

Rethink it!

**Practical ways to rid yourself of
anger, depression, jealousy and other
common problems**

By

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Do you tell yourself, *“I’m not good enough,”* or *“Things are far too difficult, why should I even try?”*

Words like this affect the way we feel and act. Such negative talk leads to fear, anxiety, depression and a ‘why bother’ attitude.

Rethink it! gives practical advice on tackling destructive thoughts that lead to anger, rejection, shame, jealousy, fear and worry.

Rethink it! is a self-improvement tool kit that can be dipped into and doesn't have to be read from cover to cover. Learn how to be more assertive, improve your communication, have better relationships and even overcome blushing.

Michael Cohen is a London therapist with more than 28 years of experience and is bestselling author of *The Power of Accepting Yourself*.

“A practical and pragmatic book that teaches how to change thoughts and beliefs in order to control unhealthy moods and self-defeating behaviour. I will recommend Rethink it! to my clients in addition to the help they receive from me.”

Meir Stolear

Senior Accredited REBT/CBT psychotherapist.

Important Notice

This book is designed to provide information in regard to the subject matter covered. It is not intended to be a substitute for medical or psychological advice or treatment. It is sold with the understanding that the publisher and author are not engaged in rendering psychological, financial, legal or other services. Any person with a condition requiring medical or psychological attention should consult a qualified medical practitioner or suitable therapist.

All client names and cases mentioned have been disguised to protect their privacy and confidentiality.

Dedication

To my dear parents Loretta and Gerald

Contents

Part 1 - Be your own best friend

1. What do you say when you talk to yourself?
2. Don't get derailed by distorted thinking
3. How demands lead to misery
4. Overcoming feelings of shame and embarrassment
5. Unconditionally accepting yourself and others
6. Overcoming worry

Part 2 - Relax and Heal Negative Emotions

7. Anxiety
8. Depression
9. Anger
10. Jealousy
11. Relax, breathe and stay sane

Part 3 - Change your behaviour

12. How to stop smoking
13. Weight loss – the psychological strategies that work
14. How to be assertive
15. It's good to talk
16. Relationship matters
17. Overcoming blushing

Recommended reading

Part 1

Be your own best friend

What do you say when you talk to yourself?

You have heard the statement: *“Talking to yourself is the first sign of madness.”* We talk to ourselves most of the time, even though we may not realise it. This self-talk takes place internally within the privacy of our own mind. All too often, self-talk is harsh, self-defeating, counterproductive and even abusive. We give ourselves labels that can prevent us from experiencing a truly happy, productive and fulfilling life. If you’ve developed a negative style of talking to yourself, you may be missing opportunities, performing below your potential and experiencing more stress than necessary.

In a similar way to negative comments from other people, our own internal dialogue can have a dramatic effect on how we feel, especially when it consists of unkind and unhelpful language.

Sometimes, this negative self-talk has a personal or historical root. It is as children that we first internalise unhelpful ideas. Parents, teachers, religious figures and others can lead us to believe negative and unjustified ideas about ourselves. If we are continually in an environment where we are being judged or criticised, our own internal dialogue takes on an extremely negative tone.

So that...

"You're stupid," becomes "I'm stupid."

"You're bad," becomes "I'm bad."

"You're selfish," becomes "I'm selfish."

"That's far too difficult for you – don't even try," becomes "Why bother," and so on.

Since the things we say to ourselves can have such a powerful effect on the way we feel and act, negative self-talk often leads to fear, anxiety and depression. Harmful self-talk can be triggered by all sorts of events, including social and work-related situations, and can occur when both good and bad things happen.

Fortunately, the reverse is also true. You can turn negative self-talk into an optimistic, positive-style of thinking. Martin Seligman, an American professor of psychology, has studied the way people explain the positive and negative events in their lives. His research shows that pessimists tend to base their view of the world on negative events. Conversely, optimists tend to distance themselves from negative events and gravitate towards the positive.

