyment of passive involvements such as watching television and reading the paper, most people tend to experience the highest levels of happiness both in the short-term and long-term when they actively participate in creative and vitally absorbing activities.

Overcoming human inertia to experiment and discover individual pursuits and partners that bring pleasure and satisfaction in the short- and long-term and, then, maintaining and extending these involvements, is a cardinal principle underpinning Ellis' view on the successful pursuit of personal happiness.

In recent years, scientists studying happiness have distinguished between *eudaemonic happiness* (finding purpose or goodness in life; living life to its fullest potential) and *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 emotions, (2) infrequent negative emotions, and (3) high life satisfaction.

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 eudaemonic happiness.

In the short-term, Ellis considered happiness to be synonymous with the feelings of enjoyment and pleasure. In his early days, he, perhaps, was most known for his pioneering work in sex and helping liberate people from conventional attitudes towards sexual experience. He provided people advice not only in therapy but also in his many self-help books (e.g., *The Encyclopaedia of Sexual Behavior*, *Sex without Guilt*, *The Art and Science of Love*) on sexual gratification including different ways to become sexually excited and to achieve orgasm. Consider the following topics he wrote about: “Kinds of Sexual Outlets,” “Physical and Psychological Methods for Arousing a Sex Partner,” and “Sexual Intercourse: Main Positions.”

While this material today may seem tame to some, in the 1960s in the United States it caused quite a stir – to the point where some of Ellis’ books were banned in several US states. But more importantly, his words by blowing away the clouds of ignorance, helped transform the sexual lives and fulfillment of literally hundreds of thousands of people.

Ellis did not restrict his ideas on how to increase one’s short-term happiness to the pleasures of the body. He 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 published in 1961, *A Guide to Personal Happiness*, Ellis provides areas of potential enjoyable activities and pursuits. These include aesthetic appreciation, exercising, fantasizing, food activities (cooking, reading cookbooks), games (anagrams, cards), handicraft activities (basket-making, crocheting, embroidering), humorous activities (cartooning, joke telling, practical jokes), martial arts (judo, karate), mechanical activities (carpentry, fixing appliances), outdoor activities (backpacking, bicycling, bird watching, camping, picnicking), performing arts (acting, ballet, debating), reading (browsing, reading fiction, poetry), relaxing activities (bathing,

massaging, meditating), socializing (dinner parties, conversations), sports (playing basketball, ping-pong, jogging, gym work), traveling (foreign local trips), writing activities (letters, short stories, poems) and volunteering activities (for charitable groups, hospitals and not-for-profit organizations).

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 one's strengths of character and personality traits, including rationality to achieve and excel at work (employment) and in other endeavors (hobbies); (2) relying on one's 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) through the use of personal coping resources, including rational thought, experiencing minimum periods of heightened, negative emotionality and stress as a consequence of environmental adversity of one form or another (e.g., lack of achievement, loss of loved one, frustrating circumstances including deprivation and over-stimulation).

While Ellis would say that sustained levels of accomplishment at work and other avocations including satisfying loving relationships that provide individuals opportunities for emotional health (minimum emotional distress) are possible without large doses of rationality, he is a strong believer that by developing one's capacity for rationality, and applying a rational mindset to daily living, self-actualization and long-term happiness would be maximized.

## Self-actualization

Increased happiness and freedom from disturbance can be achieved because all humans are born with constructive and creative tendencies and are also born with the ability to sharpen and increase their self-fulfilling tendencies.<sup>9</sup>

Ellis says that biologically, all humans are born with a drive to develop their innate potentialities. The drive which Ellis and other humanistic psychologists refers to as the self-actualizing instinct or tendency results in high levels of happiness and satisfaction when the individual discovers areas of living where they can express their unique talents and aptitudes and achieve fulfillment.

One of the main goals of people's actualizing themselves can be for them to seek for *more* spontaneous ways of living. And one main by-product of letting themselves spontaneously (and risktakingly) *try* new pursuits will often be to discover new enjoyments and then to make reaching them their planned future goals. Experimentation is partly goal-seeking; and goal-seeking partly is spontaneously experimenting with new endeavours.<sup>18</sup>

Ellis has indicated that to actualize themselves more fully, people had better choose to work at achieving more growth, development, and happiness. That is, to become more fully functioning (self-actualized), people should consciously choose the goal or purpose of becoming more fully functioning.

