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How you create your own stress

AN EXAMPLE

Peter

Peter Ward, 31, has been head of the Insurance Department at the General Bank in Neasden for the past two years. One Wednesday evening in March, he comes home after work, plops down on the couch and sighs deeply. 'It was a madhouse again today,' he grumbles to his wife. 'It was so incredibly busy. And my so-called staff are pretty much worthless.'

Peter is too tired to do anything else. All kinds of thoughts race through his head. 'Oh God, I have to make sure I prepare well for that merger meeting on Friday. I still need to call in Rachel from the mailroom. I mustn't forget Sonya's birthday. I really should have a serious talk with Frank about always arriving late and, oh man, I still haven't gotten around to that budget report ...' Peter clearly needs a break.

Let's have a look at what happened at Peter's office that Wednesday.

It's almost nine o'clock and Peter is sitting at his desk. He just got an e-mail from the head office saying that, because of the merger with the National Bank, the number of branches will have to be reduced. An emergency meeting is scheduled for Friday at the head office in Amsterdam and all managers and departmental heads are expected to attend. They plan to discuss the consequences for personnel. Right at that moment, he hears through the intercom that his secretary, Sonya, has a furious Mr Hopkins on the line. Hopkins is one of his office's most important clients. Apparently a serious mistake was made during a policy transfer. Mr Hopkins is demanding to meet with the departmental head at once. This is extremely inconvenient for Peter, who has a particularly hectic schedule today. He had just set aside ten minutes to go through his mail, but that's late again today, too. Out of the corner of his eye he sees his co-worker, Frank, running from the parking lot, his face flushed. It's five past nine. There is a strict rule that everyone works from eight thirty to five. Peter feels the anger welling up inside of him ...

Now let us listen in on what is going on inside Peter's head. What is he thinking? What is he saying to himself?

When reading the e-mail:

- 'Oh God, now I'm going to lose my job. It'll be the end of me.'
- 'It's not fair; I work myself to the bone and this is what I get.'

When dealing with the angry client:

- 'He has no right to force this on me like this.'
- 'If the shoe were on the other foot, it would be a totally different story.'
- 'Dammit, not again. Why can't she ever do it right the first time?'
- 'This new appointment completely messes up my schedule; I'll never get everything done now.'

When the mail is not delivered on time:

- 'The mail is late *again*. What does that Rachel do anyway?'
- 'If she doesn't like it here, she can find another job.'

When his co-worker Frank arrives late:

- 'He's late *again*. Who does he think he is!?'
- 'It's always the same old story with these people, who are supposed to be working for me.'

Paul

One of Peter's co-workers, Paul Bloom, 32, works three doors down. For the past two years, he has been head of the Mortgage Department. He, too, just read that same e-mail from the head office and just rescheduled his appointments to meet with Mr Hopkins, who is threatening to switch to another bank because his son was turned down for a mortgage. He, too, has seen no sign of Rachel from the mailroom. And, at 4:15 this afternoon, his secretary, Antoinette, will be going home 45 minutes early for the third time this week.

Yet there is a difference between these two men. While Peter has flown into a rage twice today already and his department has been walking around grumpy all day, Paul has remained calm and continued working steadily and efficiently. The atmosphere in his department is a pleasant one.

What is going through Paul's head?

When reading the e-mail:

- 'I wonder what they're going to say.'
- 'Maybe I can offer some of my ideas on the merger.'

When dealing with the angry client:

- 'Another one of those. Annoying – but it's part of the job; you can't expect every client to be reasonable.'
- 'Maybe he's right; maybe I'd be just as angry if I were in his shoes.'
- 'I'll ask Antoinette if she can reschedule today's appointments.'

When the mail is not delivered on time:

- 'No mail again.'
- 'This is annoying. I'll ask Rachel if I can talk to her for a moment. Maybe something's wrong. If not, I'll talk to her about her responsibility.'

When he finds out his secretary is going home early:

- 'It's annoying, but Antoinette is probably having problems again. I'll have to talk to her about it one of these days.'

Paul gets home from work, gives his wife a hug and turns all his attention to George, his 18-month-old son. He has already put his work out of his mind and hopes to play tennis tonight.

So what have we seen? Two departmental heads, Peter and Paul, undergoing more or less the same experiences at work that day. Yet not only do they respond in entirely different ways, they also have very different feelings. Does it have to do with the situation, the events that have occurred? No, the difference lies primarily in the way they think, their mental attitude towards the events. They think differently and therefore feel differently.

Tension and stress

Tension and stress have only partly to do with outside influences. People create their own stress to a large degree. How you think and imagine things ultimately determines your feelings, as well as your attitude and behaviour.

This is the basic premise of Rational Effectiveness Training (RET) or Rational Emotive Therapy, a popular method for more effectively dealing with a variety of situations that could lead to stress.

This booklet uses this method to teach you how to better understand your non-productive emotions, which can not only cause considerable stress but also lower your potential performance level. Several other methods are also discussed that will teach you how to explore, even change, your way of thinking.

