

THE ABCD THEORY OF EMOTIONS

(Understanding and Managing Emotions)

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*M*en and women are pulled and pushed by reason on the one hand and emotion on the other. Reason means logical thinking. When we argue a point we try to reason out and prove our stand with logical statements. For example a lawyer may try to prove that his client was not at the site of the crime by showing that he was in a different town on the day of the incident. Emotions, on the other hand, are feelings such as love, fear or jealousy. A man who has lost promotion in the office may be very much upset and no amount of consolation may make him see reality. We may be mortally afraid of ghosts though we do not know for sure whether ghosts exist or not.

Emotions and reason are different but this does not mean that emotions are unreasonable. It only means that emotions may go beyond reason and that it may not always be possible for us to understand emotions on a logical basis. Let us take an example. We love our children. Love is an emotion. But it is perfectly logical to have love for one's children. At the same time when we see some mothers doting upon their children and allowing them to do whatever they like, we see that they are carrying their love too far. They do not realise that such love may spoil the children.

Reason and emotion both influence our lives but we often find ourselves moved more by feelings than by reason. Some of us may be more rational whereas others may be highly emotional. But in general we find that very often in our lives we are swayed by feelings and our reasoning power is overshadowed by emotion. Think of young boys and girls in the prime of their lives committing suicide merely because they failed in SSLC!

Psychologists have been trying to find ways of understanding and managing emotions so that we can have healthy emotional personality. Nowadays we hear a lot of talk about emotional maturity and people are talking about a new concept called emotional quotient - EQ. It is different from the concept of Intelligence quotient (IQ). The EQ helps us to see how far a person is able to relate to others and get along with others in peace and harmony. For example, we may have a person who is a great expert but will he be able to get along with his colleagues nicely? Will he show off his knowledge and look down upon his co-workers?

The American psychologist Dr. Albert Ellis Ph.D. has put forward a theory, which tries to show how we can understand our emotions and try to manage them. The idea is to be aware of our emotions and control them so that our relationship with other people (at home or at the work place) is cordial and well balanced. Dr. Ellis's theory is called the Rational Emotive Theory (RET). In a simple form we can call it the ABCD theory of emotions.

In its elementary form the ABCD theory tells us that when any event takes place it gives rise to a reaction in our minds. For example, as a man walks on a lonely road at night, there is sudden darkness due to power failure. Our friend may be gripped by fear. Here, the sudden fall of darkness is the event. We can call it 'A'. The fear, which grips the man, is the reaction or the

consequence in his mind. Let us call it 'C'.

Let us now go a step further and think of a situation where an event A occurs and not one but four different persons are present. Let us imagine that a boy and girl are behaving rather too intimately in a public park.

Now let us see what kind of feelings arise in the minds of the four persons who are watching the behaviour of the youngsters. The first person may feel a strong sense of contempt at such behaviour. The second person may look at the young persons with amusement and even approve their behaviour. The third person may be positively angry and think of writing a letter to the editor of a newspaper or complaining to the municipality. The last person may remain totally unconcerned. He may feel that people have their own right to behave as they like and it is none of any one's business to judge others' actions.

In this way we see that the four different persons have four different feelings (dislike, mild approval, revolt and indifferent). Let us call these four different responses C1, C2, C3 and C4. So we find that event A i.e., a couple behaving in a very intimate way in the park is creating four different consequences in the minds of the four persons present.

The important question now is, how did the same event A give rise to four *different* emotions in the four men. One may say that it is simply because the four men are four different men. That's right. But what is it that makes them different is the question. At this stage we find that different people look at the same thing in different ways because of their *belief system*. It is the system of belief that each one of us has built up in our minds. This belief system is the result of life long learning, experience and a million different impacts on our minds throughout our lives. A man who has been brought up in a family where everything connected with women or sex was taboo may have one reaction. On the other hand a person with a liberal, broad-minded background may have a different reaction.

We can try to see how different people react to the same event in widely differing ways with the help of a simple diagram as shown below.

In the first diagram X we see the four reactions of the four persons as we see or think of them without trying to see the reason for their difference. But the diagram Y shows us that not only the four persons react differently but also we see why they think differently. We realise that their reaction to the event is not a direct reaction but it is coloured by their belief system.

We can express the relationship between events and their consequences in the following form:

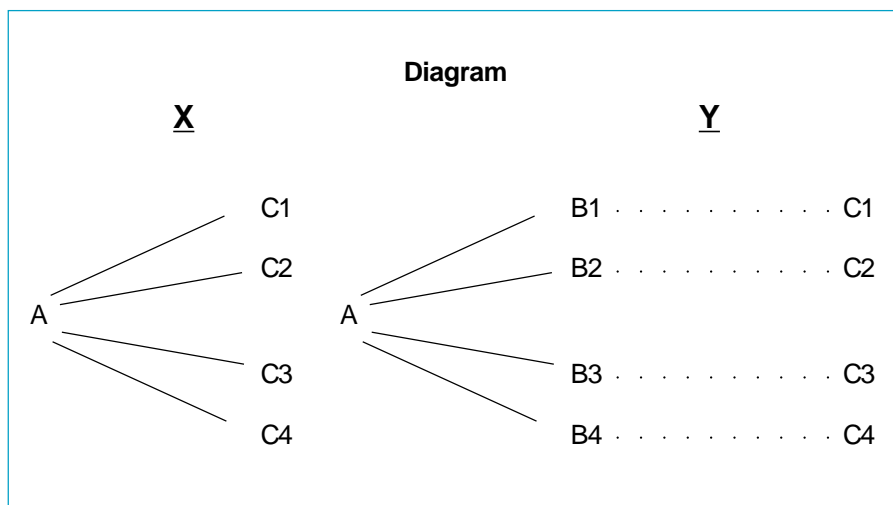
C is a function of A multiplied by B.

