

# Ten Steps to Positive Living

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# Preface

Of all the books that I have written for Sheldon Press, this is perhaps the one of which I am most fond. This is not because it is the best selling of all my Sheldon books, although it is; nor is it because it is the book that many therapists recommend to their clients as an introduction to the theory and practice of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT), the therapy upon which the book is based. I am most fond of this book because it expresses in succinct and accessible form the ideas that underpin psychological health and because of the way that it was put together.

The first edition of this book was written in 1993 and published in 1994. Actually, strictly speaking, I did not write the book in 1993, I dictated it in 1993. For I spoke the book into a minicassette recorder every day during a two-week period while walking down Madison Avenue in Manhattan from my friends' house – where I was staying on East 93rd St – to the Albert Ellis Institute on East 65th St. My then assistant, Caroline Dearden, transcribed these recordings and I worked on the transcript and put it into publishable book form.

As I made clear in the first edition, the ten steps presented in this book are not perfectly sequential. I suggest that you take Steps 1–6 before Steps 7–10. However, feel free to use this book in whatever way makes sense to you.

While the first edition of the book has stood the test of time and I am still basically happy with it, like any sturdy structure it required a makeover, some internal reorganization and some modernizing. I have performed these activities and I hope that the second edition is as well received as the first. As ever, I would be grateful to receive any feedback that you care to give. Your comments should be addressed to me c/o Sheldon Press.

*Windy Dryden, London and Eastbourne*

# Step 1

## Assume personal responsibility

I begin this book with a discussion of personal responsibility and urge you to assume responsibility only for what you are, in fact, responsible for.

### **What are you personally responsible for?**

The concept of personal responsibility is a major feature of mental health. The former Chief Rabbi, Dr Jonathan Sacks, once said that you are responsible for matters which are within your sphere of influence, and I very much agree with him. Just what, then, are you able to influence in your life? The prime areas that you are able to influence are those that belong to you as an individual. By this I mean your thoughts, your feelings, the decisions that you make and the way you act. You also have *some* influence over the likely consequences of your actions.

Not that you are in perfect control of any of these. For example, if you desperately try to control your thoughts you will soon learn that you are unable to do so. Try this experiment. Close your eyes for a moment and think of a pink elephant. Now instruct yourself that you must not think of a pink elephant. You will find, much to your surprise, that the one thing you cannot dispel from your mind is a pink elephant. However, if you allow yourself to think of a pink elephant, you will soon become bored with this thought and your mind will wander on to other things. This experiment shows that you have some control, but not perfect control, over your thoughts. Your thoughts fall, broadly speaking, within your sphere of influence and therefore you are responsible for them. Nobody

else is responsible for them. For example, I am not responsible for you thinking of a pink elephant, even though I am responsible for inviting you to think of it. My invitation is within my own sphere of influence and therefore I am responsible for it.

In other books I have written for Sheldon Press (e.g. *How to Accept Yourself*, 1999; *Coping with Envy*, 2010; and *How to Develop Inner Strength*, 2011), I have shown that your feelings largely depend on your beliefs about yourself, other people and the events that you experience in your life. This means that you are responsible for the feelings that you experience. Since you are largely responsible for the beliefs that you hold about yourself, other people and the world, you can be said to assume the major responsibility for the feelings that stem from these beliefs. You do not have total control over your beliefs or your feelings because you will encounter adversities that will influence the beliefs that you hold and the feelings you experience. However, despite this influence, you still have a fair measure of control over what you believe and what you feel in the face of these adversities.

For example, let's suppose that you enjoy the company of close friends, but your job has taken you away to another country where you do not know anybody. You are experiencing an adversity, which is a negative activating event. Being in this situation, therefore, has some bearing on the way you are going to think, given your desire to be with people that you know and love. Since you are facing an adversity, it is unlikely that you will think, 'Good. I'm pleased that I am away from my close friends', or 'It doesn't matter to me one way or the other that I am cut off from the people I care about.' Indeed, it would be unhealthy for you to think in such ways. However, facing this adversity does not absolve you of your responsibility altogether for the way you think about your plight. You will have a choice between holding a rational belief, e.g. 'I don't like being in this situation but I can stand it', and holding an irrational belief, e.g. 'I can't stand being in this situation, I'll go crazy if I have to put up with it for another moment.'

The events that you experience in your life, particularly

negative events (what I call adversities in this book), do restrict your choices of how you are going to think, but they rarely *cause* the way you think and feel. You almost always have a choice of thinking rationally or irrationally.

You are also largely responsible for the decisions you make in life, even though you may not have all the information you need when you make a decision. Imagine, for example, that you have been offered two jobs. You are unemployed and you are faced with making three choices. First, you could take job A. Second, you could take job B. Or, third, you could choose to remain unemployed and wait for a better job to come along. (Here, of course, you are taking the risk that you will not find a better job.) It is your responsibility to find out as much as you can about the two jobs that have been offered to you and also about the chances of finding a better job if you decide not to take either of them. Let's suppose that you decide to take job A. It quickly transpires, however, that important information was withheld from you which, had you known about it, would have meant that you would have made a different decision. You are still responsible for making the decision that you took, but you are not responsible for the fact that important information was withheld from you. It would be counter-productive for you to demand that you should have known this information when the reality was that you didn't know it. This is an important point: you are not responsible for knowing what you did not know. While you cannot be held responsible for something that you didn't know at a given moment, you are responsible for learning from this experience. Thus, next time you could ask certain questions about a job that you didn't ask about job A.

