

# Rational-Emotive Therapy to Help Teachers Control Their Emotions and Behavior When Dealing With Disagreeable Students

JOHN W. MAAG

*Students with challenging behaviors are very deft at engaging teachers in power struggles as a way to either feel empowered, obtain attention, or escape an unpleasant task. The more frustrated that teachers permit themselves to get, the less capable they are of responding in a therapeutic, productive fashion to students' challenging behaviors. The purpose of this article is to describe a system, based on principles of rational-emotive therapy, to help teachers stay composed when dealing with disagreeable students. Emotionally controlled teachers have greater access to behaviors in their repertoire for responding effectively to students' challenging behaviors.*

**Keywords:** therapy; cognitive/cognition; burnout; teacher(s)

Teacher burnout, resulting from psychosocial stress, has been the subject of considerable study during the past two decades. Evers, Tomic, and Brouwers (2005) found that teachers who were emotionally exhausted were at risk of experiencing burnout. The primary source of stress and subsequent burnout has been teacher-student interactions (Friedman & Lotan, 1985). Several researchers have found the most stress-inducing student behaviors were disrespect, inattentiveness, low motivation, poor achievement, apathy, and social incompetence (Blase, 1982; Friedman, 1995; Hastings & Bham, 2003; Milstein & Golaszewski, 1985; Milstein, Golaszewski, & Duquette, 1984). In general, significant correlations have



© Mark Hicks  
Courtesy of DiscoverSchool.com &  
Mark Hicks

been found between high levels of teacher burnout at all grade levels and student misbehavior (Borg & Riding, 1991; Byrne, 1994; Lamude, Scudder & Furno-Lamude, 1992). Finally, teachers interpret students' behaviors as being more negative as burnout becomes more severe (Kokkinos, Panayiotou, & Davazoglou, 2005; Whiteman & Young, 1985).

One interpretation of these results may be that teachers find it difficult to stay composed when students are misbehaving. Furthermore, once teachers overreact emotionally, they are more likely to respond ineffectively and even make the situation worse. Teachers who experience stress tend to have less access to effective

**TABLE 1**  
**Major Irrational Beliefs Teachers Hold About Students**

---

I must have constant approval from students.
Events in my classroom should always go exactly the way I want them to.
Students should not be frustrated.
Those who don't do well at school are worthless.
Students with a history of academic or behavioral problems will always have problems.
Students can make me feel bad.
I must be in total control of my class at all times.

---

Source: Bernard and Joyce, 1984.

ways to respond to students who misbehave (Maag, 2001). Bernard, Joyce, and Rosewarne (1983) contended that stress is a by-product of the manner in which teachers think about and appraise situations. Table 1 contains major irrational beliefs teachers hold about students, as summarized by Bernard and Joyce (1984).

Rational-emotive therapy (RET) provides a framework for helping teachers deal with stress associated with students' misbehaviors and, consequently, giving teachers greater access to their repertoire of effective ways to deal with students' misbehaviors. It was developed by Ellis (1962) and has since been applied to a wide array of populations and settings, including school-aged children, and incorporated into some teacher training programs (DiGiuseppe & Bernard, 1990; Nucci, 2002). Zionts and Villiers (2003) described how RET can be used by educators in the treatment of student anger and aggression. However, less information exists on the use of RET for managing teacher stress. Most of the studies focused on the use of Meichenbaum's (1985) *stress inoculation paradigm* to deliver cognitive components. Only one pure application of RET, using staff development activities, currently exists to manage teacher stress (Forman & Forman, 1980).

Following a system based on principles of RET, teachers can help themselves gain control over their emotions and behaviors regardless of how disagreeably students behave and, consequently, have greater access to effective ways of responding to students. The approach draws largely from the work of Miller (1986). Miller developed an innovative way to help teachers recognize and combat four common irrational thinking styles that are at the core of the reasons they overreact and engage in counterproductive behaviors.