As an example, imagine that you are at a friend's home and you drop a mug of coffee. Do you see this as a small accident that occurred because you were distracted, or do you feel ashamed and tell yourself you're an awkward fool? If you're a pessimist, you're likely to label yourself as the awkward fool, whereas optimists are far more likely to accept it as an accident.

Replacing negative self-talk with a positive attitude will create good feelings and set you on the path to achieving healthy emotions.

Rethink it!

Instead of:

"I will never succeed with this project – it's hopeless and so am I."

Say:

"I have achieved more than I am giving myself credit for. I am not hopeless and have a very good chance of succeeding."

Instead of:

"She thinks I'm attractive – she must be mad!"

Say:

"I'm going to ask her out on a date – I hope she'll say yes."

Instead of:

"My presentation is going to be terrible! I'll be the laughing stock of the office."

Say:

"I have given successful presentations before. This one is likely to be well received."

Other ways to challenge negative self-talk:

What would you say to a best friend?

Your best friend comes to you for support. She's in tears because she's made a mistake and is berating herself mercilessly.

Do you say?

"I agree with you. You have made a terrible mistake that you can never put right. You, of all people, should really know better. You are a horrible person who should be thoroughly ashamed of yourself."

Perhaps a family member comes to you because he or she is discouraged and on the verge of giving up on an important project.

Would you say?

"Yes, give up now. In fact, you should have given up

months ago. You know you're weak – a loser who's destined to never amount to anything. It's only going to get harder, so why try? What were you thinking anyway?"

I'm sure your answer to both of these is a resounding NO! The reality is that you would want to show your friend empathy in a positive and reassuring manner. After all, a friend is meant to be someone who believes in you when you have given up believing in yourself.

But wait...do you talk to yourself in ways you would never contemplate when talking to a friend or family member?

In times of need, do you offer comfort and support to your friends and loved ones, but reprimand yourself with harsh and critical putdowns?

If so, why the double standard?

Remember, be your own best friend. Whatever encouraging words you'd say to your best friend, say those words to yourself. You deserve it.

Keep a diary of your negative thoughts

Whenever you experience a negative thought, write it down in a diary and explain what triggered it. Review your diary on a regular basis. Was your negativity truly justified? Is there another way to view the situation? For example, change:

"I'm an idiot for losing my job. I will never find another one like it."

To:

"It's unfortunate that I lost my job. I wish I had been more efficient. I don't like losing my job, but I can handle it. Finding another job may be challenging, but I can do it!"

Just by paying attention to how you talk to yourself, you can make huge changes in your life. Often, a negative inner dialogue has taken years to develop, so creating a positive one will take time as well. However, with work and practise, you can greatly boost your confidence.

Don't be derailed by distorted thinking

Distorted thoughts have a way of making our lives miserable. The errors in our thinking are known as cognitive distortions and were first observed by the pioneering American psychiatrist Dr Aaron Beck back in the 1960s. Cognitive distortions are patterns of thought that lead people to perceive reality in a negative form. These unhelpful and distorted thinking patterns convince people that their interpretation of events are accurate and true, when in reality they are not.

Indeed, cognitive distortions generate inaccurate, exaggerated and generally self-defeating thought patterns that interfere with how a person interprets an event, usually leading to upsetting and destructive emotions. In other words, our mind convinces us of something that isn't really true. If you're suffering from distorted thinking, you're probably seeing yourself, others and the world around you in a negative light, which can lead to depression, anxiety and a whole range of emotional issues.

Although it was Beck who first developed the theory of cognitive distortion, it was his student, the noted psychiatrist and author Dr David Burns, who expanded and popularised the concept. In his best-selling 1980

book, *Feeling Good – The New Mood Therapy*, Burns gave names to the following 11 cognitive distortions:

1. All or nothing thinking

Also referred to as black and white thinking, all or nothing thinking occurs when a person's thoughts fall into good or bad categories, without leaving any room for middle ground.

