Widely known as the major founder of the cognitive-behavioral approach to counseling, Albert Ellis (1913–2007) developed what eventually became known as rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT). Born in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, Ellis moved as a young child with his family to New York City. Although he suffered from various illnesses as a child, his parents rarely visited him at the hospital as his father was often away on business trips and his mother was occupied with his two younger siblings and other activities. Feeling neglected, Ellis looked for things to occupy himself, and he could often be found reading books from the hospital library, chatting with fellow patients, imagining what he would do when he grew up, creating games he and his fellow patients could play, and more. He later called this behavior “cognitive distraction,” and it eventually became one of the components of REBT and other cognitive approaches.

Ellis was a voracious reader, often reading the early and modern-day philosophers and the work of popular psychologists. Not surprisingly, his classmates gave him the nickname “Encyclopedia.” At the age of 19, Ellis decided he wanted to cure himself of the debilitating shyness he had toward women. Keeping in mind John B. Watson’s idea of “in-vivo desensitization,” he gave himself the task of spending each lunchtime, during the month of August, sitting on a bench at the Bronx Botanical Gardens and forcing himself to talk with every woman who sat next to him. During that month, he spoke with at least 100 women and asked one out on a date. Finding that he survived the month with nothing dreadful happening, he eventually integrated trying new and often difficult or even embarrassing behaviors to overcome fears, guilt, or shame into his REBT approach.

With the Great Depression taking its toll on his family and society, in his young adulthood, Ellis decided that it was prudent to earn a degree in business. At the same time, he continued his voracious reading, began to write hundreds of essays and manuscripts, and became interested in reading and writing about love, relationships, and sexuality. This resulted in numerous people coming to talk with him about their relationship and sexual problems. Knowing that he had taught himself to overcome and change his emotional upsets and difficulties, and realizing that he had a natural talent for helping people, he eventually enrolled in a doctoral program in clinical psychology at Columbia University. Like most clinical psychologists of the time, he studied psychoanalysis but quickly began to question this widely used approach. He soon noticed that although many clients felt better after talking about their past, they weren't getting better; that is, they were not taking responsibility for creating their emotions and were not finding ways to change unhealthy emotions into healthy ones. He also questioned the new nondirective approaches, such as client-centered counseling, whose approach was far from the deductive reasoning style that he embraced when investigating the faulty thinking that was resulting in unhealthy emotions.

In part, because of Ellis’s interest in scientific understanding, his passionate belief in civil rights, his conviction that it was unethical to judge people for their lifestyles, and his interest in human sexuality, in the early 1950s, he became the founder and first president of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sex as well as the first American editor of the International Journal of Sexology. He could often be found supporting equal rights for women, gay rights, and interracial relationships, and he was even
involved in the American Association for Nude Recreation’s successful lawsuit to send sexually explicit magazines through the mail, which was decided by the Supreme Court in 1958.

In his 20s, as the result of an on-again/off-again relationship and the resulting despair he felt, Ellis realized that it was not the rejection by his woman friend that caused his despair but his belief that the woman should love him as much as he loved her. The negating of this kind of absolutist thinking eventually became a major part of his therapy. As Ellis developed a private practice, he increasingly realized that his clients had developed irrational beliefs that drove their behaviors and were the source of the unhealthy emotions from which they suffered. He also observed that even after they identified their irrational beliefs, many still had a tendency to maintain them. This led him to develop, in clear understandable terms, what was then called rational therapy, which focused on teaching others how to change their self-defeating, irrational beliefs into healthy, rational ones. He taught that people construct their emotions from the way they think, that it was not the circumstance that creates a person’s emotional destinies but one’s perception of the circumstance. It was then that he formulated his ABC Approach for Changing Disturbing Emotions, which later became known as the ABCDE approach.

In the ABCDE approach, A refers to the activating event or adversity (the event that occurs prior to the interceding thoughts); B refers to one’s belief about the event (irrational beliefs lead to unhealthy consequences); C refers to the consequences (negative emotions or destructive behaviors result from irrational beliefs); D stands for the disputation of the irrational thoughts, which is done logically, realistically, and pragmatically; and E stands for effective new philosophies. Here, new rational beliefs are clearly expressed, with the intention of repeating them in one’s mind over and over again. At this stage, additional cognitive, behavioral, and emotional tasks are used to reinforce and help maintain the healthier emotions and behaviors.

After publicly presenting his theory to his peers at the annual American Psychological Association (APA) convention in Chicago, Illinois, in 1956, Ellis was challenged and severely criticized by traditional psychoanalysts for what they described as his rational and simplistic approach. He was also challenged by some existential humanists who believed that he did not place enough emphasis on the client–therapist relationship, and they accused him of showing lack of empathy when working with clients. Although some of his critics could not see beyond his firm and directive tone and others did not like his humor and at times colorful vocabulary, his supporters recognized that fueling his manner was his genuine and fervent desire to help people suffer less and enjoy life more.

Ellis became a great promoter of his theory. One of his first books on his approach, How to Live With a Neurotic, was published in 1957, and he established his institute for rational living, called the Albert Ellis Institute, in New York City 2 years later. Here, he created his famous weekly “Friday Night Workshop,” where he would demonstrate his approach. He traveled the world teaching REBT to practitioners in the healing professions and to the general public. He was a prolific writer, with more than 85 published books and more than 1,500 published articles, and his new approach to psychotherapy became one of the most popular approaches practiced. Over the years, Ellis continued to refine his approach and changed its name to rational emotive therapy (RET) and then in 1993 to RET. Ellis worked solidly, 7 days a week, until succumbing to severe pneumonia in 2006 at the age of 92. However, even following his illness and despite being in hospital and rehab for most of his remaining 15 months, he continued to help students, colleagues, writers, and others who visited him.

Considered one of the most influential therapists of all time, Ellis was conferred the APA’s
Distinguished Professional Contribution award in 1985. At the APA's annual convention in 2013, he was posthumously awarded the APA's Award for Outstanding Lifetime Contributions to Psychology. He was also bestowed one of five Living Legend awards by the American Counseling Association in 2004. Today, many of the essential principles of REBT can be seen in most forms of cognitive-behavioral therapy that have arisen over the years. The popularity of these is mostly due to the groundbreaking, enlightening, pioneering, and tireless work of Ellis.

See also Beck, Aaron T.; Classical Psychoanalytic Approaches: Overview; Cognitive-Behavioral Therapies: Overview; Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy; Existential-Humanistic Therapies: Overview; Meichenbaum, Donald

Further Readings

- Ellis, A. (2004). Rational emotive behavior therapy: It works for me, it can work for you. Prometheus Books Amherst NY.
- Ellis, A.; Ellis, D. J. (2010). All out! An autobiography. Prometheus Books Amherst NY.

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