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What you think is what you feel

Observation, interpretation and evaluation

The theory behind Rational Effectiveness Training (RET) is that how you think about and perceive the world around you ultimately determines how you feel and behave. To understand RET properly, it is important to distinguish between observation, interpretation and evaluation. This difference can best be described using a number of examples.

OBSERVATION

Let's look over Peter's shoulder as he opens the e-mail from the head office. He reads that some branches will be closed and that an emergency meeting has been scheduled. This is pure observation. If Peter were to describe this as follows: 'This is an e-mail with a specific message', his thoughts would consist of no more than pure observation. Of course, very few people think this way in reality.

INTERPRETATION

But Peter goes further than pure observation. He immediately construes what he reads to mean, 'I'm going to lose my job.' This is an interpretation of what he sees; he has put a meaning to his observation. This meaning can be correct or incorrect. We see that Paul, who observes the same message, does not immediately think this way. He interprets it differently; he sees possibilities to learn more and share his ideas.

Once again, these different thoughts about the same e-mail might turn out to be correct or incorrect. People have the tendency to make no distinction between observation and interpretation. This is usually an advantage in daily life. After all, life would become a lot more difficult if we had to consider everything with extreme accuracy. On the other hand, a lot of misunderstandings occur because people interpret the same facts differently, often without being aware of it. They think, 'That's just the way it is!'

EVALUATION

People not only interpret their experiences in all kinds of different ways, they also assign them a value, such as 'This is dangerous', 'This is bad' or 'This is good.' These thoughts about events emotionalise our experiences.

Let's return to the two men's responses to the e-mail. Paul negatively evaluates events. In reading the message he is actually saying to himself, 'I am in danger', 'Horrible things are going to happen' and 'They're being unfair'. Paul, on the other hand, is far less interested in evaluating the events. At this point he is not thinking in terms of the threat to himself; he simply wonders what he can do about it and has an anticipatory but neutral attitude towards it.

This difference in attitude can be seen in other instances as well. When his client got angry, Peter had 'judgemental' thoughts like 'He has no right' and thoughts of failure such as 'Now my entire schedule is messed up; I'll never get everything done on time.' Paul is not happy about the situation, but responds in a more accepting fashion: 'It's simply part of the job.'

Now reread the thoughts that go through the minds of Peter and Paul during these events and notice how differently they evaluate these incidents.

This book talks about how powerfully our thoughts can affect our feelings and behaviour. It will become more and more clear how evaluations play a key role in generating feelings. The way in which we evaluate incidents gives them emotional connotations which, as a result, make us feel emotions such as tension, anxiety, stress or anger.

Naturally interpretations are equally as important, whether they are correct or incorrect, favourable or unfavourable. Take the example of the possibility of redundancy for Peter or Paul. Let's assume for a moment that both interpret this as follows: 'I'm going to be sacked.' There is a distortion of reality in this interpretation. Considering the facts, the following would be a more proper interpretation: 'There is a possibility that I will be fired.' But taking our departure from this distorted interpretation, we arrive at different conclusions. Peter, for example, thinks, 'What a disaster. My life will be ruined,' whereas Paul thinks, 'I won't be happy about it, but I'll survive.' Peter feels panicky, whereas Paul feels a normal and justified concern. The intensity of their feelings is quite different.

The founder of RET: Dr. Albert Ellis

The foundation for the current theory and training and therapy methods was laid in the 1950s by American psychologist Dr. Albert Ellis (born in 1913). Ellis was the founder of Rational Emotive Therapy, which was later developed into training models for the business community called Rational Effectiveness Training or Rational-Emotive Training.

A psychotherapist trained in psychoanalysis, Ellis became more and more dissatisfied with the lengthy therapy process inherent to the psychoanalytical method. He began experimenting with a more direct approach that entailed giving his clients advice and entering into discussions with them in order to convince them of other beliefs, instead of waiting until they gradually arrive at new insights on their own. In doing so, he particularly emphasised thought patterns and interpretations of events. His theory was based on the ideas of Greek philosophers like Epictetus and the English philosopher Bertrand Russell, as well as newer ideas of two students of Freud who had embarked in their own direction, Alfred Adler and Karen Horney.

In the late 50s Ellis played an important role in the creation of unconventional ideas about sex by means of countless books and lectures on sexuality, considered controversial at the time. His colourful, humorous and revealing language earned him many friends as well as enemies, primarily among conservative puritans.

Through the 70s, his ideas on the relationship between thought and feeling became more prominent within psychology. Scientific research proved the importance of cognition in the generation of emotions and behaviour.

Behavioural therapists also began to show more interest in the role of the thought process in problem behaviour. The ideas of people like Ellis began to pervade psychology and psychotherapy, often in altered form and more than once without acknowledgement.