Ellis strongly endorses a self-actualizing, action-oriented philosophy and posits important ways self-actualization can be achieved. One of the main ways to be self-actualizing (as will be discussed below) is to seek more spontaneous ways of living to discover new enjoyments and then to make re-achieving them a future goal. These enjoyments include becoming vitally absorbed in intrinsically interesting pursuits and activities both at work and in other areas of life. Normally, self-actualization involves the pursuit of excellence and enjoyment – whichever people choose to desire and emphasize.

To make themselves more fully functioning, people had better ask themselves: “What do I choose as my life purpose?” “What do I really like and dislike?” “How can I experiment and discover what I truly prefer, and prefer not to do?” “Which of my likes (e.g. smoking) and dislikes (e.g. exercising) will probably be self-harming as well as enjoyable?” By acting on this information, people can push themselves to greater self-actualization.<sup>14</sup>

Ellis does not believe in a transcendental or mystical self to self-actualize that achieves higher, miraculous states of consciousness. Rather, continuous experimentation and discovering of what one enjoys doing and discovering ways of achieving success at work and in relationships leads a person to develop their unique human, biological potential and results in satisfaction and fulfillment.

General self-actualization involves the pursuit of excellence or enjoyment in whatever ways an individual chooses to desire and emphasize. Healthy, enjoyable and maximally enjoyable pursuits differ from culture to culture, individual to individual.

So push your way into self-fulfillment. If you will, take care to realize exactly what is truly actualizing for you. The best watchwords seem to be: experimenting, risk-taking and adventuring. By all means try to make yourself emotionally healthier, happier, and more fulfilled. These goals overlap considerably. But evaluate your chosen goals carefully, and be ready to retreat when you obtain doubtful or harmful results.<sup>17</sup>

Ellis’ final word on self-actualization is that “musterbation and self-fulfillment is not very self-fulfilling.” Attempting to be *fully* or *perfectly* self-actualized can be self-sabotaging. Don’t push self-actualization too hard. Don’t take goals to extremes. To try frantically to get what you want you may neglect others, to be hated by them, and to harm the social group.

You don't easily achieve self-actualization when you are disturbed . . . Achieving emotional health and self-actualization are goals that overlap but are not quite the same. . . . But even if you are hardly ever miserable, you may still be far from happy and self-actualizing. So, REBT helps you, first, to be less disturbed and, second, to discover what you really enjoy in life. It then helps you to get more of that and to discover what you really dislike and helps you to get less of that.<sup>15</sup>

## Ellis Abandons Self-esteem

Your self-esteem is a fiction. Ego is a fiction. You'd better not have self-esteem. It's the greatest sickness known to humans because it really means "I give myself a good rating *because* I perform well and am approved." Self-denigration is worse, but self-esteem is still a measure, a rating of an entire person – and therefore false. It depends on your doing the right thing, and when you do the wrong thing, back to shithood you go. (Ellis public lecture)

Contradictory as it may sound, Ellis argues that people's self-esteem is a major obstacle to the attainment of happiness. Here's how he explains it.

The human condition impels you to foolishly rate yourself. Almost everyone does that and I don't think they do it from upbringing. I think they do it because that's what they naturally do.

Why do you think people rate themselves? What's their goal? Why do they measure their speaking, loving, tennis playing, and test-taking, and use this measure to rate their being, their essence? The main reason you rate yourself is to be grandiose – to get into heaven – to be holier than thou, better than others, superhuman. You want to prove that you are the only one to sit on the right side of God. Your sought-after pay-off is nobility. "I am going to be the noblest Roman of them all. I'm going to do exactly the right thing and be deified. You shits are allowed to fail and be disapproved. But not ME!"

Inferiority is just inferiority. Someone may be taller than you or a better player than you and then you'd be inferior with regard to that trait or ability. But *feelings* of inferiority mean you're putting yourself down for some inferiority characteristic. Feelings of inferiority or worthlessness usually stem from the two main irrational beliefs: "I *must* do well or perfectly well and I *must* win your approval! Else I am worthless!"

