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What is RET again?

Cognitive therapy and training

Why is someone feeling anxious? Because he has anxious thoughts. Why is someone feeling angry? Because he thinks that people should stick to his rules. What makes someone gloomy? The fact that he has gloomy, negative thoughts about himself and the world. A psychologist who bases himself on cognitive psychology will give this kind of answer. Cognitive psychology, among other things, concentrates on the origin of emotions and stress, examines the connection between how people think and how they feel. The results of these psychological theories are increasingly being adopted in all kinds of therapy and training. One of the oldest cognitive therapies, that is based on these principles, is the Rational-Emotive Therapy. This form of therapy has been developed since the fifties of the last century by the American psychologist Albert Ellis. The ideas taken from this therapy are the focal point of this book. Today it is also known as Rational-Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) which has the same meaning. Ellis introduced this term a few years ago to stress the fact that the behavioural side is also taken into account in this therapy. Therefore we prefer to use the term RET because in our country this form of therapy has already been known by this name for decades.¹

The forms of cognitive therapy, that have been developed these last decades by various researchers and authors, differ in the stress they lay on the various aspects of thinking.

¹ The abbreviation RET is also used as an abbreviation of Rational Emotive Training. To make things worse RET is sometimes used for Rational Effectiveness Training. With respect to content these terms do not differ very much. They tell us something about the different contexts in which the theory and methods are being used. The word 'training' is especially used to make a distinction in target groups, to stress the fact that it is not some heavy therapy meant for serious deviations. In that case the interventions are focussed on more or less normal problems like stress at work. The term Rational Effectiveness Training particularly stresses the aspect of effectively functioning at work. In an earlier book *The Stumbling Blocks of the Mind*, we used the term Rational Effectiveness Training because this book mainly concerns problems at work.

One emphasizes the explanations people have for their failures and achievements. A depressing line of thinking can be for example 'if I succeed, it is by chance, if I fail, it is because of my inability'. Others emphasize the formal characteristics of people's arguments. An example is to be found in the tendency to draw negative conclusions from a limited number of experiences: someone has taken me in, the world is bad, I told you so. Someone else says that some problem solving ways of thinking lead to more happiness than others. With these forms of therapy you learn methods to solve your problems step by step.

The RET strongly emphasizes the esteem or appraisal people have of things happening to them. Do you worry about your own or other people's actions? Do you mind the adversities you experience? How about your self-esteem? And how do you think the world should be organized?

The ABC of RET

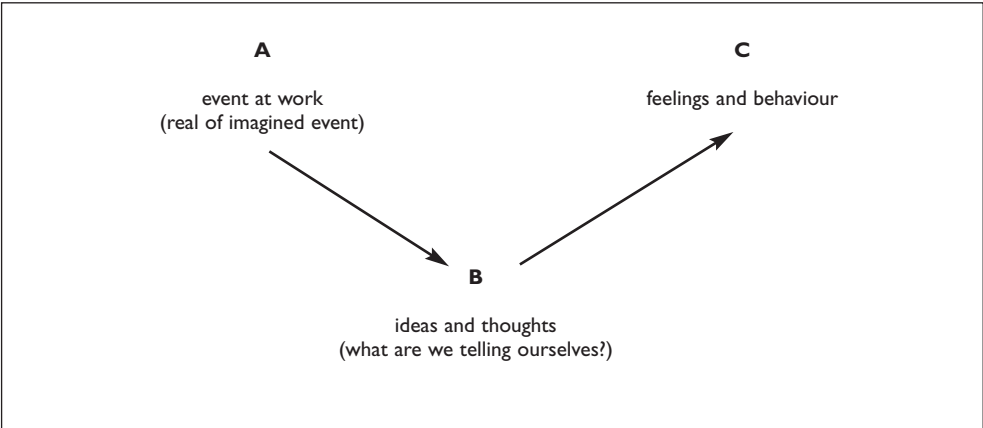
Although this book is written for people already somewhat advanced in their knowledge and experience with RET, it can do no harm to go through a number of basic principles of the RET-model again.

RET maps emotional events according to the ABC-model. A strict distinction is made between three elements:

The A, that stands for *activating event*, is the event that causes an emotional reaction. For example: my boss announces my dismissal.

The B stands for *belief*, the idea or thoughts about the event A. For example: It is terrible that I will be fired. I cannot handle this. This cannot be. Now I have failed.

The C refers to the *consequences*. These consist of the *emotional reaction* and the consequent *behaviour*. In this example it is the anxiety and clamming up, on the one hand, and the anger and calling the boss names on the other.



