

# MIND PERFORMANCE HACKS™

*Tips & Tools for Overclocking Your Brain*



O'REILLY®

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HACK  
**#57**

## Learn Your Emotional ABCs

Mental and emotional clarity reinforce each other, so don't ignore your emotions in your quest to be a better thinker. Greater clarity is just a few steps away.

The ABC model of emotion, widespread in contemporary psychotherapy, holds that it is not an *activating* (A) event, such as rejection by a friend or lover, that causes you emotional *consequences* (C) such as depression; rather, the linchpin is your invisible *beliefs* (B) about the event that come in between A and C. Fortunately, it's often easier to intentionally change beliefs than emotions.

Since at least the time of the ancient Stoics, some have believed that our *circumstances* don't control whether we're happy, but our *thoughts* about them do. Our reasoned thoughts and beliefs form a kind of buffer between reality and our private selves—in theory. In practice, our thoughts often don't *buffer* us from events we don't like so much as *amplify* those experiences, causing us emotional turmoil and suffering. In fact, our thoughts can be so irrational and so removed from reality that they often make us suffer, even when nothing is objectively wrong.

Questioning the irrational thoughts that cause you emotional pain and thereby cloud your reasoning can help you think more clearly and act more effectively. This hack explores the ABC model of emotion pioneered by Albert Ellis, developer of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT). You can use it as a lever to heave off the massive boulders of emotional self-oppression.<sup>1</sup>

### Going Beyond the ABCs

According to Ellis, people in our culture go through three *normal* stages of emotion (shown in Table 7-1) many times a day, consisting of an activating event in the external world, filtered through their beliefs, resulting in emotional consequences.

Table 7-1. The ABCs of emotion

Stage	Name of stage	Description
A	Activation	The triggering event
B	Beliefs	What you told yourself about A
C	Consequences	The emotional results of B: how you reacted to your belief

Engaging in the three additional steps of *rational self-analysis*<sup>2</sup> shown in Table 7-2 can help you be more reasonable, and even happier.

Table 7-2. Three additional stages

Stage	Name of stage	Description
D	Disputation	The arguments you will make to yourself, and new beliefs you will form, to help you achieve E
E	Effect	The new effect you want: how you'd <i>prefer</i> to feel and behave
F	Further action/effective new philosophy	Further steps you will take to avoid the same dysfunctional thoughts and reactions in the future

The steps of rational self-analysis also have an alphabetic mnemonic. They constitute the three stages beyond ABC, if you take them: disputation of your irrational beliefs, aiming at an emotional effect, followed by further action to stop the cycle from occurring again.

## Disputing Irrational Beliefs

You can use three broad classes of disputation in a rational self-analysis:

### *Empirical*

What evidence is there for this belief? Is there a law of nature that proves it, or does the *law* exist only in my mind?

### *Logical*

Just because I want something, does it follow logically that I *must* get it? Just because it's uncomfortable, does it follow that it's *awful*? Just because I made a mistake, does it follow that I'm an *idiot*?

### *Pragmatic*

Does believing this help me to be effective and happy? Or does it create interpersonal problems, roadblocks, and stress?

You can also dispute your beliefs with a list of *cognitive distortions* [Hack #58]. Sometimes just being able to nail one of your irrational beliefs as a classic example of one of the distortions on the list is enough to make it shrivel in a smoking heap.

## In Real Life

In practice, you will usually perform a rational self-analysis in the order C, A, B, E, D, F. That is, you'll do the following:

1. Experience some emotional *consequences* (C).
2. Identify the *activating event* (A).
3. Identify which *beliefs* (B) the event was filtered through.
4. Determine what *effect* (E) you *would* have preferred.
5. To that end, *dispute* (D) your old beliefs and create some new ones.
6. Make plans for *further action* (F).

Let's follow the steps of the typical rational self-analysis of a hypothetical grad student. We'll call this person Russell, after Bertrand Russell, the famous rationalist. Our man Russell has a disability that sometimes causes him some discomfort and embarrassment, and he is trying to learn to cope with it.

One night at dinner, Russell has a sudden attack of an incurable disease called *hodaddia*, which he contracted from a mosquito bite on a tropical vacation several years ago. When the attack struck tonight, he collapsed in pain and turned bright mauve all over, as usual. This is the *activating event*.