Shouldhood equals shithood. Instead of trying to prove yourself, you'd better try to be yourself and enjoy yourself! (Ellis public lecture)

Ellis nominates *unconditional self-acceptance* to replace self-esteem. Here, he counsels people to call on their rationality to accept themselves as fallible people who will from time-to-time make mistakes and be disapproved of or rejected by others. He also encourages people to work hard at self-improvement.

Healthy (and happy) people are usually glad to be alive and accept themselves because they are alive and have some capacity to enjoy themselves. They refuse to measure their intrinsic worth by their extrinsic achievement or by what others think of them. They frankly choose to accept themselves unconditionally; and they try to completely avoid rating themselves – their totality or their being. They attempt to enjoy rather than prove themselves.<sup>16</sup>

## Finding Happiness: No Apologies Needed

Ellis says that anyone who tries to give you a prescription by which you can always feel happy, speaks foolishly or knavishly. Happiness, or a positive feeling of pleasure, joy, or elation, tends to be a by-product of what people do, and people cannot easily gain it by prescription. What you as a unique human individual do and how much pleasure you get from doing it largely depends on your personal preferences, which others cannot very well predict. How much pleasure you get from going on a walk or sleeping with your spouse is individual.

As people are biologically, socially, and culturally different from all other human beings, Ellis indicates that happiness-advisors, coaches and psychologists had better not be too presumptive and try to tell people what they can most enjoy and how to go about achieving pinnacles of pleasure. In most ways, this is for the individual, and no one but the individual, to discover. For almost six decades, Ellis has advocated that you have the right, as a unique person, to choose to seek self-actualization.

If you look for an absorbing interest, try to find persons or activities in which you can honestly absorb yourself for your own sake. . . . You have a right as a human with your own personal tastes, to devote yourself “selfishly” to an avocation – such as coin collecting or restoring antique cars – that has little “social” value.<sup>18</sup>

As will become evident throughout this book, there is a journey that people can take that can help them to become happier and more fulfilled. In some ways the journey is already chartered and in other ways the journey requires self-discovery.

Ellis maintained that there are some commonalities in the reasons why people experience emotional barriers to happiness in the form of anger, anxiety, and depression. Most people experience these blockers to some extent and to greater

or lesser degrees. Insofar as this is the case, everyone can benefit from taking the time (journey) to a gain greater understanding of what Ellis considers to be the primary cause of poor emotional health and to learn a set of techniques for becoming less unhappy and achieving emotional health. This journey is well demarcated with people from all backgrounds benefitting. For Ellis, the root cause of emotional distress is neither people's unconscious conflicts with parents nor past nor present negative interactions with difficult people and environmental hardship. Rather, Ellis explains emotional distress in terms of the way people perceive and interpret their relationships with their parents or with the environment. As will be revealed in the following chapter, according to Ellis, it is people's innate tendency towards absolutistic thinking (e.g., "Because I prefer you to treat me considerately, you must be so at all times." "Because I prefer success and approval, I should be successful and approved of in all important activities.") that he considers to be the core feature of irrationality and the central cause of emotional unhappiness. Thinking in terms of what you prefer rather than *must* have increases the probability of achieving your goals. The range of techniques for eliminating irrationality is reviewed in Chapter 3.

However, Ellis is quite clear in his assertion that reduced emotional unhappiness and increased emotional health is necessary, but not sufficient for us to achieve happiness and fulfillment. For Ellis, there is another journey that needs to be taken. Here, the specific direction is less well charted. Because of the wide range of differences amongst people in terms of their interests, desires and pleasures, the pursuit of happiness needs to be more experimental, including the need to take risks. The journey towards happiness can be made more efficient if the captain of the ship (you) are employing your capacity for rationality to its fullest. As will be described in Chapter 4, there are several principles of rationality that Ellis offer to help people to think, feel and act in ways that help them discover more ways to enjoy life and have a ball.

Some say life's satisfactions come naturally, spontaneously, if you stop pushing the river and merely take things as they come, unplanfully, effortlessly. How did the great sages who said this arrive at this marvelous secret of human felicity? By substantial thought and effort!!<sup>15</sup>

A final and very important point that Albert Ellis makes about happiness is that, for many people, happy is not achieved through inertia and inactivity. Happiness does not fall in your lap because you are deserving. Rather, it is generally an outcome of work and practice in discovering those things you do well and enjoy doing (and those that you do not).