People tend to say that the event causes the emotion. Within the ABC-model: the A causes the C. According to the RET-theory the emotional reaction, as well as the related behaviour, is mainly caused by the idea, the way of thinking about the event, the B. Or: it is mainly the B that causes the C. So not the events themselves cause the emotions, but above all the way we think about these events. To stick to the example of the dismissal: all kinds of meanings can be given to the same event. Maybe someone even has positive thoughts about the dismissal on hand: 'Glad to be rid of this lousy job. I am forced to resign so for the time being I will get a benefit to watch out for something new at leisure. Not bad!' In such a case you probably will feel happy. A reaction like this is not only theory. One of the authors of this book (Th.IJ) had this experience. And more people have reacted in a positive way to a dismissal. But the reaction could be totally different: 'This is a complete disaster. My self-esteem is deeply hurt.' In such cases you probably will start feeling gloomy. Another possibility is that someone thinks more about the injustice being done to him: 'My boss has treated me unfairly; he is playing a dirty trick on me. He just can't do this to me, the bastard'. People who think this way probably will feel very angry. Maybe he also acts angry by calling the boss names or threatening him. It is clear from these examples that strong interpretations or appraisals play a role followed by strong emotions.

Harmful and useful emotions

RET mainly concerns the better handling of inadequate and harmful emotional reactions. Emotional reactions can be very useful and give energy to come into action. But it is also possible that you are functioning badly because of your emotional reactions and needlessly lose a lot of energy. For example, it could happen that you have too much stress at work because of strong emotional reactions. This happens when you are angry and irritated too often because people do not perform as they should according to your standards and values. Much of this stress not only harms your health because you are getting exhausted, but can also lead to bad performances. Someone, who is too afraid of making mistakes, will needlessly spend too much time on his work. Or maybe he is afraid to experiment with new methods because he has to take chances and could fail. Within RET a distinction is made between adequate and not-adequate emotional reactions. Some emotions can help you. When you are feeling irritated about something this could be a new beginning and give you energy to stand up for yourself. Being a bit worried or even afraid before going on a trip, stimulates you to take precautions. We will take about the useful and positive aspects of emotions in Chapter 2.

Rational and irrational thinking

In the book 'The Stumbling Blocks of the Mind' five very frequent irrational thoughts are distinguished which often give people problems at work. We go briefly through them again:

1. Perfectionism
2. Disaster thinking
3. Low frustration tolerance
4. The love junkie: addiction to respect and love
5. Demands on others and the world

1. PERFECTIONISM

In case of excessive perfectionism the central way of thinking is that you **cannot** make mistakes. Requiring absolute infallibility often goes together with self-judgment: a mistake means weakness. Therefore perfectionists are always aware of dangers if something goes wrong or could go wrong. After all, making mistakes means falling short, or worse: total failure. In doing this perfectionists are creating their own 'sword of Damocles' that is constantly hanging above them.

2. DISASTER THINKING

Doomsayers always see terrible dangers coming straight at them. Often they have invented them themselves, for example by enormously exaggerating the consequences of an event. Some possible thoughts that could be running through their mind:

- 'I am never going to be able to finish it, it's awful.' (When the pile of work is growing)
- 'The whole project is a failure.' (When some mistake has been made)
- 'We are not going to reach that turnover. Oh, what a mess!' (When no reaction to an advertisement is coming in)
- 'I just as well can forget my whole career' (When a superior has given a critical appraisal)

It is irrational to predict that facts which can be interpreted in a negative way, only can lead to fatal events in the future. 'I told you so, everything is going wrong.' This is another example of exaggeration based on a limited number of facts. These are the molehills that grow into mountains in their fantasy.

Disaster thinking not only leads to a lot of unnecessary stress, but it often results in unproductive behaviour like indecisiveness and avoiding risks as much as possible.

3. LOW FRUSTRATION TOLERANCE

People with a low frustration tolerance (LFT) cannot face things and think they are too difficult and too heavy. They often react emotionally when things are not going their way. Some examples of thoughts:

- 'I cannot handle criticism.'
- 'If that happens, I will not survive it.'
- 'That is much too difficult for me.'
- 'I can't stand it.'
- 'It is unbearable when the computer is not working. Right now when I have so much to do.'

The idea behind this is that life should be much easier than it is. In this way of thinking burdens and possible setbacks grow into insurmountable problems in their fantasy. The irrational can also be found in exaggeration. Difficult things sometimes can be a nuisance, but they can be handled. They can also be a challenge. By trying out things that are difficult, you can come up with a success sometimes. In any case you survive! The demand that the sun should shine every day is as absurd as demanding that life should be easier.