$$\text{i.e. } C = f(A \times B)$$

In this way we see that the consequences or emotional reactions are **not directly caused** by the events themselves. Our reactions or emotions are caused by the influence of our belief system on our perception. Our belief system has a lot to do with our reactions. Think of the young person who commits suicide merely because she or he did not get through the SSLC. What is that person's belief system? That passing SSLC is of the greatest importance in life and that failure means that everything in life is lost. We should therefore stop and think about our belief system and try to see how it influences our reactions.

The greatest of all belief systems that all of us have is that the world and the people in the world are there to make us happy. Everything should happen only for our good. If therefore someone hurts our feelings we feel as if heavens have fallen. For example, a child who has been pampered by its parents may develop a sense of superiority and easily take offence with other people.

Having seen the part played by B, the belief system, we shall now see what we can do with it. We can have a hard look at our belief system and see whether we can 'discover' to what extent it is rational or irrational. That is, to what extent it is based on reason or not based on reason. Thus we now introduce the last element of our theory namely, 'D'. D stands for *detecting* how far our belief system is based on reason. If we find that after all, what we have been holding so dear to our heart is not entirely reasonable then we can see whether we can give up that belief. We certainly do not want to be bogged down by unreasonable beliefs. Do we?



However, it may not be an easy thing for us to detect reason in our beliefs. We might have been holding on to such belief right from our early childhood. Psychologists say that a child acquires beliefs even when it is in the womb of its mother. However, if we wish to be masters of our own feelings and if we do not want emotions to cloud our thinking and make us lose sight of reason then we must make a sincere effort to have a look at our belief system and see whether there is any irrational element in it. If on a clear examination we do find that some of what we have been holding on to is not rational then we must have the courage to give up such ideas. It will definitely be to our advantage.

Take a case where someone makes an appointment with you and does not keep it. You may feel disappointed. You may also get angry. Here we may look at our emotions of disappointment and anger. We may notice that the disappointment we felt is a reasonable reaction and so it is rational. But is our anger on the matter rational? Whenever we feel angry, sad or upset we can try to see the real reason for the feeling and try to find the real cause for our reaction. We can make it a habit to detect the rational and irrational aspects of our belief system.

Let us now see how the ABCD theory can be of help to us in practical ways.

Let me narrate an incident, which occurred in my life and which helped me to see the practical wisdom of this theory. On a weekend when my family was away I felt very dull and bored so I went to my niece's house hoping to have a nice weekend with her and her family. While my niece did welcome me, throughout the evening she showed severe irritation with her son as she was taking his lessons. She served me dinner but didn't eat with me on the plea that she had to complete the little fellow's lessons. She went on scolding the chap with punctuation of, "Uncle, please help yourself" I had a most unpleasant weekend and I felt I would have been happier if I had remained all by myself. I felt irritated and angry.

What made me cross with my niece? Was it her behaviour? Or was it my view of her behaviour? Wasn't my anger prompted by my belief that she had a duty to make my weekend pleasant and enjoyable? To what extent is this belief rational? From where did I get this brilliant idea? Isn't it a fact that most of us have an inborn feeling that it is the duty of the youngsters to make the older members of the family happy?

If I try to detect the rational and irrational elements in my belief I might be able to find that the extent to which I felt disappointed and uncomfortable was a fairly rational thing. But to blame

my niece for my unhappiness and to feel irritated and be angry with her - to what extent is this rational? It may be recalled that I went to her place without prior appointment (for such is our culture). What might have been her own problems? After all, she gets the weekend after a whole week of hard work. Much household work is piled up. When I, having had an idea of the A B C D theory, analyzed the situation dispassionately, I felt much better. My mind felt light and I no longer felt angry with my niece.

This then is the way the A B C D theory helps us in understanding our own emotions and looking at the rational and the irrational content of our belief systems. We find that much trouble is generated by our belief system, which has been playing the role of spoilsport in our emotional lives. So, the key to our emotional well being lies in unravelling the mysteries of this belief. If we can make it a practice to think coolly about our feelings and try with a calm mind to see how far they are rational, we may find it easier to manage our emotions and have a better emotional life.

Epictetus, the Greek philosopher said in the first century A.D. "What disturbs peoples minds is not events but their judgement on events."



The Missing Link - Emotional Intelligence

In most Educational Institutes to-day, the students are being taught to enter a rat race culture, which is not only a strain on the students but also inculcates unhealthy competition, the emphasis being only on grades and higher grades At one time, it was possible to make a successful career on the basis of pure intellect, but this does not hold true any longer, with changing paradigms, Corporates and individuals have begun to realise the importance of people skills against pure IQ.

To-day's fast paced and stress filled world offers immense scope for uncertainty, inter-personal conflicts; unhealthy competition and negative feelings towards others. In such an uncertain world, emotional intelligence offers a chance to one and all to realise the importance of feeling good about one's self and eventually be successful in all spheres of professional and personal life Studies have shown that emotionally intelligent individuals (people with high emotional intelligence) are more motivated, self-aware and hold very high self-esteems....

Deepali Patel, Times of India.