For example:

Sarah is determined to stop smoking and sets a date to quit. The day arrives, and within six hours, she has a puff of a cigarette. Despite immediately extinguishing it and throwing the remaining cigarettes away, Sarah says to herself: *"That's it ... I have failed to stop completely."*

This thought upsets Sarah so much that she purchases another pack of cigarettes and smokes them all that day.

Rethink it!

I asked Sarah to challenge herself and think of times when she had stopped smoking, even if only for a few days or hours. Instead of viewing her most-recent attempt to quit as a complete failure, I suggested she think of what happened as a mistake, and remind herself that she can choose to get back on track with her smoking cessation plans. Remember, there are few situations that are absolute.

Whenever Sarah finds herself faced with a similar quandary, she now asks herself:

"Is it really so bad, or am I indulging in all or nothing thinking?"

"How else can I think about the situation?"

“Am I taking a balanced view or thinking in an extreme way?”

2. Overgeneralisation

An overgeneralisation occurs when a person comes to a general conclusion based on a single incident or a single piece of evidence. If something bad happens just once, the person expects it to happen over and over again, seeing a single, unpleasant event as part of a never-ending pattern of defeat. He may use words such as “always” and “never” when thinking about it, and assumes it will automatically happen again.

“I always miss my train.”

“I never get anything right.”

“Nothing works out for me.”

Example:

James arranges a picnic for his family in late August. Although the weather forecast suggests it will be dry and sunny, it rains for most of the time and the family ends up getting drenched.

James says to himself: *“Typical! It always rains when I arrange an outdoor outing for the family.”*

Rethink it!

I asked James if his statement that it always rains when he arranges outdoor events for his family is 100 per cent true. After a short pause, he smiled and mentioned that his family enjoyed a very pleasant day out on Brighton beach earlier in the year. Now, when James is tempted to over-generalise, he asks himself:

“Am I over-generalising?”

“What are the facts?”

“Are my interpretations accurate?”

3. Mental filter

A mental filter occurs when we take the negative details of a situation or event and magnify them while filtering out all the positive aspects. For instance, a person may pick out a single, unpleasant detail about an experience and dwell on it exclusively until their version of reality becomes overly negative or distorted.

Example: Nicky is asked to speak at a colleague's leaving party. Afterwards, 19 out of 20 people say nice things about the speech. However, one person makes a mildly critical remark. Nicky obsesses about the comment for hours while ignoring all the positive feedback.

Rethink it!

I asked Nicky if she realised she was zeroing in on the one negative comment and dismissing all the compliments. Immediately, she could see that she was being hard on herself. In future, Nicky has decided to ask herself:

"Am I looking at the negatives, while ignoring the positives?"

"Is there a more balanced way to view this situation?"

4. Discounting the positive

Discounting the positive involves ignoring or invalidating good things that have happened. People who discount the positive often overlook their achievements while being quick to notice their faults. They discount their success, believing it was just luck or

chance. People who discount the positive rarely feel any sense of pride or satisfaction in their achievements.

Example:

Tim wins salesperson of the year and is awarded a cheque for £2,000 and a plaque as acknowledgement of his exceptional performance. Tim feels very uncomfortable with this award and refuses to take up the offer of a drink with his co-workers. He discounts the recognition, saying he was just doing his job and hadn't done anything out of the ordinary to deserve it. Tim puts his plaque in a drawer and never mentions it to anyone outside of work.

Rethink it!

Tim's lack of self-worth kept him from enjoying his award. Instead of minimising his recognition, I encouraged Tim to express gratitude for it. I suggested he think about why the company had awarded him a £2,000 cheque. Tim began to reconsider his stance and realised that he did do a lot of extra work and deserved the award. Now Tim:

Examines evidence for and against discounting positives.

Asks himself if everyone would see it this way... if not, why not?

He reminds himself that if everyone thought so negatively of him, there would be different consequences.

5. Mind reading

An individual who is mind reading makes a negative interpretation about what others are thinking, even

though there is no evidence to support this conclusion. Despite nothing being said, mind readers believe they know what people think and feel about them, as well as why they behave the way they do towards them.

