



## The Albert Ellis Legacy

A Review of

*Albert Ellis Revisited*

by Jon Carlson and William Knaus (Eds.)

New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2014. 363 pp. ISBN

978-0-415-87544-8 (hardcover); ISBN 978-0-415-87545-5

(paperback); ISBN 978-1-315-88408-0 (e-Book). \$200.00,

hardcover; \$54.95, paperback

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0038593>

Reviewed by

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Albert Ellis was one of the leading psychotherapists of the 20th century. The approach to therapy that he originated, rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT), has had worldwide impact in the treatment of human distress with the Albert Ellis Institute in New York City historically the center of that influence. He was a prolific writer with a curriculum vitae that listed 550 articles and over 85 books, as well as hundreds of speeches, workshops, and convention presentations. I (F.F.) knew him well and authored his obituary in the *American Psychologist* (Farley, 2009). I often took students from my doctoral classes at Temple University in Philadelphia to the Albert Ellis Institute to meet with Ellis and discuss issues of therapy and his views on a range of psychological issues. He was a gracious host and deeply committed to students and the future of the field.

*Albert Ellis Revisited*, edited by Jon Carlson and William Knaus, reflects the past but offers a contemporary perspective. It is a compilation of 20 of Ellis's most influential original articles or chapters from 1958 through 2002, each one prefaced by a current scholar, colleague, or friend of his who discusses the paper, often considering the work's contemporary relevance. Albert Ellis died in 2007, and the book is published as part of the Albert Ellis Tribute Series "dedicated to the celebration and expansion of Albert Ellis' work" (p. xviii). The book is organized into three parts: Theoretical Foundations, Applications, and Special Issues. In a volume dedicated to the celebration of someone's work, one expects enthusiastic kudos, and that is certainly true of this book.

In Theoretical Foundations, the lead article is one of the most important pieces in Ellis's oeuvre, the 1958 article "Rational Psychotherapy," a 14-page article that appeared in the *Journal of Psychology*. In this article, Ellis listed 12 irrational ideas that bedevil human thinking, and he expanded and expounded upon this basic point throughout his professional life. The article was a manifesto for a cognitive approach to psychotherapy:

The rational therapist, then is a frank propagandist who believes whole-heartedly in a more rigorous application of the rules of logic, of straight thinking, and of scientific method to everyday life, and who ruthlessly uncovers every vestige of irrational thinking in the client's experience and energetically urges him into more rational channels. In so doing, the rational therapist does not ignore or eradicate the client's emotions; on the contrary, he considers them most seriously, and helps change them, when they are disordered and self-defeating, through the same means by which they commonly arise in the first place—that is, by thinking and acting. (p. 17).

Ellis's ideas in this 1958 article departed sharply from most therapies of the past, such as psychoanalysis, and fitted well with a growing movement toward cognitive psychology. The remaining seven articles in Part I on Theoretical Foundations consider some important elaborations of his original rational psychotherapy model, showing the evolution to a rational emotive therapy (RET), then to a rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT) model, the final step in his thinking on therapy.

One interesting exposition in Theoretical Foundations addresses whether the irrational thought, so much a life-long target of Ellis's work, is a universal in the human condition and thus potentially biologically and genetically based. Ellis proposed in a 1975 convention presentation that nature may be a stronger factor in irrational thinking than previously considered, as evidenced by its widespread incidence across societies and cultures. To the extent this is true, it might be seen as a limiting factor in the success of talk therapy in reducing irrational thought.

Another interesting elaboration under Theoretical Foundations is the introduction of Ellis's ABC model of emotional disturbance in a 1985 article. This model incorporates Ellis's view that thoughts, feelings, and actions are closely connected. "A" represents the Activating events; "B" represents the Beliefs about A, and "C" represents the Consequences in thoughts, feelings, and behavior of the interactions of A and B. In his discussion of this 1985 article, Will Ross brings this central model up-to-date.

Part II of the book concerns the applications of Ellis's work, articles he wrote on anxiety, depression, perfectionism, denial, guilt, fears of rejection, and disabilities, among other topics. One interesting book chapter from 1988 describes a case of severe depression treated by REBT. What enhances the interest value here is the discussion of the chapter by an REBT practitioner in Pakistan, Nosheen K. Rahman. One gets a flavor of the international reach of Ellis's work and its value in a non-U.S. society. Rahman notes that she introduced REBT to Pakistan. She considers the relation of Islam to REBT, listing similarities and differences in the principles of each, providing a valuable short list of considerations for an REBT practitioner with a Muslim client. Rahman notes the high incidence of depression in Pakistan and that many of the irrational beliefs of her clients are similar to reports on U.S. clients, supporting the universality of these beliefs.

The final section, Part III, is devoted to special issues such as REBT's effectiveness with clients with devout religious beliefs, the use of the term "mentally ill," answering some objections to Ellis's approach, and projecting the future of REBT. In his 1997 chapter on the future, Ellis covers a range of areas of activity and opportunity for REBT and cognitive behavior therapy, including school programs, self-help materials and groups, stress management training, brief therapy, and more. Clearly, since 1997, Ellis's work has had

continued influence as shown in *Albert Ellis Revisited* and in the many citations to his work noted in it.

We were especially interested in rereading Ellis's 1997 article "Should Some People Be Labeled as Mentally Ill?" We are currently teaching an undergraduate honors course "The Meaning of Madness" in which the points raised by Ellis are central to the classroom discussion of this topic. This article and several in this Special Issues section illustrate Ellis's broad interests, beyond his models of therapy, encompassing some of the central issues of a helping science and profession. An example of the breadth of his interests is the strong role of philosophy and linguistics in his thinking and writing shown at many places in this volume, as are his concerns for justice, civil rights, and individual freedoms.

Ellis was one of the most colorful, provocative, and influential psychologists of the last 100 years (Farley, 2009). At a memorial held for him at Columbia University, his alma mater, a scheduled program of two to three hours ran to almost six hours, ending at 1:30 a.m. because so many individuals wanted to testify at length to the Albert Ellis they knew and admired! At his 90th birthday, greetings came from the Dalai Lama, the president of the United States, the governor of New York, the mayor of New York, the family of former President Bill Clinton, and many more. I (F.F.) have conducted Conversation Hours at the American Psychological Association convention with Ellis and Aaron T. Beck jointly, two giants of psychotherapy, which were always presented to a packed and enthusiastic crowd; I also organized at some of these conventions a "Comedy Jam" where famed psychologists let their hair down and did live humorous performances on stage, and Ellis, when he was able to attend, always opened these with the singing of hilarious songs he had written about psychological and psychotherapeutic themes to uproarious audience response!

*Albert Ellis Revisited* captures many of Ellis's seminal written contributions in original form with commentary, though a notable omission is any contribution of his collaborator and widow, Debbie Joffe Ellis (see Ellis, 2010; Ellis & Ellis, 2011, 2014). Perhaps in a future book in the Albert Ellis Tribute Series that collaboration can be incorporated, particularly given the continuing contributions she is making to the Ellis legacy.

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