

APA: ABC Theory Of Emotion



According to psychologist Albert Ellis, Ph.D., our feelings are governed by our thinking. Ellis proposed that the relationship between thinking and feeling can be explained by the formula $A + B = C$, where:

A = the **A**ctual event

B = the **B**eliefs or thoughts (our “self talk”) we have about the event

C = the **C**onsequences of our feelings

In other words, feelings such as sadness, happiness, guilt, anger, jealousy, pride, anxiety, disgust, frustration - to name just a few - are not determined by events alone. They are also determined by our thinking about those events. In fact, thinking is the major determinant of our emotional reaction to a given situation.

An example may help to illustrate this concept:

- Ⓜ An actual event, or “**A**”, might be someone dangerously cutting in front of you on the freeway, causing you to brake suddenly. Your thoughts, or “**B**’s”, might be: *“What an #@HOLE, that jerk nearly caused an accident!”*; *“How rude and inconsiderate!”*; or *“I ought to teach that guy a lesson and cut in front of him so he knows what it’s like!”* Now your immediate reaction might be arousal, or even fear. These feelings will fade fairly quickly, and be replaced by the feeling of anger, our “**C**”, that is stirred up by your thinking about what happened. This feeling of anger may persist for minutes, or even hours, as long as you continue thinking similarly about the event. On the other hand, if your thought, or “**B**”, had been: *“That guy probably didn’t even see me”* or *“Wow, he’s really in a big hurry, perhaps he’s headed to the hospital!”* you might not feel angry at all.

Here is another example:

- Ⓜ You have been a hard working and loyal employee of a company for ten years. Despite these facts, you are passed over for a promotion that you were hoping to receive, and the job is instead given to someone from outside of the company. This is the actual event, or the “**A**”. Your thinking, or “**B**’s”, might be: *“This isn’t fair, they should have given the job to me!”*; *“I’ve been a loyal employee for ten years and look how they repay me?”*; or *“Why even try to do a good job if this is how I’m rewarded?”* Your feelings, or “**C**’s”, might be betrayal, discouragement, anger, or even depression. But, what if you were to instead adopt a positive attitude and think to yourself: *“This is probably the best thing that could have happened to me. I’ve been working here too long, it’s time for me to go back to school so I can get a better job.”* In this scenario, your negative feelings would likely disappear and you might instead feel relieved, optimistic, or even excited.

Mastering Your Emotions

In order to master our emotions, and more specifically those that are negative or destructive, we need to develop a greater awareness of the thoughts that cause our feelings and how they can be modified. Negative emotions are almost always caused by thinking that is distorted in some way. By learning to identify and correct the distortions in our thinking – allowing our thoughts to become more realistic, well-balanced, and generally kinder to ourselves and others – we can develop a sense of mastery over our emotions and alleviate much of our suffering. According to Ellis, people achieve this mastery by assuming a “man as scientist” perspective in which they examine any thoughts they suspect may be distorted, demanding proof (or “evidence”) that those thoughts are true. They might even ask those very questions: *“Where is the proof?”* or *“What is the evidence?”* If thoughts are distorted – meaning they lack sufficient supporting evidence – they can then be eliminated or changed to take on a more realistic and valid form.

Believe it or not, in certain cases people do not want to change their negative or destructive thinking. They may believe that doing so will take too much effort. Or, the negative thoughts may feel familiar – and therefore comforting – to them. Obviously, people are free to think and believe whatever they want. But, if distorted thinking is causing you to feel frustrated, angry, guilty, anxious, or depressed – and by correcting your distorted thinking you can ultimately overcome those negative emotions – why not abandon your unsupported thoughts and allow yourself to feel better? Granted, this may not be an easy process. But many things worth doing are not. Just know that with some time and effort, you can become a master over your feelings by starting with your “**A B C**’s”.