Example:

Jenny is at a party and due to anxiety is finding it hard to make conversation. She decides: *“Everyone is looking down their nose at me ... the people I have managed to speak to must think I’m really stupid.”*

Rethink it!

I ask Jenny if she has any real evidence that anyone – let alone everyone – is looking down on her. Did she think that maybe she was being too hard on herself? Jenny realised that she was mind reading and asked herself the following.

“What is the evidence that people are looking down their nose at me?”

“How do I know what other people are thinking?”

“Just because I assume something, does that mean I’m right?”

“What else could they be thinking that is positive?”

6. Fortune telling

Fortune telling involves anticipating the worst and taking it as fact. When a person is fortune telling, he believes he knows what the future holds. He makes negative predictions and is convinced they are unavoidable facts.

Example:

Peter is on his way to a job interview and tells himself: *“I just know I’m going to be asked questions I*

cannot answer. It's all going to go horribly wrong."

Rethink it!

I ask Peter: *"Have you ever predicted disaster about a job interview before, only to find it went far better than you expected?"* Peter's answer was a resounding, "Yes." Now he asks himself:

"Am I predicting disaster without evidence to back it up?"

7. Magnification

This distortion involves magnifying problems by blowing their effects way out of proportion. When things go wrong, we all have a tendency to exaggerate the consequences and imagine a disastrous outcome.

Example:

Frankie says to herself: *"This is the worst thing that could happen. It's awful and I can't cope!"*

Rethink it!

I ask Frankie:

"Realistically, what's the worst that could happen?"

"If the worst did happen, what would you do to cope?"

"What's most likely to happen?"

"In reality, is it really that awful or terrible?"

By answering these questions, Frankie was able to put the situation into perspective and reduce her anxiety.

8. Emotional reasoning

Emotional reasoning is a negative style of thinking in

which people base their view of themselves, other people, or a situation on the way they feel, rather than taking reality into account. A person assumes that his feelings reflect fact, regardless of the evidence. He assumes that what he feels must be true.

"I feel like a failure, so I must be one."

"I wouldn't be worrying if there wasn't something to worry about."

"I feel unattractive, so I must be."

Example:

James is anxious about air travel, so he reasons that flying on a modern aircraft is a risky and dangerous thing to do. Because James' reasoning is based on emotion, he doesn't stop to consider the facts.

Rethink it!

I asked James to consider that he might be confusing his feelings with the facts, and pointed out that if flying really was that dangerous, then why doesn't everyone who boards an aircraft feel anxious? James could see he was confusing his thoughts and feelings with reality. Now he asks himself:

"Am I confusing my feelings with the facts?"

"Do my feelings necessarily reflect reality?"

"Am I thinking this way just because I'm feeling bad right now?"

9. Shoulds and musts

"I SHOULD be a better person."

"People MUST treat me in a fair, polite way."

"The world MUST always be the way I want it to be."

These kinds of statements are called irrational beliefs.

They are demands we place on ourselves, others and the world. Our demands can lie at the very core of our difficulties, leading to depression, anger and a “why bother?” attitude. Our aim is to replace demands with preferences – to restructure our irrational unhealthy thinking with rational healthy alternative thoughts. Since this is such an important form of distorted thinking, I have devoted a whole segment to it, *How demands lead to misery*.

10. Labelling

Labelling is an extreme type of all or nothing thinking, as well as an overgeneralisation. Instead of describing a specific behaviour, a person assigns a negative or self-defeating label to himself or others.

Example:

Michael had spent a whole weekend writing an article for an in-house magazine. On Monday morning, his computer hard drive failed. To make matters worse, Michael had failed to back up his article onto an external drive. Michael said to himself: *“I’m a complete loser.”*

Rethink it!

I asked Michael what good could possibly come from calling himself names. Instead, I suggested he be specific and judge his actions, rather than himself. For example, noting that it was a stupid thing to do is a far better response than putting himself down, which would only make him feel worse. After re-evaluating the situation, Michael came to a more specific conclusion:

“Not backing up my work was a stupid error. I made a mistake after a busy week.”