Russell feels furiously ashamed and embarrassed. He loathes and pities himself, and then he gets depressed and needy, feeling helpless. These are the *emotional consequences*. He lies in bed ineffectually and demands that his roommates brew him big pitchers of hot lemonade with maple syrup, which is the only thing besides his medication that seems to bring relief.

Finally, Russell decides he's had enough. Just this once, he's going to analyze his thinking and clear his head. He identifies A and C.

Next, Russell dredges up his *beliefs* (B) that transformed the activating event (A) into the emotional consequences (C):

- I'm weak and worthless.
- I'm crippled by this hodaddia; as a hodaddia victim, I can never do anything worthwhile, because hodaddia can strike at any moment.
- Everyone hates me, because they think I'm a purple freak.
- I probably ruined any chance of seeing my date again when I turned mauve and started moaning at dinner.
- I should never have gone sunbathing in my Speedo on spring break instead of staying in my mosquito-proof tent. I'm such an idiot.

The *effects* (E) Russell wants to have in the future, instead of his normal emotional consequences, are as follows:

- Feel calm and reassured after an attack
- Get on with his life

- Stop bugging his roommates to take care of him
- Be more effective again

To achieve these effects, Russell *disputes* (D) his irrational beliefs as follows:

1. How does it *logically* follow that just because I have a disability, I'm "weak and worthless"? No, that's just *labeling* myself. In fact, lots of people with disabilities throughout history have been incredibly strong and creative, and produced work of great worth; consider Stephen Hawking and Vincent Van Gogh.
2. Believing I can never do anything worthwhile is *binary thinking*. Even if my hodaddia were much worse, I could still do *some* worthwhile things. *Empirically*, I've already managed to do some interesting things, such as my blog, which has thousands of subscribers, and the Obfuscated INTERCAL programming contest, which I've won for the last four years. Plus, I'm a good friend, when I'm not demanding hot lemonade with maple syrup. Why should I *filter out* all the good stuff I do when I think about my life?
3. Granted, a lot of people think I'm weird because I turn purple and moan sometimes, but not everyone knows about my hodaddia disability or would hold it against me if they did. I am blessed with friends and family who love and understand me to various degrees, but even if no one did, I could still find pleasure in life and be happy, so my whole mental debate about whether people hate me because I'm a "purple freak" can just sod off!
4. As for my date tonight: how long could I keep my hodaddia problem from Chris? It's better to be open with people I'm going to be romantically involved with; if I scare them off, that's one less shallow person to have in my life. Anyway, I don't have *telepathy*; if I want to know what Chris really thought and felt, I should call and find out, instead of assuming the worst. Maybe Chris is worried about me and would like to know I'm OK.
5. Should, should, should. This is just *musturbation*. Even if I was a fool to go sunbathing, what law of the universe says that no one is allowed to be a fool? If there is one, a lot of people are breaking it. Anyway, none of my friends who went out sunbathing that spring break caught the hodaddia virus. I just happened to have a hidden genetic susceptibility. How could I know that? So, unless I want to be miserable for the rest of my life, I *should* stop engaging in this *shouldy* thinking.
6. Anyway, *pragmatically* speaking, all of this self-loathing, depression, and being demanding is not at all helpful. It drags me down and makes

me ineffective and ineffectual, which is itself one of the things I'm berating myself about. So, I had better uproot all these irrational beliefs.

Finally, Russell decides to take some *further action* (F):

- Write up his rational self-analysis in a more portable form, such as an index card he can carry in his *exoself* [Hack #17] and refer to the next time he starts hating himself
- Continue to extend and deepen this self-analysis so that he understands himself and his problems better
- Join some hodaddia support groups online and read up on further action he can take, such as educating friends and acquaintances about his condition, and then take those actions

Suddenly, Russell doesn't feel so bad anymore. In fact, he feels like working on a new project.

## End Notes

1. Ellis, Albert, Ph.D., and Robert A. Harper, Ph.D. 1997. *A Guide to Rational Living*, Third Edition. Wilshire Book Company. This is the classic introduction to Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy. The second edition, titled *A New Guide to Rational Living*, was written in E-Prime [Hack #52].
2. Froggatt, Wayne. 1997. *GoodStress: The Life That Can Be Yours*. HarperCollins Publishers (New Zealand) Limited.

## See Also

- Froggatt, Wayne. 1997. "Twelve Rational Principles: Using the principles of Rational Effectiveness Training to achieve a satisfying and productive life." <http://www.managingstress.com/articles/frogatt.htm>. This page contains the first chapter of *GoodStress* and is a good introduction to Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy.