

ABCs of Understanding and Managing Difficult Emotions

One of the tools I discuss and teach to virtually all of my clients (individuals and couples), are the "ABCs of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT)." This is a cognitive approach to understanding emotions that helps us recognize thinking patterns that occur when events in our life result in strong emotions that increase feelings of anxiety, depression, or anger (or really any other emotion).

Although this approach is very simple and easy to learn, it takes practice to master and many clients tell me they have a hard time remembering what the letters "ABC" stand for and how to apply them to thinking patterns. Because of this, I am adding this quick reference to the articles section on the website, so the information can be easily found and reviewed.

Without Further Ado:

The ABCs can be thought of as a formula. Don't let that scare you. We are not talking math here. This is simply a way to think logically about how our emotions work and how we can begin to understand and control them. The equation looks like this:

$$\mathbf{A + B = C}$$

The "A" in the equation stands for the **Activating Event**. You can think of the activating event as "the thing that started my emotions rolling." An example of an activating event (and the one I usually give in a counseling session) is when someone cuts you off in traffic. You were minding your own business, and all-of-a-sudden, the car next to you cuts right in front of you causing you to step on your brakes. Unless you are quite unusual, an event like this results in a cascade of emotions; often taking the form of fear and anger.

It is critical to understand, and begin to accept, that the "thing" that happens to us (the activating event, in this case being cut off while driving), does not cause an emotion to occur. It does start things off, but it takes more than simply the event to result in an emotion. An emotion is caused by the "**A**" (Activating Event) plus the "**B**." So, what does the B stand for?

The "B" in the equation is your **Belief** about the event. In the example of getting cut off in traffic, we have many beliefs that could occur. One typical belief, that is likely to lead to anger, is that the individual who cut us off is "a jerk," "does not know how to drive," or "is trying to kill me." Actually, these examples are usually mild compared to what is actually going through our mind in this situation. But other beliefs are possible. For instance, we could choose to believe that the driver in question was experiencing some type of emergency. We could believe that we were driving in his blind spot. Or, we could decide to believe that he simply made a mistake and recognize that we have made the same mistake in the past. Obviously these two different approaches to what we believe are going to result in different "**Emotional Consequences**." Emotional Consequences are represented by the "**C**" in the equation.

Emotional Consequences are the result of what happened, or the event, plus what we believe about the event.

Can we control the events that impact us throughout the day? Perhaps some of the time. It is not safe, or wise, to walk down the street counting a handful of hundred-dollar bills. Keeping our money in our wallet probably makes us less likely to get mugged. But the vast majority of things that happen to us are just simply out of our control. You can't control the actions of the other drivers on the road around you, for instance.

It is a very good thing that activating events do not "cause" our emotions. If events alone cause our emotions, and we have no control over these events happening to us, it would mean we have no control over our emotions. If we are not paying attention, actively checking what we believe, we act as if this is the case. I sometimes have clients tell me, "I just cannot control my anger." These individuals are saying events that happen to them have complete control over what they feel, and how they will act as a result. They have no choice but to be angry.

Thankfully, this is simply not the case.

Do we have control over what we believe about the events that happen to us? Of course, we do. It is completely up to me whether I believe the driver meant to cut me off, or that he made a mistake that anyone, including me, might make. Having the ability to choose what I believe about a situation, means I have control over how I feel, and how I respond, in any situation.

Two Types of Beliefs:

There are generally two types of beliefs. There are "accurate" beliefs and "inaccurate" beliefs. Technically, the correct terms in the psychology world are "rational" and "irrational" beliefs. I try to stay away from using these terms, because they feel overly clinical and negative. If the words rational and irrational do not come across as negative and judgmental to you, then you might find them more useful as you think about your beliefs in a given situation.

If you think through the belief you have about a given event and decide that it is accurate, then the emotion you are feeling you simply have to feel. An example is when someone close to you dies. When this painful and inevitable event occurs, you will feel sad and will grieve the loss. As strange as it may sound, you are not sad because your relative, or close friend died. Rather, you are sad because you *believe* that this important person in your life will no longer be there and you will not have them as a confidante, or be able to enjoy their company, or have them in your life anymore. This belief is accurate. Because it is accurate, you will have to go through the grieving process. Your job now is to go through this process in a healthy way, that doesn't increase your pain, or the pain of others.

If it is hard to imagine that grieving over your lost friend, or relative, is based on what you believe, imagine you hear that the relative of your neighbor three doors down has died. You

might be temporarily saddened, because your acquaintance is sad, and you have empathy for her, but moments later you will be able to go about your day and probably not think about the death any further. This is not because you are cold hearted, but because you *believe* your neighbors tragedy does not affect you. You did not know, nor will you miss, their relative. This belief is also accurate.

If the driver that cut you off waved a one finger salute as he went by, believing he is a jerk is more likely to be accurate. The anger you feel is inevitable and your job now is to figure out how to deal with the anger in a healthy way. Responding by tailgating, returning his salute, or allowing the event to wreck your day are **not** examples of handling the anger in a healthy way. All of these behaviors may provide a feeling of immediate satisfaction, but in the end, handling anger this way makes things worse.

What if, after thinking about it, you realize your belief is inaccurate? When I choose to believe the driver, who cut me off is a jerk, or is trying to kill me, I most likely have chosen an inaccurate belief. Although, like the example above, it is possible the individual is a jerk, I have no way of knowing this (unless he flashes me that salute). When I have cut people off in the past, I do not think of myself as a jerk, because I am not a jerk. I simply made a mistake. When we recognize that one of our beliefs is inaccurate, even partially, then we need to change it to something more accurate; for instance, one of the alternate beliefs mentioned above, like, "Maybe I was driving in his blind spot."

So, here is the formula again, written out:

The **Activating Event**, plus what I **Believe** about it, results in my **Emotional Consequence**. Check the belief. If it is accurate, then focus on how to deal in a healthy way with the necessary feelings. If it is inaccurate, even a little, choose a more accurate belief to change the emotions I am feeling.

Conclusion

The purpose of providing the above information is to help you remember what we talked about during your counseling session. It should bring up more questions when you think about specific events and the emotions that you had as a result. Please bring these to your next session and we can explore both your accurate and inaccurate beliefs and what to do about each.

If you are reading this and have not discussed this with me in a session, it might be difficult to apply the concept to events you are experiencing. If you would like to, give me a call at **(907) 222-2503**, or make an online appointment request to talk about these concepts further.

Hopefully this was helpful, and I look forward to talking with you soon!

John

ABC's Worksheet

You can use the following worksheet to lay out the ABCs for a specific activating event, or emotion in a logical way. It might be helpful to use a separate lined piece of paper.

A: Activating Event
(What happened?) + **B:** Belief
(What do I believe about it?) = **C:** Emotional Consequences
(How did I end up feeling?)

D: Is my belief accurate, true, and rational? If it is, how do I handle my feelings in a way that is healthy and not harmful to me, or others?

E: If aspects of my beliefs are inaccurate, how can I change the beliefs to be more accurate? How does this change the way I feel?

REBT (Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy) was developed by Albert Ellis, PhD

This explanation of the theory is based on my interpretation and examples. My examples and explanation are copyrighted 2018 by John M. Fugett, MA, LPC. All Rights Reserved.