## Recognizing Irrational Beliefs

Most people engage in a variety of irrational thinking styles, including those in Table 1. An irrational thought is simply one that does not match the facts of a given situation. For example, a person who says, "I'll never get

into graduate school because I have low entrance exam scores" fails to acknowledge the other factors considered in the admission process (e.g., grade point average, letters of recommendation, and relevant past experience). Irrational thinking also involves absolutistic, rigid, and demanding beliefs. Ellis (1962) believed that irrational thinking styles stem from both heredity and environment. An important assumption he made, according to DiGiuseppe and Bernard (1990), is the innate human tendency toward self-actualization, as proposed by Abraham Maslow. Achieving self-actualization is typically thwarted by opposing irrational tendencies.

Ellis (1962) originally posited the existence of 11 irrational beliefs. More recently, DiGiuseppe and Bernard (1990) summarized three general categories of irrational beliefs, with many variations:

- I must do well and win approval or else I am a rotten person.
- Others must treat me considerately and kindly in the exact way I want, and if they don't, they should be damned and punished.
- Conditions under which I live must be arranged so that I get what I want quickly and comfortably.

They also postulated four other common forms of irrational thoughts:

- Awfulizing ("It's terrible and horrible that I'm not doing as I must.")
- I-Can't-Stand-Its ("I can't handle the things that are happening to me.")
- Worthlessness ("I am a useless person and need others to approve of me.")
- Allness or unrealistic overgeneralization ("Because I failed, I'll always fail.")

Miller (1986) considered that, of the many irrational thinking styles, four contribute most to the difficulty people experience in controlling their emotions and behavior: *demandingness*, *awfulizing*, *I-can't-stand-its*, and *condemning and damning*. It is important to note that individuals often engage in these four irrational thinking styles automatically and unconsciously. Table 2 presents a generic irrational statement (left column) and the type of irrational thinking involved in each part of the statement (right column).

## Combating Irrational Thinking

The main way for teachers to dispute their irrational beliefs first involves (a) identifying them, (b) then determining why there are irrational, and (c) reformulating them into rational ones (Ellis, 1980). This process is not easy because irrational beliefs teachers use to interpret situations have become unconscious through years of repeated activation. Consequently, it takes a tremendous amount of

**TABLE 2**  
**Irrational Statements and Types of Irrational Thinking**

What Individuals Say to Themselves or Others	Types of Irrational Thinking Behind Them
"That event (for example, a student telling a teacher to 'shut up') shouldn't have happened, and	Demandingness: The use of the words <i>should/shouldn't</i> , <i>have to</i> , <i>need to</i> , and <i>must</i> . These words represent a magical way to change reality to the way individuals want it.
"It's awful that it did, and	Awfulizing: The belief that a situation is more than 100% worse than it is; catastrophizing; making mountains out of mole hills.
"I can't stand it, and	I-can't-stand-its: Imagining one can't tolerate situations or have any happiness if the situation persists.
"Somebody around here needs to be condemned and damned as rotten and worthless—let's see, is it me? Is it you? Is it the way the world works?"	Condemning and damning: The tendency to be excessively critical of oneself, others, or the world.

Source: Miller (1986).

conscious effort to combat irrational beliefs effectively. Doing so requires that teachers understand two important factors in making a fundamental change in their behavior:

- force themselves to behave differently from how they are feeling, and
- generate the power within themselves to turn their intention to change into actual change (Miller, 1986).

Imagine someone being transferred from the United States to work in London, England, for a year. This transfer would require the person to drive on the left-hand side of the road. The first day of driving may be scary and anxiety producing. Nevertheless, the person can make himself or herself drive—even if at a very slow speed—hence forcing himself or herself to behave differently than he or she feels. After 6 months of driving, the person is most likely no longer afraid and nervous.

Gaining greater emotional and behavioral control first requires teachers to take a close look at how they experience classroom events. Any student interaction—either aversive or productive—teachers encounter with students contains the following four parts:

- Event: Any situation of which we are a part, and/or our interactions with others
- Belief: The interpretation or the meaning we attach to the event or situation
- Emotion: The feelings we experience as a result of our interpretation about an event (e.g., happiness, sadness, anger, frustration, anxiety, depression, guilt, joy)
- Behavior: Our actions—how we respond, both verbally and nonverbally, when confronted with a situation, based on our beliefs and feelings about it

Although it may not be obvious when teachers are angry or frustrated, they always have a choice about how they respond to a student's disagreeable behavior. They can either (a) use a rational interpretation of the student's actions to control their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in an effective way or (b) allow students to control their behavior by interpreting in an irrational way what they say or do.

