SELF-REPORTED AFFECT AND CORE IRRATIONAL THINKING:
A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT: Prior tests of irrational thinking have included affect words in their irrational idea statements. Thus, because of content similarity, spuriously high correlations may have been previously observed between the endorsement of irrational ideas and self-reported affect. A new measure of core irrational ideas, the Personal Beliefs Test, was given to 70 adults between the ages of 17 and 58. Results showed moderate correlations with neuroticism and self-reported negative affect, and a non-significant association with positive affect, thus supporting RET theory. Most of the explained variance in negative affect was related to the endorsement of irrational, Low Frustration Tolerance and Self Worth statements. This suggests that rational emotive therapists might devote greater time to disputing these ideas. Since most studies, including the present one, find only moderate correlations (i.e., .20 to .70) between irrational thinking and negative affect, it seems important to review the hypothesis that such thinking is the primary cause of emotionality.

The central tenet of rational emotive personality theory (Ellis, 1973) is that emotional distress is not directly caused by environmental events. Instead, the experience of distress is thought to be sharply heightened by adherence to a number of rather specific beliefs or "irrational ideas" which depart from logical and reality-based assumptions and which lead to self-defeating behavior.

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Copies of the Personal Beliefs Test can be obtained from the author.

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In earlier writing (Ellis, 1962) 11 such ideas were specified, spanning a variety of content areas such as achievement, approval, effects of past experiences, etc. More recently, the list has been reduced to four general, content free core ideas (Bernard & Joyce, 1984; Rimm & Masters, 1979; Walen, et al, 1980). These are 1) Awfulizing or catastrophizing ideas which greatly exaggerate the meaning or consequences of events (e.g. “It will be awful if I don’t get invited to the party”), 2) Ideas reflecting low frustration tolerance for either events or for the actions of others (e.g. “I can’t stand it when my son is late”), 3) Ideas reflecting dictatorial shoulds, oughts, and musts which demand that certain actions or events occur, or that those which do occur, not occur (e.g. “Children must always behave well in school”), and 4) Self worth ideas which represent overgeneralized attempts to rate a whole person, rather than individual actions or behaviors (e.g. “He is an evil person”).

These four irrational ideas are thought to be enduring, generalized cognitive structures (Smith, 1982) which are broad and philosophic in nature and which can be applied to many life content areas. They are to be distinguished from the more narrow, subvocal and transient self-statements of Self-Instructional Training (Meichenbaum, 1977) which are useful in guiding specific behaviors (e.g. “Go slow. Hammer this nail straight into the wood”), and the specific cognitive errors hypothesized by Beck (1976) to produce emotional distress (e.g. personalization, dichotomous thinking, etc.).

It would be expected that believing in a greater number of irrational ideas, or believing in them “more deeply” (i.e. intensely) or “more broadly” (i.e. with fewer situational exceptions), would be related to a greater degree (i.e. frequency, intensity, and/or duration) of emotional distress. Interestingly, these specific hypotheses have never been formally stated by RET theorists and they have not been systematically investigated.

The theory makes no specific prediction about self-perceived positive feelings and the lack of belief in irrational ideas. However, it would not be expected that less irrational ideation, in and of itself, would be related to more positive feelings. While this null stated hypothesis has also never been tested, it is important to determine its veracity for purposes of discriminant validity. That is, irrational beliefs would be expected to be related to some, but not all, areas of the human emotional experience.

This hypothesis is consonant with the literature in happiness. As Diener (1984) has recently noted, “...subjective well-being...is not just the absence of negative factors....” It would seem likely that negative feelings would stand in the way of experiencing positive feelings, al-