

TRIBUTE TO ALBERT ELLIS



Albert Ellis, the most influential psychologist of the 20th Century, the grandfather of cognitive behaviour therapy and widely considered one of the most influential psychologists of all time and probably the most prolific writer on psychology and psychotherapy ever.

Born in Pittsburgh in 1913 into a middle class Jewish family, at 4 years old he moved to New York, but his childhood was blighted by nephritis often spending many months at a time in hospital. He made the best of a difficult childhood by using his head and becoming, in his words, "a stubborn and pronounced problem-solver." His serious kidney disorder turned his attention from sports to books, and the strife in his family (his parents were divorced when he was 12) led him to work at understanding others.

Academically he was very able and did well at school without having tried too hard. In junior school Ellis set his sights on becoming the Great American Novelist, planning to study accounting in high school and college, make enough money to retire at 30, and write without the pressure of financial need. The Great Depression put an end to his vision, but he made it through college in 1934 with a degree in business administration from the City University of New York.

Joining his brother in a short-lived venture in a pants-matching business they scoured the New York garment auctions for pants to match their customer's still-usable coats. In 1938, he became the personnel manager for a gift and novelty firm, but he really wanted to be a songwriter, (another Cole Porter or Irving Berlin), but failed to attract the attention of any music publishers in Tin Pan Alley.

In early adult life, he had a brief but passionate flirtation with left wing politics becoming quite an activist.

Ellis devoted most of his spare time to writing short stories, plays, novels, comic poetry, essays and nonfiction books. By the time he was 28, he had finished almost two dozen full-length manuscripts, but had not been able to get them published. He realized his future did not lie in writing fiction, and turned exclusively to nonfiction, to promoting what he called the "sex-family

revolution." He collected more and more materials for a treatise called "The Case for Sexual Liberty,"

Always interested in sexual and relationship problems, he set up the LAMP institute in 1939 inspired by his experiences in advising friends with relationship and sexual problems. At this time Ellis discovered that he liked counselling as well as writing. In 1942 he returned to school, entering the clinical-psychology program at Columbia. He started a part-time private practice in family and sex counselling soon after he received his master's degree in 1943. He was further awarded a doctorate by Columbia in 1947.

Ellis had come to believe that psychoanalysis was the deepest and most effective form of therapy, but the psychoanalytic institutes refused to take trainees without Medical Doctorates. Undeterred he found Charles Hulbeck at The Karen Horney group who agreed to work with him. Successfully he qualified as a psychoanalyst.

In the late 1940s he taught at Rutgers and New York University, and was the senior clinical psychologist at the Northern New Jersey Mental Hygiene Clinic. He also became the chief psychologist at the New Jersey Diagnostic Centre and then at the New Jersey Department of Institutions and Agencies.

But Ellis' faith in psychoanalysis was rapidly crumbling. He discovered that when he saw clients only once a week or even every other week, they progressed as well as when he saw them daily. He took a more active role, interjecting advice and direct interpretations as he did when he was counselling people with family or sex problems. His clients seemed to improve more quickly than when he used passive psychoanalytic procedures. And remembering that before he underwent analysis, he had worked through many of his own problems by reading and practicing the philosophies of Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Spinoza and Bertrand Russell, he began to teach his clients the principles that had worked for him.

By 1950 he was chief psychologist with the Department of Institution and Agencies for New Jersey.

By the mid 1950s Ellis was disillusioned with what he saw were the inadequacies and inefficiencies of psychoanalysis and began to develop what became by 1957 Rational Therapy, concentrating on changing people's behaviour by confronting them with their irrational beliefs and persuading them to adopt rational ones. Noting through self practice, "when I became rational-emotive, my own personality processes really began to vibrate."

'Rational Psychotherapy and Individual Psychotherapy' was the title of the first article to be published detailing his ideas of how the practice and theory of psychotherapy needed to change. In the same year 1957, he published his first book for the public 'How to Live with a Neurotic'.

By 1959 there was enough professional and public interest to encourage him to found a non-profit educational organisation originally called the Institute for Rational Living where he held workshops to teach his principles to other

therapists. Later this was changed to the Institute for Rational Emotive Therapy and later still to the Albert Ellis Institute and Rational Emotive Behavioural Therapy.

The Art and Science of Love, his first really successful book, appeared in 1960. Before his death in 2007, he had published 54 books and over 600 articles on REBT, sex and marriage.

During the 1960s and 1970s his influence spread through writings and presentations to professional and lay audiences alike and formal training in Rational Emotive Therapy became available at the Institute. Scores of studies began to be published in journals concerned with treatment outcomes and verification of Ellis's theories. He was later to reflect (2001) "Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) is one of the youngest of today's popular psychotherapies, and I think I can immodestly say that I originated it in January 1955, under the names of Rational ~Therapy and Rational Emotive Therapy."

1962 saw the publication of Reason and Emotion in Psychotherapy, Ellis's magnum opus that he would comprehensively revise in 1993.

By the 1980s Rational Emotive Behavioural Therapy was having a major impact in the field of psychotherapy and was moving beyond the boundaries of the USA with affiliated institutes being set up on five continents, including the UK where the Association of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapists was formed.

Ellis had always carried a heavy workload seeing individual clients, conducting group therapy and marathon sessions as well as supervising trainees and writing books and articles. Even at the age of 80 in 1993 his workload was as demanding as it was when he was 45. Fortunately he was at that time living on the top floor of the Institute!

He had been plagued by a serious decline in his health in his last years. He had been diabetic since he was 40 years of age, had gone deaf and had failing eyesight, all of which he bore with stoical conviction. Even during his last illnesses he would receive and teach groups of students, spreading the word of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy.

Until his death on July 24, 2007, Dr. Ellis served as President Emeritus of the Albert Ellis Institute in New York which continues his legacy of providing professional training programs and psychotherapy to individuals, families and groups.

His autobiography 'All Out' was published posthumously, anyone who wishes to have a deeper insight into the man and his works should obtain a copy without delay. It is a truly frank and 'no holds barred' account of his life, his loves (there were many) his works and his mistakes. A remarkable book that completes a remarkable life.

Contributors to this autobiography

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