### **Demandingness**

Demandingness is the most difficult irrational thinking style to combat because the strategies for doing so go against social convention. However, it is worth teachers rethinking these automatic reactions. Every time teachers allow themselves to become overly upset, they are, in effect, demanding something of either students or themselves. For example, teachers may respond to a student who says "shut up!" by saying to themselves in an indignant way, "That student should not have told me to 'shut up'" or "That student needs to be more respectful." However, taking the facts about the event, these statements demand that the student change an action that has already happened and over which neither of them has any real control.

No matter how much teachers might wish to, they cannot turn back time so that the student was respectful and did not tell them to "shut up." When teachers place these types of demands on others, they fail to acknowledge the reality of a situation. It is a futile attempt to change reality to the way they want it to be.

It is often very difficult for teachers to use demanding words such as "must," "have to," or "should" in a factual

way to describe the reality of a student's behavior. The reason is that when people evaluate behavior, there is a tendency to lump together the idea of whether they accept the behavior with the idea of whether they approve of the behavior. However, these two notions are actually separate from each other.

Individuals tend not to accept a behavior if they do not approve of it. However, it is possible to accept the fact that a behavior has occurred, without having to approve of it. For example, a mother may come home from work to discover that her son had spilled a glass of milk on the floor and had not cleaned it up. The milk *should be* on the floor because it is. No amount of her saying "It shouldn't be there" or "He should have cleaned it up" is going to magically reverse time and put the milk back in the glass. The mother does not have to approve of the milk being on the floor to accept the reality of the situation. Once the mother accepts that the milk should be on the floor, it becomes possible to figure out how to respond to it effectively. To do otherwise simply wastes time, emotional energy, and ability to respond effectively.

### Combating Demandingness

Combating the irrational thinking involved in demandingness is deceptively simple. Instead of using demanding words as an attempt to magically change reality, teachers merely use demanding words to describe reality. The most common demanding words appear in Table 3. The first demanding word is *must*, which, according to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, is defined as "imperative requirement" or "compelled to." The word *must*, and the others in Table 3, indicate that there is no choice involved. Therefore, the rule for not engaging in demandingness is to test whether the demanding words that pop into a teacher's mind live up to their definition and match the reality of the situation. If a behavior is a *must* or a *have to*, then there is no choice involved. Individuals are compelled by forces beyond their control to do something. For example, dying is a *must*; humans cannot live forever. Or if someone drops a pen or pencil, it must fall to the ground because of gravity.

However, if individuals use demanding words when there is any choice at all, then they are engaging in demandingness. For example, someone is engaging in demandingness who says, "I must be on time to work" as he or she leaves the house 10 minutes late. The only thing the person accomplishes by repeating the word *must* is to keep himself or herself in a state of emotional upset that gets worse with every red light encountered.

TABLE 3  
The Most Common Demanding Words

Must	Have to	Ought to
Need to	Got to	Should and shouldn't

Rather, the person should ask himself or herself, "Is it possible for me not to be on time?" The answer is "Yes." The person may not like the consequences, but it is possible not to be on time.

Another way to test whether a situation offers absolutely no choice is to imagine using a nondemanding word to describe it. For example, the person who was late to work might try saying, "It would be *preferable* to be on time." As silly as it may sound at first, if the person actually said "It would be preferable . . .," his or her level of emotional upset would automatically decrease.

The demanding words *should* and *shouldn't* are the most difficult to use factually because if someone does not approve of something, he or she tends to elevate it into a demand. For example, a student says "shut up" to a teacher after being given a direction. Should the student have said "shut up" to the teacher? The answer is yes! This response may seem outrageous, but no amount of the teacher's saying "shouldn't" will turn back time and change the encounter so that the student gives a polite and compliant response. Doing so will only result in a teacher's emotional arousal level being elevated to a point where it becomes difficult for the teacher to access an effective way to respond to the student. A bystander, on hearing a teacher say "He should have said 'shut up' to me," may be tempted to say, "Are you saying you liked the fact that the student said 'shut up' to you?" The teacher would respond by saying "No, I don't approve of that response, but I do accept that it happened and there is nothing I can do to change it." Once teachers accept the reality of a situation, they can then determine how bad it is.