The low frustration way of thinking leads to a lot of unnecessary stress and dissatisfaction, a half-hearted attempt accompanied by a lot of moaning. This also leads all too often to giving up on the task too quickly: 'I told you so, much too complicated!'

4. THE LOVE JUNKIE: ADDICTED TO RESPECT AND LOVE

A favourite thought of the love junkie is the idea that it is necessary for people to love and respect you.

Some examples of this type of irrational thoughts:

- 'It is terrible when people reject me.'
- 'If I do not have a steady partner, I am a nobody.'
- 'It is unbearable that my assistant does not look at me anymore since I told her of.'
- 'I had better shut my mouth, because we will only be having discussions and that will end our collaboration.'
- 'If I refuse this task now, he will be angry and that will be the end of me.'

The exaggeration lies in the idea that it is absolutely necessary that people like you and approve of your behaviour. Of course it is very nice when people around you like you. But love and respect are no absolute necessities of people, like water and food. Here a rational wish is also made into an irrational demand.

The irrational thoughts of the love junkie lead to anxiety when there is a threat of loss of sympathy. 'Just imagine that he does not like me anymore, that would be horrible.'

It is clear that this attitude and the anxiety it causes, leads to the avoidance of conflicts, to not daring to say what you think. The proposition of new ideas always carries the risk of being rejected. The 'love junkie'-thinking often leads to compromising and to keeping

all your options open. It does not lead to appreciation and affection of everyone around you.

5. DEMANDS ON OTHERS AND THE WORLD

A very frequent irrational demand is that other people's behaviour should be different from what they normally do, and that the world should be different. The others should behave themselves according to our ideas and the world should be different, better, fairer.

- 'I worked so hard, he does not have the right to treat me like this.'
- 'So many things are going wrong in this organisation, it should not be like this.'
- 'Colleagues should always treat each other fairly.'
- 'People should keep their promises.'
- 'My colleague is going home before his time, so now I have to work harder, this should not be happening.'
- 'I am on holiday and it is raining, that's not fair.'
- 'I don't deserve this.'
- 'Wars should not exist.'

These demanding ways of thought mainly apply to justice and standards of how others, organisations or even nature should be. They can originate anger, rancour and unnecessary irritations. The irrational is found in the fact that people do not wish to accept reality as it presents itself and demand that this changes. 'This has to change, because I want it to.' Here a wish is made into a demand too.

Accepting of course does not mean approving. A rational attitude is to accept the things you cannot change and to try to change the things you could change.

These are all examples of irrational ways of thought that are often seen in work and private situations. They lead to intense emotions, blockades and often to not-constructive and ineffective behaviour.

RET is not a theory of personality

The above division of irrational ideas makes it easy to recognize frequent patterns. However, it can also lead to simplifications or to all too simple characterizations of people, which go like this: He is a real love junkie, she is a typical perfectionist, so that is why they behave like they do! Many management books about the psychological aspects of situations at work use the division in types of personalities. Because of these divisions people tend to label each other. A particular way of thinking does not need to be a general characteristic. They can differ in each situation. It is very well possible to be a perfectionist in one field and not in another. For example, someone can be a perfectionist

when raising his children, but not when making out bills.

It is also impossible to say that certain emotional problems or complaints are the consequence of one and the same way of thinking. Often, different ways of thinking mix. Someone, who has fear of failure when performing some task, can have a typically perfectionist way of thinking: If things go wrong I turn out to be useless. But maybe fantasies about the disasters that will happen when things go wrong can have a part in this, for example: 'This is going to cost me my job and I can forget all about my career' (disaster thinking). Or maybe other thoughts are playing a prominent role like: 'A failure like that would be unbearable for me.' (low frustration tolerance). So an event can activate more than one irrational thought at the same time which can differ depending on the person or the moment.

So it is important not to jump to conclusions too quickly about someone's personality. It is also not right to want to draw conclusions about someone's way of thinking on the basis of difficult situations.

The training

People who are being trained or want to train themselves by means of a book like this, first of all should learn to make a distinction between the A, the B and the C. This step is fairly complicated. You have to learn giving answers to questions like these: What is exactly happening to me? (the A) Where begins my part, my way of thinking (the B) that makes me feel like this and make me behave like this (the C)? It is often difficult to understand your own part in how you feel and how you behave. In daily life it is normal to talk about emotions as if they were forced on you from outside: My work (that is the A) is giving me stress (the C). My boss (A) is making me insecure (C). Such a remark (A) makes me angry (C). In their direct experience it really seems as if these events directly cause the emotions.