You also have some responsibility for the likely consequences of your actions. Imagine that you have made a promise to do something for a friend. However, when the time comes for the favour, something more interesting crops up and you decide not to keep your promise. It is very likely that your friend is going to be displeased that you did not help him in the way you agreed. Here, it can be said that you are responsible not only for your failure to

keep your promise (i.e. your action) but also for the disappointment of your friend. However, you cannot be held responsible for your friend's feelings of severe depression, since his depressed feelings stem largely from the disturbed way that he was thinking about your failure to keep your promise. So, if your friend accuses you of making him depressed, he is wrong: while you are responsible for breaking your promise to him, he is largely responsible for his feelings of depression.

What all this means is that it is very important for you to take responsibility for your thoughts, feelings, decisions and actions, and for the likely consequences of these actions. Unless you assume personal responsibility, you will not strive to change what you can change; rather, you will tend to blame other people or life events for the way you think, feel and act and for the decisions that you make. Blaming other people and external events for what you are really responsible for is a hallmark of poor mental health. When you do this, you tend to see yourself as a victim and take an 'I am helpless', self-pitying view towards life. Refusing to accept personal responsibility means that you also refuse to take control of your life. As such, you look towards others to rescue you and become overly dependent on them. Being a victim you will tend to complain bitterly about your lot and how unfairly you have been treated by others and by the world.

If you do this you will tend to blame your past and your parents for the way you think, feel and act today. Unfortunately, some schools of psychology tend to reinforce this by not distinguishing between past events *contributing* to the way you think, feel and act today, and those same events *causing* your thoughts, feelings and behaviour. My view is that your past certainly has an influence, but it can rarely be said to cause the way you respond to life events now. The way you respond now depends largely upon the beliefs you hold about current and future events. You may have learned from your parents, for example, that if you fail to do well in life this means that you are a failure. However, don't forget that in all probability you have spent many years keeping this philosophy alive in your own head. Thus, my view is that you are responsible



for choosing – yes, choosing – to keep alive these philosophies and that you can learn to change them.

## **Responsibility is different from blame**

It is very important to distinguish between responsibility and blame. While I am arguing that people are responsible largely for the way they think, feel and act, it does not therefore follow that they need to be blamed for their thoughts, feelings and actions and the consequences of their decisions and actions. For blame involves the beliefs that others must not behave badly, that they are bad people if they do bad things and that they need to be punished for so doing. What I argue in this book is that people are fallible human beings, neither good nor bad: when they do something bad they need to take responsibility for it, but they do not have to blame themselves for their wrongdoings. As I have shown in my book *Transforming Eight Deadly Emotions into Healthy Ones* (Sheldon Press, 2012), blame stops you learning from your errors. If you are to be blamed, this means you are a bad person, and if you are a bad person you will continue to do bad things.

To summarize, take responsibility for what is within your sphere of influence, but do not take responsibility for what is not within your sphere of influence, particularly for what is within the sphere of influence of others. When you take responsibility for your thoughts, feelings and actions, doing so will encourage you to change your unhealthy thinking patterns which are linked to your self-defeating emotions and self-defeating behaviours. If you assume the responsibility that you undoubtedly have, you will be able to benefit from the rest of the book. If you continue to deny this responsibility, then it is unlikely that you will benefit from this or any other self-help material that you may purchase.

# Step 2

## Adopt flexible beliefs about your desires

As I have shown in Step 1, your feelings and behaviour are largely dependent upon the way you think about the events in your life. Thus, if you are to be mentally healthy, it is important that you develop a set of beliefs and attitudes which enable you to do so. I call this set of beliefs and attitudes a philosophy. In my view, a mentally healthy philosophy is essentially flexible.

### **A model of human emotions**

What constitutes a mentally healthy, flexible set of beliefs, and how does this differ from a set of beliefs that is rigid and will lead to poor mental health? I can best answer this question by teaching you a model of human emotions which I regularly teach my clients in the course of counselling them. This model has three parts.

#### **Part 1**

I want you to imagine that you believe it is desirable or preferable for you to have a minimum of £11 with you at all times. You do not believe that it is essential to have this sum with you at all times, just that it is preferable. Imagine, then, that you are holding this flexible belief as you check how much money you have in your pocket or purse. You discover that you only have a £10 note. How do you think you would feel about having £10 when you desire, but do not insist on, having a minimum of £11 with you at all times? I think you will see that you would feel concerned or disappointed.

These negative emotions are, I argue, healthy because they enable you to adjust to this negative situation and motivate you to take constructive steps to correct the situation, if it is possible for you to do so.

## **Part 2**

Now I want you to imagine that you are holding a different belief. This time you believe strongly that you absolutely *must* have a minimum of £11 with you at all times. This is essential and it would be the end of the world if you didn't have this sum. With this belief clearly in mind, how would you feel about only having £10? I think you will see that you would have an entirely different set of negative emotions: those which are unhealthy. For wouldn't you feel anxious or even depressed? These emotions are hardly likely to encourage you to adjust to the situation, nor would they help you to take constructive action to try to remedy it.

Now, please note that in Parts 1 and 2 of the model you are facing the same situation, i.e. you have £10 in your pocket. Note also that your very different negative emotional reactions – in the first part a healthy set and in the second part an unhealthy set – stem from different philosophies. In the first part, you were holding a flexible, non-demanding philosophy, while in the second part I asked you to hold a rigid, demanding philosophy.

## **Part 3**

In this final part of the model, I want you to imagine that you are still holding the same rigid, demanding belief that I invited you to hold in the second part, namely that it is absolutely essential that you have a minimum of £11 with you at all times and it would be terrible if you didn't. Now imagine that while desperately searching in your pocket or purse, you find two £1 coins that you didn't realize you had. How would you feel about having £1 more than you believe you need? Most people say that they would feel relieved, and for a while you probably would too, because you have discovered that you have more than your absolute minimum.

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