### Combating Awfulizing

Other common terms for awfulizing are *catastrophizing*, *making mountains out of mole hills*, or *blowing things out of proportion*. Awfulizing is a logical consequence when a teacher engages in demandingness. If the teacher says that the student shouldn't have said "shut up," his or her next interpretation of the event will be that it was awful that it did happen. To effectively combat awfulizing, it is important for teachers to understand and accept the fact that negative events do happen to them and can either be interpreted as terrible (irrational)

**TABLE 4**  
**The Bodily Damage Scale**

Percentage "Bad"	Type of Injury
100	Death
90	Quadriplegic
80	Paraplegic
70	Broken jaw
60	Dislocated shoulder
50	Broken finger
40	Gash requiring stitches
30	Black eye
20	Contusion with swelling
10	Mosquito bite
0	Nothing

or unfortunate (rational). To avoid awfulizing, bad events are put into perspective so that teachers can prevent themselves overreacting to students' misbehavior and, instead, respond rationally and effectively.

The *bodily damage scale* is one tool for combating awfulizing (see Table 4). The idea behind the scale is that when individuals are able to compare a negative event to physical injury, a tangible situation that all humans understand and try to avoid, they will get upset only in proportion to the real unpleasantness of the event (Miller, 1986). If teachers train themselves to use the bodily damage scale whenever they encounter a disagreeable situation with a student that they label as bad, they will generate a response within themselves that is logical, based on the "badness percentage" they select. For example, when a student tells a teacher to "shut up," that event can be placed on the bodily damage scale, and teachers can ask themselves, "How bad is it?" This is determined by looking at the scale and asking "How much physical pain would I be willing to trade to have prevented the student from saying "shut up?" It is likely that few teachers want to go higher than 10% (mosquito bite). Therefore, teachers choose to keep themselves composed by telling themselves that the incident warrants being only 10% upset, which leaves them with 90% of their rational thinking capabilities to figure out how to deal with the situation effectively. Using this scale takes practice, so it is important for teachers to be patient with themselves while they are learning.

It is important to understand that the bodily damage scale can be modified to include any hierarchy of pain that makes sense to a particular teacher. Instead of having 10 items, the scale could have 21, going up 5 percentage points at a time. The order can also be changed. For example, someone may feel that the pain of a gash

requiring stitches is worse than that of a broken finger and, consequently, change the order. The only requirement is that the order of injury makes hierarchical sense to the individual using it.

### **Combating I-Can't-Stand-Its, Condemning, and Damning**

Teachers who work first on reducing their demandingness and awfulizing, which are strongly interconnected, will have an easier time controlling the other two kinds of irrational responses: I-can't-stand-its, on one hand, and condemning and damning, on the other. When teachers say, "I can't stand this anymore," they are grossly exaggerating reality and increasing their chances of overreacting. As is the case with demanding terms such as *must* and *should*, saying "I can't stand it" is a fallacy. Humans are living proof that they have stood everything that has ever happened to them. Death is the only thing humans cannot stand. Coincidentally, placing an event on the Bodily Damage Scale indicates that if teachers can stand the pain, they can also stand the event. Finally, if teachers let the other irrational thinking styles take over, they are more likely to condemn others, themselves, or the world. On the other hand, if they successfully combat the first three thinking styles—demandingness, awfulizing, and I-can't-stand-its—the tendency to condemn is reduced.

### **Conclusion**

Rational-Emotive Therapy is a powerful approach that has been applied to help a variety of individuals and problems. However, little information exists on using RET to help teachers stay composed when students are behaving disagreeably. Student misbehavior is one of the biggest factors in teacher burnout. However, when teachers avoid irrational thinking about a student's behavior, their level of emotional upset automatically decreases, giving them the emotional control to figure out an effective response. As a result, they are less likely to feel hurt and disrespected and to be overly punitive with their students. Students with challenging behaviors experience a sense of power and control when they can successfully push teachers' buttons. Recognizing and combating irrational thinking styles will help teachers handle any disagreeable behaviors a student displays and will reduce the likelihood of the student's getting their goat. Consequently, teachers remain in control, feel empowered, and avoid serious levels of stress that accompanies burnout.

