

Rational Coaching: A cognitive behavioural approach¹

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Rational Coaching is based on the Rational Emotive Behavioural Approach developed by Albert Ellis. It is suitable for personal/life, performance, executive and health coaching. This paper covers the basic theory and practice of Rational Coaching and includes the ABCDEF coaching framework for assessment and intervention.

Keywords: Albert Ellis, Rational Coaching, Rational Emotive Behavioural Approach, ABCDEF model, inference chaining, B-C connection, bibliotherapy.

RATIONAL COACHING is a shortened title for the full name: Rational Emotive Behavioural Coaching (REBC). Rational Coaching has been developed over the past two decades (see Neenan & Palmer, 2001a, b) and was influenced by a combination of Rational Emotive Behavioural Therapy (REBT) (Ellis, 1962, 1994), Rational Effectiveness Training (Ellis & Blum, 1967; DiMattia & Mennen, 1990) and other adaptations of REBT to the workplace (e.g. Ellis, 1972; Dryden & Gordon, 1993; Palmer & Burton, 1996; Palmer, 1995a, b; Richman, 1993). In the UK Cognitive Behavioural Coaching which has developed is based on an integration of the Rational Emotive Behavioural and the Cognitive Behavioural approaches, strategies and techniques (see Palmer & Szymanska, 2007). Theorists can readily recognise the Rational Emotive Behavioural Approach in the early cognitive behavioural coaching literature (e.g. Neenan & Palmer, 2001a; Neenan & Dryden, 2002) and the distinctions between them have been illustrated (Palmer & Gyllensten, 2008). This integration probably is due to the main developers of Cognitive Behavioural Coaching being trained and accredited practitioners in both approaches. However, like Cognitive Behavioural Coaching, the Rational Emotive Behavioural Approach can be used effectively

without being integrated. Rational coaching is particularly useful for enhancing performance, reducing stress and increasing resilience.

Basic theory and practice

If the coachee presents with a practical issue or problem that does not necessitate a psychological intervention then a practical problem solving or solution focused model is used such as the PRACTICE framework (see Palmer, 2007, 2008). Otherwise, similar to Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy, Rational Coaching focuses on the assessment and subsequent disputation and modification of four key types of irrational beliefs which Ellis (1994) asserts are based on rigid, absolutist, dogmatic, goal-blocking, unempirical, illogical and unhelpful thinking. These beliefs are at the core of poor psychological and behavioural performance in both personal and work life settings.

1. **Demands** are made upon ourselves, others and the world. They are absolutist and generally consist of 'must', 'should', 'ought', 'got to', 'have to' statements, e.g. 'I must perform well' or 'You've got to help me.'

And three major derivatives which Ellis (1994) hypothesised followed on from the demand:

¹ This article is dedicated to Albert Ellis, the pioneer who developed the Rational Emotive Behavioural Approach.

2. **Awfulising** – events are defined as worse than bad, e.g. ‘This is awful, really terrible.’
3. **Low frustration tolerance (LFT)** – the coachee believes that he or she can not tolerate discomfort or frustration, e.g. ‘I can’t stand it!’ or ‘I can’t bear the situation any longer.’ This derivative is also known as ‘I can’t stand it itis’.
4. **Depreciation or downing** of self, others or life which involves global negative ratings, e.g. ‘As I’ve failed my exams therefore I’m a failure’, ‘He’s totally stupid.’ This derivative is often referred to as ‘damnation’.

In Rational Coaching the four major ‘irrational’ or unhelpful types of belief are examined and disputed. Then rational or helpful (functional) beliefs are developed which are flexible, non-absolutist, empirical/realistic, logical and functional. For example:

1. **Non-demanding and preferential**, e.g. ‘It’s strongly preferable to perform well but realistically I don’t have to.’
2. **De-awfulising**, e.g. ‘The situation may be bad but hardly awful or the end of the world.’
3. **High Frustration Tolerance**, e.g. ‘I don’t like it but I can stand it.’
4. **Self- or other-acceptance**, e.g. ‘If I fail it does not mean I’m a failure. I can still accept myself.’ ‘Just because he has acted stupidly does not make him stupid.’

Some theorists include all-or-nothing (all-or-never) thinking as a fourth derivative, e.g. ‘I’m always going to fail’ or ‘He’s never on time.’ This contrasts with flexible thinking, e.g. ‘Sometimes I may fail’ or ‘Occasionally he arrives late.’ Ellis and associates (1997) included this fourth derivative in their book on stress counselling as so often in their practice, stressed clients expressed ‘all-or-nothing’ and overgeneralised thinking when discussing their problems.

Consequences and goals: Emotions, physiological and behavioural

Holding irrational beliefs can lead to unhelpful and goal-blocking, performance

interfering emotional, physiological and behavioural consequences. For example, the belief, ‘I must perform well and if I don’t it would be awful’, could trigger the emotion of anxiety prior to a performance related event such as giving a presentation. With performance anxiety there are the associated unhelpful physiological responses such as palpitations, butterflies in the stomach, dry mouth, sweaty and clammy hands. Behaviourally there is a tendency to avoid these situations and once in the situation, to talk quickly to finish the presentation as soon as possible and escape.

In Rational Coaching often emotional goals are developed. In this example, whereas *anxiety* can be performance interfering, a preferred emotional goal of coaching could be *concern* which may be more goal-focused. Other more functional alternatives are sadness instead of depression, annoyance instead of damning anger, disappointment instead of hurt, regret instead of shame/embarrassment, remorse instead of guilt (see Palmer & Burton, 1996; Ellis et al., 1997, for the taxonomy of negative emotions). Behavioural goals are developed, for example, in this case preparing the presentation and talking steadily without rushing. A physiological goal could be to reduce palpitations.

ABCDEF Rational Coaching Model

Rational Coaching is based on the ABCDE model of emotional management, resilience and performance developed by Albert Ellis (1994, 1996). The acronym stands for Activating event or adversity, Beliefs, Consequences, Disputation and Effective new approach to the concern or problem.

The example below briefly demonstrates how the ABCDE model is used for assessment and intervention in Rational Coaching. In many ways, the approach takes Plato’s (360 BC) words in *The Republic* very seriously, ‘The beginning is the most important part of any work.’ Careful early assessment helps to elicit the relevant hot cognitions that are performance interfering, goal-blocking and stress inducing.

A *Activating event*

Coach: What's the problem?

Coachee: Undertaking a difficult task. (Target problem.) Then an initial goal is developed and noted down.

C *Consequences*

This is a brief assessment to elicit the key negative emotion interfering with performance.

Coach: How do you feel about doing this task?

Coachee: Anxious.

A *Refining the problem or issue using Inference Chaining*

At this stage the coach assesses the critical aspect of the target problem (known as 'Critical A') that the coachee is disturbed about at 'C'. In this case the coachee is anxious about doing the task. Assessment is undertaken by using an advanced technique known as inference chaining (see Palmer & Burton, 1996; Palmer, 1997). This technique will be described in more depth later. A shortened version of inference chaining is illustrated below which is often used in brief coaching or in the first coaching session instead of the extended version:

Coach: What are you most anxious about when you imagine undertaking this difficult task?

Coachee: Not doing a perfect job (The hypothesised Critical A). The initial goal may be refined or revised at this stage by discussion with the coachee. In this case the goals become: To start the task; to do an acceptable job.

B *Beliefs*

The Critical 'A' is used to elicit the key irrational and unhelpful beliefs:

Coach: Now imagine in your mind's eye that you are not doing a perfect job. Can you imagine it?

Coachee: Yes.

Coach: What thoughts are going through your mind now?

Coachee: I should do a perfect job (*Demand*)

Coach: And if you don't?

(Coach asking the question to elicit a derivative)

Coachee: If I don't do a perfect job then I'm totally useless (*Self-downing*)

Coach: Do you find that situation bearable?

(Coach asking the question to elicit another derivative)

Coachee: No! I can't stand it (LFT)

C *Consequences*

At this step the coach assesses other consequences, notes them down and the coachee develops additional relevant goals.

Emotion: Performance Anxiety – Goal: feel concerned.

Physiological: Butterflies in stomach – Goal: feel relatively relaxed.

D *Disputation*

At the next stage the unhelpful beliefs are disputed by the coach using empirical, logical and pragmatic (functional) questions. Examples of Socratic disputation of self-depreciation/self-downing beliefs are:

Empirical: Where is the evidence that you are totally useless if you don't do a perfect job?

Logical: Is it logical to conclude that if you don't do a perfect job, therefore you are totally useless?

Pragmatic (functional): Where is it going to get you if you carry on believing that if you don't do a perfect job therefore you are totally useless?

In addition to questioning, a variety of cognitive, emotive, imaginal and behavioural techniques may have been used to help the coachee to modify their demanding beliefs to flexible beliefs, self-downing to self-acceptance, awfulising to deawfulising and low frustration tolerance to high frustration tolerance (see Palmer & Burton, 1996; Ellis et al., 1997; Neenan & Dryden, 2002). By tackling performance anxiety and developing performance concern instead, the

procrastinating behaviour may be reduced or eliminated. The ABC assessment framework can be completed as below:

D Disputation and restructuring unhelpful beliefs

- It's strongly preferable to do a good job but realistically I don't have to.
- I can learn to accept myself if I don't do a perfect job.
- Although I don't like it I'm living proof that I can stand making mistakes.

E Effective new approach

- Stay focused on immediate task to achieve goals. Start the task and on completion reward myself with a large latte coffee and favourite cake once the task has been finished.

In Rational Coaching, the interventions focus on present and future goals and often coaches will focus on the last part of the framework as below (Palmer, 2002) so that coachees can learn to become their own self-coach:

F Focus remains on personal or work goals and learning process may enhance future performance and reduce stress

- Focus remains on tackling procrastination.
- Future focus – Learns not to rigidly demand a 'perfect' performance from self in future situations.

Use of forms in Rational Coaching

In Rational Coaching the coachee is actively encouraged to become their own self-coach. As the approach provides an ABCDEF model and framework, coachees usually find it useful to complete forms in the coaching meeting that reflect this framework. This helps them to use the model outside of the coaching meeting. Figure 1, overleaf, demonstrates how the previous example can be transferred to a five column Performance

Enhancing Coaching Form. Note that the form is not completed in an obvious ABCDE order, but reflects the real order as described in the previous section (see pages 13–15). To make this process easier, the coach or coaching psychologist assists the coachee to complete the form and this can be undertaken at the first meeting especially if brief or time-limited coaching is being undertaken. It also provides a useful take-away from the meeting.

Inference chaining

Inference chaining involves chaining together a set of inferences about a particular problem or issue to assess what aspect of the problem the coachee is most concerned about. Note that an inference is an interpretation which goes beyond observable reality but gives a personal meaning to it.

Sometimes a mini-inference chain described in the previous section is insufficient in eliciting the most Critical 'A' or aspect of an event. In their management book, Palmer and Burton (1996) illustrate how inference chaining can be used to discover why an employee was encountering difficulty cold-calling important customers. During this meeting the inferences are noted down on a whiteboard. The example is below (adapted 1996, 66–68)²:

Kaye: So you're finding you put off calls to important clients, and as you know, there have been a number of complaints.

Ron: Right.

Kaye: We spoke about this problem last week. It seems that you're still avoiding making the calls even though you agreed to make them.

Ron: I just seem incapable of making them.

Kaye: Hmm. We need to sort this out. I've got an idea how we can get to the root cause of the problem. Do you want to give it a go?

Ron: OK I've got nothing to lose.

Kaye: And perhaps all to gain. Just imagine for the moment that you're about to telephone an important client. (Kaye pauses for a few seconds to allow sufficient time for Ron

² © Palmer & Burton, 1996. Example reproduced with permission.

Figure 1: Performance Enhancing Form
 © 2001, Centre for Coaching (reproduced with permission).

Target Problem (A)	Performance Interfering Thoughts (PITs) (B)	Emotional/ Behavioural Reaction (C)	Performance Enhancing Thoughts (PETs) (D)	Effective and New Approach to Problem (D)
Undertaking a difficult task <i>Mini inference chain:</i> What are you most anxious about? Not doing a perfect job Goals: Start task; to do an acceptable job; feel concerned instead of anxious © 2009, S. Palmer	I should do a perfect job (Demand). If I don't do a perfect job then I'm totally useless (Self- downing). I can't stand making mistakes (LFT).	Performance Anxiety Procrastination Butterflies in stomach	It's strongly preferable to do a good job but realistically I don't have to. I can learn to accept myself if I don't do a perfect job. Although I don't like it I'm living proof that I can stand making mistakes.	Stay focused on immediate task to achieve goals. Start the task and on completion reward myself with a large latte coffee and favourite cake once a 'boring bit' has been finished.

to imagine ringing an important customer.)
 How do you feel?
 Ron: Anxious.
 Kaye: What is anxiety-provoking in your mind about actually speaking to an important customer?
 Ron: Well, I suppose I'm afraid of bad news.
 Kaye: Bad news?
 Ron: Yeah – maybe they'll say they've cancelled their order.
 Kaye: Well, let's suppose they have cancelled the order. Why do you get anxious about that?
 Ron: I get worried that I'll get no more commission and that would look bad.
 Kaye: And if that was true?
 Ron: I might lose my job and never get another good job again!

Kaye: (Kaye now maps out the inference chain for Ron and refers to the whiteboard.)
 OK Ron. I want to recap. Which of these are you most anxious about:
 Speaking to a customer;
 Getting bad news;
 Being told that they have cancelled an order;
 Getting no more commission;
 Looking bad;
 Losing your job;
 Never getting a good job again?
 Ron: It's not so much the bad news. And frankly, it's unlikely that I'll lose my job. I reckon that I really get stressed about looking bad in front of my colleagues.
 Note that in this example the true activating event or 'A' (from the ABC model) was not making telephone calls to his customers but

'looking bad in front of my colleagues'. Now this becomes the gateway into finding his self-defeating and irrational thinking. Kaye helps Ron to focus on the Critical 'A'.

Kaye: Now really imagine that your colleagues are thinking badly of you.

Ron: No trouble. I remember the last time it happened.

Kaye: What are you telling yourself?

Ron: I should always do well. They think I'm useless. And if that's true it would be really awful!

Kaye: As long as you believe that you 'should always do well' and if you don't they would think you're 'useless' and it would be 'really awful', how will you feel?

(Kaye is hoping to show Ron the disadvantages of holding these self-defeating beliefs and thereby encouraging him to challenge them in a later meeting.)

Ron: Anxious.

Kaye: Would it be helpful to look at your thinking and attempt to deal with your anxiety?

Ron: I'll give it a go.

Making the B–C connection

In the first or second rational coaching meeting, it is important for the coachee to understand the connection between the Beliefs and the Consequences. This is often known as the B–C connection. In the example above, once Kaye had helped Ron to elicit the 'irrational beliefs', she clarified whether or not he understood the connection between his beliefs and the consequences:

Kaye: As long as you believe that you 'should always do well' and if you don't they would think you're 'useless' and it would be 'really awful', how will you feel?

Ron: Anxious.

Kaye: Would it be helpful to look at your thinking and attempt to deal with your anxiety?

Ron: I'll give it a go.

It was clear to Kaye that Ron understood the B–C connection. However, if he could not

understand the link between the beliefs and the consequences, then it is likely he would not see the benefit of or understand the reason for her later examining and disputing his performance interfering and stress-inducing beliefs. If he had not understood this connection then Kaye would have spent additional time explaining the link, perhaps using an illustrative example (see Palmer, 1992). Often coachees hold an A–C theoretical stance i.e. the Activating Event directly triggers the Consequences. For example 'My manager (A) made me feel guilty (C)'. If this personal theoretical A–C model is not revised, then the coachee is unlikely to take responsibility for how he or she feels and not see the benefits of modifying their beliefs.

Bibliotherapy (Bibliotraining)

Rational emotive behavioural self-help books are used to assist the coachee in learning and applying the basic ABCDEFs of the approach outside of the coaching meetings. There are many books based on Albert Ellis' approach that are also suitable as bibliotherapy (sometimes known as bibliotraining) in coaching settings on a wide range of topics suitable for both personal and work contexts. For example, controlling anxiety (Ellis, 2000), enhancing happiness (Ellis, 1999; Froggatt, 1993), peak performance at work (Dryden & Gordon, 1993), people problems at work (Palmer & Burton, 1996), relationships (Ellis 2001; Ellis & Harper, 2004), stress management (Palmer & Cooper, 2007), self-acceptance and self-esteem (Ellis, 2005; Ellis & Powers, 2002; Wilding & Palmer, 2006), taking control (Froggatt, 2006).

Conclusion

This paper illustrated the basic theory and practice of Rational Coaching. Both Rational Coaching and Cognitive Behavioural Coaching are increasing in popularity as they go beyond behavioural coaching models and can tackle psychological blocks to performance. They provide an easy to understand theory which helps the coachee to rapidly become their own self-coach.

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