

Sparky writes:

When I first came to learn about SMART in 1999, it was a revelation to me at the time - one of those "aha" moments; a missing piece in the jigsaw I call my self. First contact was in a chat room on the internet - I forget exactly who welcomed me; but one question hooked me: if this habit was so harmful to me why did I want to carry on doing it (I had expressed a desire to be able to moderate). It was a puzzle to me; a simple question with an answer which has taken me some time to answer.

Up until that point I can probably say I had little in the way of discipline of thought, little structure in how I built up, tested and checked through my perceptions of reality. I am not without education; I had studied, gained qualifications, a job, a home, but until that point never completed what I would call an emotional education. The human brain doesn't come with a user manual detailing the structure and the nature of belief systems. I had a belief system based in some part on some irrational distortions which I had not bothered or known how to dispute up until that point. It is through the examination, checking and testing of my beliefs about myself that my life has been effected. In other words as I have said before; learning to untie the knots of a lifetimes muddling in the dark.

Before learning about REBT I would not draw a general picture of doom to be held up as an example of despair, but I did at times have some black periods in my history where I could have done with some rational guidance. I can remember a particular point some time in 1999 for a "then and now" reference - I did not exercise regularly, my sleep patterns were erratic, I was depressed to the point of desperation over thoughts about my partner in particular (who was undergoing hospital tests for a possible cerebral lesion) but myself in general, I hated my job, my leisure time was spent either drinking, watching TV or doing as little as possible, and my personal relationships seemed on rather unstable ground with dubious boundaries.

The effects on my life have been measurable in terms of what I do and don't do now; I exercise regularly, I sleep well, my depression is largely gone, I do a job I can enjoy, I spend my leisure time productively with people I like, I have a more constant sense of self worth not so easily effected by external events, I can set goals for myself and stick to them and my relationships with my family and partner are improved. I look at where I can improve different areas of my life and set about making changes to improve my lifestyle. The darkest moods I have are short lived, curtailed by use of rational emotive therapy techniques and patience.

One of the biggest benefits for me has been to develop my thinking around principles of Rational Emotive Therapy. Rational Emotive Therapy can be used so much more than in just the healing of one particular behavioral problem. The scope has widened as time has gone on; from that first attempt at quitting drinking, looking at a range of emotional issues past and present to setting goals for myself, changing the way I live, my lifestyle in terms of health, environment and relationships with other people. At its core - the ABC tool is to me a scientific tool which advocates the discovery of personal and universal truth about myself and the world in which we live. I think it's better to be aware of the world as it is, as close to the reality as possible without a set of common cognitive distortions blocking the way. Truly this is an experiment in cognitive science to be repeated again and again!

The CBA tool I have used in a number of situations where often - a path is not clear to me. We each reach certain points in our life where there are a number of choices to consider, and the path may not seem clear. Careful consideration of the costs and benefits of each particular path yield not only some surprising personal attitudes and beliefs, a consistent and structured approach to decision making, but also often a clear way through the multitude of choices life offers. My partner used to quote me - "I used

to be indecisive, but now I'm not so sure". Now I tend to think - I at least have a method, a starting point from which to even begin a decision making process.

I would say - over time, the effects on my relationships with my family and partner in particular seem to have changed in several different, yet subtle ways. I tend to view other people with a more accepting attitude, even though I find particular behaviors sometimes challenging to deal with I now feel more confident and capable of dealing with a variety of situations. What I observe is that in response to a different attitude from me, I see a different attitude being returned in response. By far the biggest response has been my partner's apparent change in attitude and level of confidence over the last few years. Through discussion, rational thinking and approach she has grown a great deal in terms of confidence, approach to problems and response. I don't think she quite realizes what a change in character she has had, but its certainly had a positive effect.

Given the prominence of AA, it's not surprising that was the first thing I found when I initially looked for help with my depression and drinking. I was involved initially with AA entirely online, through social chat, email and even online AA meetings. I attended a few meetings face to face, and met at least one person in the program on a couple of occasions. There were some very positive role models to follow, and I really appreciated the love and support offered by some people, but unfortunately almost to a point of unhealthy obsession with chat rooms in particular where we would remain in contact. I never really enjoyed the face to face meetings that I did go to - the atmosphere and the people just didn't live up to the big, bright and beautiful image that I had built up in my head through months of online participation with other AA members. I felt driven by fear to abstain, rather than any positive motivation about the benefits of lifestyle changes that anyone can make. It was on the whole, a real mix of people, discussions about recovery, and irrational sounding steps to follow. Follow I did, to the point where I was such a worthless individual for my own "character defects" that I could stand no more. It seemed like a constant mix of love and slap across the face; up one day, down the next, up the steps, down the slippery slope towards death or insanity. I needed options to consider, self empowerment, and a new game to play!

I know - for some people, it's a different experience - a lot of love, and a lot less slap, so I can see how that in itself can be very effective in helping people abstain. That said, I think there are almost certainly different "home groups" people can attend which have a range of different people, characteristics and atmospheres. My choices were limited though - I found nowhere I was really comfortable with.

Towards the end of my involvement with AA, I was participating less and less, but still reading more and more. SMART eventually became the one real viable alternative path for me to choose. It took a lot for me to leave some of the people I talked with every day, but this too seemed like the most sensible way to turn my back on what was an often dark chapter of my life.

I would say the thing I like most about SMART is the idea of challenging beliefs about myself and the world we live in; this is presented in the form of an "ABC" tool. This, in my opinion, is a modern contemporary cornerstone for empirical testing of personal belief systems. For me, the disputing of irrational beliefs has gone so much further than simply overcoming one particular problem behavior. SMART, Rational Emotive Therapy and its core principles are the thin end of the wedge used in leveraging sometimes rather profound changes in personal lifestyle choices, emotive intelligence and belief systems.