## About the Author

**John W. Maag**, PhD, is a professor at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln specializing in the education and treatment of children with emotional and behavioral disorders. His research interests include cognitive–behavioral interventions, managing resistance, and functional assessment. A licensed psychotherapist, he is a consulting editor to various journals and is a nationally recognized speaker. Address: John W. Maag, 202 Barkley Memorial Center, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE 68583-0732; e-mail: jmaag1@unl.edu.

## References

- Bernard, M. E., & Joyce, M. R. (1984). *Rational–emotive therapy with children and adolescents: Theory, treatment strategies, and preventative methods*. New York: Wiley.
- Bernard, M. E., Joyce, M. R., & Rosewarne, P. M. (1983). Helping teachers cope with stress: A rational–emotive approach. In A. Ellis & M. E. Bernard (Eds.), *Rational-emotive approaches to the problems of childhood* (pp. 415-455). New York: Plenum.
- Blase, J. J. (1982). A social–psychological grounded theory of teacher burnout. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 18, 93-113.
- Borg, M. G., & Riding, R. J. (1991). Towards a model for the determinants of occupational stress among school teachers. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 16, 355-373.
- Byrne, B. M. (1994). Burnout: Testing for the validity, replication, and invariance of causal structure across elementary, intermediate, and secondary teachers. *American Educational Research Journal*, 31, 645-673.
- DiGiuseppe, R. A., & Bernard, M. E. (1990). The application of rational–emotive theory and therapy to school-aged children. *School Psychology Review*, 19, 268-286.
- Ellis, A. (1962). *Reason and emotion in psychotherapy*. Secaucus, NJ: Lyle Stewart.
- Ellis, A. (1980). Rational–emotive and cognitive behavior therapy: Similarities and differences. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 4, 325-350.
- Evers, W., Tomic, W., & Brouwers, A. (2005). Does equity sensitivity moderate the relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and teacher burnout? *Representative Research in Social Psychology*, 28, 35-46.
- Forman, S. G., & Forman, B. D. (1980). Rational–emotive staff development. *Psychology in the Schools*, 17, 90-96.
- Friedman, I. A. (1995). Student behavior patterns contributing to teacher burnout. *Journal of Educational Research*, 88, 281-289.
- Friedman, I. A., & Lotan, I. (1985). *Teacher burnout*. Jerusalem: Henrietta Szold Institute.
- Hastings, R. P., & Bham, M. S. (2003). The relationship between student behaviour patterns and teacher burnout. *School Psychology International*, 24, 115-127.
- Kokkinos, C. M., Panayiotou, G., & Davazoglou, A. M. (2005). Correlates of teacher appraisals of student behaviors. *Psychology in the Schools*, 42, 79-89.
- Lamude, K. G., Scudder, J., & Furno-Lamude, D. (1992). The relationship of student resistance strategies in the classroom to teacher burnout and teacher type-A behavior. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, 7, 597-610.
- Maag, J. W. (2001). *Powerful struggles: Managing resistance, building rapport*. Longmont, CO: Sopris Press.
- Meichenbaum, D. (1985). *Stress inoculation training*. New York: Pergamon.
- Miller, T. (1986). *The unfair advantage*. Skaneateles, NY: Lakeside.
- Milstein, M., & Golaszewski, T. (1985). Effects of organizationally based and individually based stress management efforts in elementary school settings. *Urban Education*, 49, 389-409.
- Milstein, M., Golaszewski, T., & Duquette, R. (1984). Organizationally based stress: What bothers teachers. *Journal of Educational Research*, 77, 293-297.
- Nucci, C. (2002). The rational teacher: Rational emotive behavior therapy in teacher education. *Journal of Rational-Emotive & Cognitive-Behavior Therapy*, 20, 15-32.
- Whiteman, J. L., & Young, J. C. (1985). Teacher burnout and the perception of student behavior. *Education*, 105, 299-305.
- Zions, P., & Villiers, D. (2003). Rational emotive behavior therapy and cognitive behavior therapy in the treatment of student anger and aggression. In L. M. Bullock, R. A. Gable, & K. J. Melloy (Eds.), *Prevention/intervention for noncompliant acting-out, and aggressive behavior: Promoting positive student outcomes* (pp. 16-21). Las Vegas, NV: Council for Children with Behavioral disorders.