11. Personalisation and blame

Personalisation and blame occur when someone automatically assumes responsibility for negative events that are not under their control. Sometimes, people will blame others for their circumstances while overlooking how they may have contributed to the problem.

Example:

Sarah took her two children and their two friends to see a film they had all been looking forward to. Not one of the children enjoyed the film, so Sarah ended up blaming herself.

Rethink it!

I asked Sarah if she was being reasonable by blaming herself for the children's lack of enjoyment. Realising that she couldn't be expected to take responsibility, she now asks herself:

"Am I really to blame for other people's actions and emotions?"

"Is this really all about me?"

When you're feeling down, focus on your thinking. If your thoughts are negative or critical, look for the thinking errors and challenge them. Once you get into the habit of disputing your negative self-talk, you'll find it easier to handle difficult situations. As a result, you'll feel less stressed, more confident and in control.

How demands lead to misery

Did you know that our feelings and behaviour are largely dependent on the way we think about the events in our

lives? In order to lead a psychologically healthy life, it is important that we hold beliefs that enable us to develop a positive attitude towards ourselves, others and the world at large. If we hold rigid, dogmatic and unhelpful beliefs, then we are likely to experience unhealthy emotions and psychological distress. On the other hand, if our beliefs and attitudes are flexible, we are likely to exhibit healthy emotions and behaviours that allow us to achieve our goals and live a happy life.

Three major demands that lead to emotional misery:

We all desire good things to happen to us, and want to avoid bad things. However, we also have a strong tendency to elevate these desires into absolute demands. When we hold onto demanding and dogmatic beliefs, we become upset. It is this rigidity that lies at the core of our emotionally disturbed responses to negative events.

According to the pioneering American psychologist Dr Albert Ellis, irrational beliefs are central to emotional distress. Dr Ellis identified three major demands that create this distress. Often referred to as the three 'major musts', they are:

Demands we place on ourselves - such as: *"I must do well or else I'm no good."*

Demands we place on others

Such as: *"People must treat me fairly and kindly, and if they don't, they are no good."*

Demands we place on the world

Such as: *"Life must go the way I want, when I want."*

"The universe must treat me well."

These demands lead to emotional misery. The first can trigger anxiety, depression, guilt and shame. The

second is behind a great deal of anger, aggression and even acts of violence. The third can cause self-pity, depression and a “why bother?” attitude.

Let’s look a little closer at these three demands:

1. Demands we place on ourselves

It is natural, healthy and good to want to achieve success in all that we do in life. But problems can arise when we place unduly high expectations on ourselves and elevate a desire to do well into an absolute demand that we MUST do well. Then, if we aren’t as successful as we’d demanded, we exaggerate the severity of the situation and run ourselves down. We tell ourselves that the situation is hopeless and that we are failures and no good. This can then lead to self-denigration and even self-hatred.

2. Demands we place on others

It is perfectly reasonable to want people to treat us with respect, and to be polite and courteous. However, as with the first demand, problems can arise when we elevate the desire to be treated well into an absolute insistence that we MUST be treated well all the time. Then, when people fail to live up to our expectations, we feel aggrieved and condemn them, which can lead to rage and anger.

3 Demands we place on the world

Do you demand that life must be easy, without discomfort or inconvenience? It is reasonable to desire that the world be a safe place and to prefer that things go the way that we want them to go. However, problems arise when we become inflexible and insist that circumstances must turn out the way we want. This can make tolerating frustration difficult and result in

self-pity, anxiety and depression.

“Shoulds” and “Musts”

In common everyday language, everybody uses words such as “should” and “must.”

“I really should get to my hospital appointment on time.”

“I must wait for the pedestrian lights to turn green before I cross the road.”

The above statements can be very helpful and potentially life saving. However, “should”, “must”, “have to” and “got to” can become unhelpful when used in the context of an unreasonable demand. If you insist that you must or should have things such as success, fairness and convenience, you are demanding that the world dances to your tune and that your rules are always obeyed. Demands could include:

“People must treat me fairly all the time.”