In RET it is important to first get rid of the idea that the event directly causes the emotion. This is called an *A-C reasoning*. The emotion is mainly caused by the thoughts you have consciously or unconsciously about the event. This is called a *B-C reasoning*. It is all about making the change from the A-C reasoning to the B-C reasoning. This is one of the most difficult steps, but a necessary one in the first phase of the process. Only when you see and accept that your own thoughts, your ideas and your perception are the principal cause of your feeling, then you can begin to change the emotions and the stress. You make yourself responsible as it were for how you feel and in this way you take charge. This own responsibility is an important starting-point of RET: the *emotional responsibility principle*.

There can be a lot of reasons why the change from A-C-reasoning to B-C-reasoning is difficult. For example, it is necessary to stop blaming others and your surroundings when you feel bad. There is nothing easier than to think: 'My work, my boss or my partner are

driving me up the wall: so they are the culprits?’ Others are causing your stress and you think that you yourself have little influence over it. You have to give up this ‘comfortable position’. It does mean that you will have more influence on your own thoughts than on the behaviour of others.

Only when you have taken this hurdle, change from the A-C reasoning to the B-C-reasoning, you can take the next step. What kind of thought is it that I have? What is right about it and what not? Is it or is it not an irrational thought? If someone thinks: ‘My colleague is breaking my rules because he is always late, what a nuisance’, this is, in RET-terms, a rational or real thought. You feel bad, for example because it irritates you but that is just a feeling that is part of this disagreeable situation. If this way of thinking about your colleague’s behaviour is followed by a *demand* (He must not do this!) or *overgeneralization* (He is a big bastard who should be dealt with!), then intense feelings will rise which not only can cause you a lot of trouble, but also make your performance worse. Maybe you will get into more trouble because you aggressively counterattack him which disrupts the relations even more. Often you do not even notice these exaggerations in your thinking, your disapproval of people and the demand making.

Bringing up for discussion your own exaggerated and irrational way of thinking and looking for more real thoughts is called the **challenge**.

The help of an outsider, for example in training or therapy, could be necessary to learn to see the irrational in your own thinking. To yourself your irrational way of thinking has become so obvious that you do not even put it into words: “That’s the way it is, he’s a bastard.” You do not see your thought as your own, you consider it reality.

Changing yourself, is it possible?

The essence of applying RET is the challenge, or the bringing up for discussion of irrational thoughts that cause excessive emotions of stress. Its result will be a more effective, realistic and helping thought. This way of thinking helps you to cope better with a problematic situation.

RET was born as a reaction to psychoanalysis. In the fifties Albert Ellis unfolded his theory, because he was not satisfied with the results psychoanalysts had with their clients. He saw possibilities to give the client healing self-insights in a shorter time than was usual in psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis is a complicated theory and a methodology that gets deep into the story of someone’s life and where the therapist does not have a leading role. The therapy is a long process of discovery. One of the characteristics (and success factors) of the RET-method is that a simple model is used (the ABC-model) that focuses on topical subjects. It is a methodology that can easily be picked up by the client himself. Ever since RET was introduced, it has been the custom of the RET-therapists to show the client the method in an active and didactical way, so that they could learn to apply it on themselves. The therapy itself can become shorter, because the therapy and the therapeutic relation

do not have to take years. The client becomes more self-reliant and less dependent on the therapist for a shorter time, because he himself is growing into an expert in handling his unproductive emotions and stress. Jacobs (1998) calls it an educative model, with which 'the client is taught to become his own therapist with the help of the ABC-model.'

Many people doubt if they can adjust their beliefs. They think they are an unshakable part of their nature and that there is nothing they can do about it. They are missing the point that they have changed their opinions many times in their lives. Getting new perceptions that are opposed to the old ones is a fact of life. Few people never changed their political vision, on second thoughts rather liked people better than before, or thought their decision was not a very wise one after all. Just as you can adopt irrational beliefs as your own, you can do this with rational ones. What makes it tricky is that you have to work hard in order to change your beliefs knowingly and actively. If you spent your whole life becoming an excellent (and irrational) perfectionist, then it is not likely that a few conversations and exercises or the reading of some books will suffice. Only understanding how RET works is not enough. A lot of exercise is needed to be able to easily apply the new way of thinking in the daily confrontation with difficult situations. Exercises in a number of chapters will teach you how to do this.

So in the RET-training you can distinguish different steps: recognizing your own part, discovering and formulating the unproductive or irrational thoughts, bringing up these thoughts for discussion and finding a better, more productive and rational way of thinking. The last step is learning to put into practice this new way of thinking. The aim is to make yourself more familiar with these new ways of thinking, so that you bring onto yourself less stress and unproductive emotions.

We will have a closer look on stress emotions in the next chapter. When do they help us and when not?