

Reason versus emotion: the daily battle

Abstract

This article goes through neurologic development and explains how brain affects human body when people feel strong emotions. To know this process is a helpful tool to be used in psychotherapy since allows to understand what is happening when we are feeling distressed. From the perspective of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) we can manage the emotional response using the capability or introduce reasoning to change the attitude in front of adversities. Since Albert Ellis presented to the scientist community his Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) in 1955 (first called Rational Therapy) Cognitive Psychology has become the best psychotherapy to promote psychological well-being. Ellis^{1,2} stated that irrationality is universal but he also pointed out that although there is a tendency to act in an irrational way, we can look at our irrational beliefs, dispute and change them into rational. To be successful in this goal it is important to know how the brain works and the chances to get psychological improvement.

Keywords: reason, emotion, feelings, brain, rational emotive behavioral therapy, beliefs

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Introduction

Within the frame of Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy Ellis stated that irrationality is the reason why people react to daily concerns in an exaggerated way, feeling unhealthy emotions and acting badly; and rational thinking is the clue to get healthy emotions and efficient behaviors.^{3,4} We are not aware about the physical processes that run in the brain that impact to the body and cause emotional disturbance. So it is important to know what is really happening in both physiological and mental aspects to understand the differences between emotion and feeling.

From the evolutionary perspective, our capacity for reasoning is the age of a baby. The human brain has evolved over millions of years in a way similar to how the trunk of a tree grows, that is, it has added layers one on top of the other increasing its thickness. That implies that the structures of the primal brain are still there. That primordial brain is known as the *reptilian brain* since we shared it with reptiles. It is a part of the brain that is instinctive, and that deals only with regulating the organic balance. Its goal is survival. About 400 million years ago it had that function, and it does efficaciously. When we become dehydrated, it *warns us* by making us feel thirsty, and if our body temperature drops too low, it *warns us* by making us feel cold. It is the brain part that regulates everything that is unconscious and maintains our vital signs. Thanks to this brain we survive. The reptilian brain does not get excited, does not know what that means.

A few million years later the *limbic brain* appeared and with it we started feeling emotions. Its primary function was to enhance the actions of the reptilian brain. Thanks to emotions, in addition to wanting to survive, we are motivated to do so. When a threat compromises our life, the brain sends information to different organs of the body to provide energy. We need energy to act, either fleeing or defending from the threat. Thanks to the segregation of hormones such as adrenaline and others, breathing accelerates, heart rate increases, pupils dilate, there are a vast amount of changes throughout the body that prepare us for action. Emotions help us informing that something important is happening, whether it is pleasant or unpleasant. That

is why we always remember everything that has had a tremendous emotional impact for us. Being rigorous, emotions are no more than the physiological response in the body to certain orders of the brain. The adrenaline is secreted because the adrenal glands receive the appropriate order. We notice that physical response in the pulse, the heartbeat, accelerated breathing, sweating, etc. and that cluster of physical sensations has a name: *feelings*.

Who gives them a name? The *cognitive brain* or *neocortex* does it, the most evolved part of the brain, the one that allows us to think, plan, and anticipate. Thanks to cognition, there is language and we cooperate with others. The first Homo sapiens met to hunt in groups, which increased their chances of success. With the cognitive brain we are able to use reason and can try to explain what is going on around our mood: “I am afraid, anxious, stressed, euphoric, and angry”, etc. So, we could say that *feelings* are the awareness of our emotion, or in other words: we call *feeling* to the cognitive perceptions of the emotions. When we are excited, whether a pleasant or unpleasant emotions, feedback is produced, the brain receives information about everything that is happening in the body and makes us aware of it consciously. We do not say “I have more adrenaline in blood,” but “I’m stressed.” In a nutshell, emotions are the physiological response in the body to the orders given by certain brain structures when certain stimuli are produced. Feelings are the physiological response in the brain that specific brain structures give when they receive information from the rest of the body. The feeling is the conscious expression of emotion. Emotional intelligence information goes from “top to bottom”, physical emotional information goes from “bottom to top”. The disjunctive is not “reason-heart”, but cognition-emotion. In other words: everything happens in the brain.

The emotional response is caused by the *limbic system*. It is unconscious and automatic and cannot be controlled. We cannot tell our adrenal gland to be still. However, it can be regulated. The way to regulate it is through reason. Reason makes us civilized. The limbic system makes us feel anger and the cognitive system controls the expression of that anger so that we do not behave like heartless ones. The limbic system can suggest that the child deserves a slap, but

thanks to the cognitive system we do not give it to him, but we explain why we dislike his behavior.

Reason gives us arguments not to fall into the temptation of buying ourselves a whim; the emotion tries to convince us that we deserve it. Logic informs us that a particular relationship does not suit us, emotion makes us go on. We make thousands of things in a completely irrational way without thinking, like covering our heads with the sheets if we hear a nocturnal noise in the house as if the sheets were armored and could guarantee our integrity. On the other hand, change the sidewalk if we run into a black cat as if it could devour us or change our luck; or crossing the fingers as if that favored this luck. We buy a “nice” lottery number as if it were more likely to be awarded. When we lower the cognitive guard, that is, “when we act without thinking,” it is the emotion (or the conscious expression of it) that guides our behaviour. That is why it is said, “Reason is guiding but emotions are deciding”. That is why grandparents always advised us “count to ten”. Ellis⁵ affirmed that it is not the circumstances that create emotions, but our beliefs about them. So if we use rational thinking we can choose the feeling we experience and manage the emotional response.

There is a daily battle between reason and emotion. Moreover, when the imbalance between them is very intense, we say that we are neurotic. The neurosis, or ability to get oneself upset, is nothing more than the exaggerated alteration of the mood with negative thoughts that affect all the body; it is a conflict between reason and emotion. Emotions are essential in life since they help us to decide. Given a dilemma, thanks to cognition we can imagine how we will feel if we take one or another alternative, we advance the emotional state. It is also true that sometimes even being very rational we are wrong, and then we wonder if we should have done what we wanted instead of what we were advised by reasoning. In any case we have to accept our fallibility since as human beings we are imperfect. Reason is infinitely more powerful than emotion if we make proper and conscious use of it. It allows us to regulate the emotional response. It leads us to balance the conflict. It gives us the ability to feel our emotions properly and modulate them in response to a stressful stimulus. That stimulus, by

the way, can be external or internal. The external ones are obvious: a discussion, a real threat, a fright. The internal stimuli are the result of our ability to imagine unreal dangers, anticipating them so that we feel exactly how we would feel if they existed since the orders that the limbic system gives to the body are the same. Anxiety is a good example of this. A person who has anxiety suffers from an imaginary danger, and their emotions run wild. Cognition makes anxiety volatile.

Conclusion

Most emotions are not innate but are conditioned by apprenticeship and our life experience. If we have “learned” to get neurotic we can also unlearn to do so and transform ourselves into more stable, serene, psychologically healthy people. The best tool to achieve this is the *Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy* of Albert Ellis whose premise is: As we think, we feel; as we feel we live. When we understand how the brain affects the body we increase the options to use rational thinking which lead us to psychological well-being.

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Conflicts of interest

Author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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