“The world should always be a fair place.”

Example:

Deborah was feeling anxious about a presentation she had to give to a group of associates at work. Deborah tells herself: *“I must give a perfect presentation or I’ve failed.”*

You can now see how these irrational beliefs can leave a person feeling anxious. As we have seen, demands consist of irrational beliefs. They are unrealistic, rigid, blow events way out of proportion and are inconsistent with reality. They lead to unhealthy feelings that can cause misery and distress. On the other hand, preferences consist of rational beliefs and are

realistic, flexible and aligned with reality. They keep events in perspective and lead to healthy, appropriate feelings.

Preferences contain statements such as:

"I would like to, but I don't have to."

"I prefer to, but I don't have to."

"I hope to, but there are no guarantees."

Rethink it!

I indicated to Deborah that rather than holding onto counter-productive demands, she would be better off thinking in terms of preferences. I suggested that a more flexible attitude would reduce her anxiety, and that she should dispute the idea that her presentation must be perfect. Deborah challenged her irrational beliefs by asking herself:

"Why must I give a perfect presentation?"

"I really would like to give a perfect presentation, but does it follow that I have to?"

"How would giving a less than perfect presentation make me less successful?"

After challenging her "shoulds" and "musts", Deborah arrived at the far more flexible belief:

"I would prefer to give a perfect presentation, but it's not absolutely necessary."

This reduced her anxiety considerably, allowing her to enjoy giving an outstanding, but not completely perfect, presentation.

It is important to recognise that you have far more control over your thoughts and feelings than you realise. Other people can physically punch you in the stomach, causing you physical pain. They may also be able to frustrate your plans and cause mischief. However, it is

you and only you who largely creates your emotional suffering and self-defeating behaviour. It can be liberating to recognise that you have a choice as to how you think, feel and respond to upsetting events in your life. When under pressure, most people have trouble thinking rationally. You have probably been thinking in irrational ways for a long time. However, by putting in the effort to challenge and change your thoughts, you will soon find yourself getting less upset.

Overcoming feelings of shame and embarrassment

Many people feel shame and embarrassment because they are worried about what others may think of them. Those who say they never worry about this are probably being economical with the truth because this particular worry trait is something we've inherited from our ancestors.

Many years ago, we all lived in small hunter-gatherer tribes where everyone knew each other and built their lives together. Of utmost importance was survival and attracting the best mate in order to pass on our genes. Within the tribe, status and authority were key ingredients, so fitting in and being liked was essential. Say or do the wrong thing and we risked being excluded from the group. Abandoned and alone, we would be left to fend for ourselves in a dangerous, hostile world. Being obsessively worried about doing and saying the right thing was appropriate then, but is that still the case in today's world?

These days, we can decide which tribe is ours. We

also have far more choice about our role within that group. Make a mistake or say something inappropriate, and we are far more likely to be forgiven. Even if we do become ostracised from one set of friends, it's unlikely to affect our standing within other groups.

Our modern world also gives us far more opportunity and freedom to choose potential mates than the ancient world ever did – something our ancestors could only dream about. So when we fear looking foolish, worry about what others think or find ourselves obsessing about a work presentation, we are in part buying into an ancient ancestral trait.

If talking to strangers, asking someone out on a date or discussing issues with your boss leads to a significant anxious feeling in the pit of your stomach, it could be that your emotional reaction is keeping you from experiencing pleasure and satisfaction, acting assertively or sharing intimacy in your life. People who feel shame and embarrassment often rate themselves in a very negative light. They may condemn themselves, and put themselves down. Yet most of the behaviours we feel ashamed about amount only to things we would prefer not to have done. For example, we may bring some unnecessary attention to ourselves by doing something perceived as stupid, but does that make us a stupid person?

It may be helpful to regret having done certain things, but to berate yourself and be filled with self-criticism is potentially damaging and certainly self-defeating. Why feel ashamed and blow out of proportion something that others would merely regret? Is it truly the end of the world if something we say comes out the wrong way?

