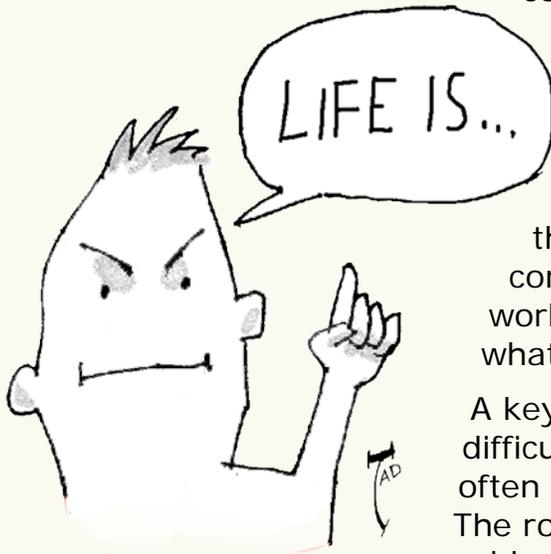


Critical Thinking II: Irrational Assumptions

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We considered how critical thinking involves scrutiny of areas where we do not want to think. And we identified relevant questions we avoid in those areas. Now we can consider how both neurotic obsession and



commonsensism typically rationalize their stands by certain irrational assumptions about life itself—assumptions that would have been noticed with a modicum of study regarding one's own psyche.

The 12 ideas below represent irrational ideas that many adults have about how they should conduct their lives. They are taken from the work of Albert Ellis, psychologist and founder of what is called “Rational-Emotive Therapy.”

A key part of Ellis’ theory is that psychological difficulties and self-defeating behaviors are very often supported by our irrational ideas about life.

The root of many behavioral and emotional problems is nourished by what we *think* life is about and only subsequently in our feelings and actions. This is why he doesn't analyze his patients' feelings and behaviors. Rather, he helps them identify irrational views about life itself. From that self-revelation, a patient can discover and avoid all sorts of dysfunctional feelings and behaviors rooted in that irrational view about life.

Most people would find that at least one of these 12 ideas represents their own irrational thinking. Ellis refers to these as “convictions that cause and sustain neurosis.” Although he calls these “convictions,” I suggest that we call them “assumptions.” They are not necessarily convictions that we embrace consciously. They are not life-principles we would teach our children. In fact, you may have little idea what your irrational assumptions about living well really are.

Also, by “neurosis,” Ellis is not referring to serious mental illness. Rather, he is referring to everyday spontaneous impulses that often get ordinary people into messes they could have avoided but didn't know how.

If you would like to discover your unnoticed assumptions, then *do not think about what you think*. These assumptions have already diverted your thinking to other concerns. Instead, *watch how you behave*. Monitor your everyday actions as if you were someone else watching you day and night.

So think critically about this one issue:

Does my behavior seem to be habitually influenced by an irrational assumption about living well?

First, read over all 12 assumptions. Then see which of these statements comes closest to describing your *behaviors* that may be evidence of one spontaneous assumption you have about life. Notice that each of these assumptions is expressed as an assumption about life itself. It is not a conscious conviction about how you should behave but rather an unnoticed assumption about life that subconsciously affects how you behave.

Then, in light of how you behave, express your main *irrational* assumption about life along the lines of those shown in the first column below.

Next, to grow beyond these unnoticed but irrational assumptions, express a more deliberate and *rational conviction* about life that is opposed to the irrational assumption you identified.

12 Irrational Assumptions That Cause & Sustain Neurosis¹

	Irrational Assumptions	Rational Convictions
1	For adults, it is a dire necessity to be loved by significant others for almost everything they do.	To be loved by others is not as important as _____.
2	Certain acts are awful or wicked; people who perform such acts should be condemned; they deserve punishment, not help.	Certain repulsive acts and behaviors are _____. They deserve _____.
3	It is horrible when things are not the way we like them to be.	Being disappointed is _____. A mature response to being disappointed is _____.
4	Feeling miserable is always caused by external conditions, forced on us by outside people and events.	The feeling of being miserable is essentially _____. A rational response to it requires _____.
5	If something is dangerous or fearsome we should be terribly upset and worry about it continuously.	Rational responses to dangers and fears almost always involve _____.

6	It is easier to avoid life's difficulties and self-responsibilities than to face them.	The most reasonable responses to life's difficulties, including responsibilities that belong to us, involve _____.
7	Everyone absolutely needs something other or stronger or greater than themselves on which to rely.	In the face of threats, a reasonable adult will rely on his/her inner power to _____.
8	Normal adults should be thoroughly competent, intelligent, and achieving in all possible respects.	The effort to be perfect is nowhere near as important as an effort to be _____.
9	Because something once strongly affected our life, it should always affect it.	The wisest way to think about deeply influential experiences is to _____.
10	It is essential to have certain and perfect control over things.	Life is ... To meet life's challenges, it is highly important to have the habit of _____.
11	Happiness can be achieved by just relaxing and doing nothing.	Genuine happiness always has a dimension of _____.
12	We have virtually no control over our emotions, and we cannot help feeling disturbed about things.	With difficult emotions, it is healthy and helpful to _____.

Finally, in upcoming weeks, consider how your new rational conviction would affect what you do and say. What behaviors do you need to stop? What behaviors should you learn?

This last step will not be final. It is meant to be open-ended as you develop the habit of noticing your behaviors, identifying any irrational assumptions they demonstrate, and then adapting and strengthening your rational convictions regarding life.

¹ Retrieved on July 25, 2006 from <http://www.ship.edu/~cgboeree/ellis.html> (From *The Essence of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy* by Albert Ellis, Ph.D. Revised, May 1994.) For clarity, some of the language has been changed by Tad Dunne.