Even if people do laugh at you or form a negative impression, so what? They're judging you on one short meeting and don't know who you truly are. Little purpose is served in the modern world by shame and embarrassment, and these painful feelings could be preventing you from experiencing self-worth, hope for the future, friendship and love.

Rethink it!

Here are some ideas to help you stop worrying about what other people think of you.

1. Remember those ancestral traits

People are normally too hung up worrying about what others think about them to have time to think about you. Attempting to read someone's mind doesn't work, and can lead to catastrophic thinking. Even if someone's laughing, it doesn't automatically mean she thinks less of you as a person, and it isn't necessarily directed at you. While you're busy thinking about whether you came across as you'd hoped, the other person has moved on!

2. What other people think of you is none of your business

Spending time worrying about what others think serves no purpose. Needily seeking the approval of others is a waste of your time and emotional energy. What is important is not whether others approve of you, but whether you approve of yourself. Instead of worrying about how those you meet choose to perceive you, focus on fulfilling your own potential. How people see you is governed by their own interpretations, and shaped by their personal beliefs and judgments – therefore it's none of your business.

3. You don't need other people's approval to be happy

Don't wait for other people's permission before living the life you want to lead. Your confidence and sense of self-worth do not depend on whether they approve of your decisions. While you may prefer to acknowledge the opinions of those close to you, don't allow what they think to prevent you from leading a life that makes you happy. Besides, you can never really know what other people are thinking. Just because you are carrying around shameful or embarrassed feelings doesn't mean everyone else is judging you and, even if they are, you don't have to take their opinions seriously.

4. You can overcome shame by attacking it head on.

One of the most effective ways of overcoming shame and embarrassment is through the use of a shame-attacking exercise. This concept was developed by the noted psychologist and founder of rational emotive behaviour therapy, Albert Ellis. To help his clients overcome fear, shame and embarrassment, Dr Ellis would prescribe an exercise that forced them to challenge their feelings.

The best way to deal with fear and uncertainty, in Dr Ellis' opinion, is to focus on the worst-case scenario rather than the best-case scenario.

To overcome the fear of shame, you might be asked to deliberately act in a shameful way in order to attract criticism and disapproval from other people. By doing so, you prove to yourself that even if you do look silly and are criticised, it's not the end of the world and you can tolerate other people's judgements, even if you do feel highly uncomfortable.

By practising shame attacking, you learn that:

1. You can accept yourself and not put yourself down even when you do foolish things.
2. That you probably overestimate the negative reactions of other people to your behaviour, even when you consider it shameful.
3. That while it is preferable not to behave in a stupid way, it isn't the end of the world if you do.
4. That you can cope even when people give you disapproving looks or criticise you for your behaviour.

Important note: Shame-attacking exercises should not put you or others at risk of harm and should not involve breaking the law. Please be sensible and don't do anything that is likely to have a negative consequence, such as the loss of your job or damage to a relationship.

Examples of shame-attacking exercises:

Go into a department store lift and announce in a loud voice the floor number and what items are sold on that floor.

Wear a sweater or shirt inside-out or back-to-front in public.

Walk into a newsagent and announce you've been time-travelling and don't know what year it is.

During my training as a therapist, I practised the last example during a lunch break and got some very strange looks. However, even though I felt a build-up of anxiety as I approached the newsagent, I quickly discovered that nothing terrible happened as a consequence. Indeed, it gave the customers a rather amusing shopping experience.

When you practise a shame-attacking exercise, your head is very likely to be filled with negative shameful

beliefs. It is important to vigorously dispute these.

For instance, with my newsagent experience I told myself that:

“Just because I acted in a foolish manor, it doesn’t mean I am a foolish person.”

Rational beliefs can help to cancel out the irrational beliefs. When you practise shame attacking, you will discover that, more often than not, hardly anyone pays any attention or cares when you act in an eccentric way. If someone does notice, discovering that you can cope is a great relief.