In the early 70s Ellis was primarily active as a management consultant. His publications of that time included the book *Executive Leadership. A rational approach*. In the early 80s, a study among American psychotherapists showed that Albert Ellis was among the three most influential psychologists/psychiatrists, together with Carl Rogers and Sigmund Freud.

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Twisted reasoning and strong emotions

‘Since I don’t agree with it, it shouldn’t happen.’ ‘If I mess this up, it will prove that I’m worthless.’ These are examples of common lines of thought that are irrational.

The irrationality of the first example lies in the linking of one’s personal standard – ‘I don’t agree with it’ – to the demand that actual incidents adapt to this standard. The fact that most incidents occur as a result of a variety of factors we have no control over is categorically denied. It is a line of thought that disregards the facts, such as the fact that other people have different views and interests.

The second example is an overgeneralization, a line of reasoning that is inconsistent with logic. It is a single event that we have assigned a particular value – ‘This is wrong’ – as a result of which we subsequently apply this value to the entire person, as if the value of a whole person can be measured based on the value of a single performance at a single moment.

RET uses the following criteria to determine whether a line of thought is rational or irrational:

- Can the line of thought be sufficiently backed up with actual facts?
- Is the line of thought logically consistent?

The irrational ideas that can get people into trouble usually have an absolute, exaggerated and therefore imaginary nature. The strong evaluations that result from these ideas can unnecessarily force emotions (see Chapter 2). Another characteristic of irrational thinking is that it does not help the person achieve their goal, i.e. it is non-productive. Anyone who demands that he make no mistakes because this would mean he is a failure will not function better as a result. On the contrary, it often leads to poorer performance as a result of blockage.

Let’s now examine a number of common irrational lines of thought. Hopefully you can identify with them. This isn’t always easy, since we become so hooked on one particular

way of thinking that we no longer recognise it in ourselves. We simply think, 'That's just the way it is!' We are seeing through tinted glasses without realising it.

I EXCESSIVE PERFECTIONISM

Excessive perfectionism means thinking that you are not allowed to make mistakes. *That it is unacceptable to make mistakes.* This demand of absolute infallibility is then linked to the (erroneous) conclusion that mistakes are a sign of weakness. Excessive perfectionists always see danger when something goes wrong or threatens to go wrong. In their eyes, making a mistake means failing or, worse yet, total and complete failure. Perfectionists create their own 'sword of Damocles' that constantly hangs above their head, threatening them.

Examples of perfectionist thoughts:

- 'Nothing may go wrong because then I will fail and that means I am an idiot and a complete failure.'
- 'If I make a mistake, it will only prove that I am worthless.'
- 'Oh no, it's not 100% perfect; I'm a failure; this is horrible.'

'What is wrong with this way of thinking?' you might be asking yourself, certainly if you are a perfectionist yourself. The irrationality lies in the exaggeration. Naturally there is nothing wrong with the desire and aim to do things as best as possible. After all, no one likes to make mistakes. This is a *healthy* form of perfectionism. But a demanding attitude with regard to one's own performance results in the linkage of self-esteem to performance. This is where the irrationality lies. As if by making mistakes, you will suddenly change from being a 'worthy' person to a 'worthless' one! As if you need to be a perfect human being in order to have positive self-esteem! The tragedy of this for perfectionists is that this continuous threat of failure creates such fearful and frantic behaviour that their performance suffers as a result. Research into the performance of top athletes has shown that, when it comes to the crunch, perfectionists fall by the wayside. The fear of failure never lets up. This is not surprising, since their self-esteem is at stake, leaving them less able to concentrate on their performance. Perfectionism can lead to all kinds of non-productive behaviour, such as avoiding risks and taking the safe route, or spending too much time and energy and checking everything and going over it again and again in order to reduce the possibility of any mistakes.

2 DISASTER THINKING PATTERN

Doomsayers always see horrible dangers coming towards them. Ellis calls this way of thinking 'catastrophizing'. Often these dangers are of their own making, such as by over-exaggerating the consequences of an incident. Common thoughts that run through their mind are:

- When they see a growing pile of work: ‘I’ll never finish it all; this is absolutely horrible.’
- If there are no responses to an advertisement: ‘We’ll never make a turnover. What a huge disaster!’
- When receiving criticism from a manager: ‘I might as well forget my career.’

It is irrational to predict that facts that can be negatively interpreted will naturally lead to disastrous events in the future: ‘I knew it – everything is going wrong.’ This is yet another example of an exaggeration based on a limited number of facts. It is the molehill that has been turned into a mountain in the mind.

Disaster thinking not only leads to unnecessary tension, but also often non-productive behaviour, such as indecisiveness and the avoidance of as many risks as possible.

3 LOW FRUSTRATION TOLERANCE

People with Low Frustration Tolerance (LFT) often dread events and thoughts they find too difficult or painful. They often quickly respond emotionally when things don’t go their way. Examples of this type of thinking:

- ‘I can’t handle criticism.’
- ‘If that happens, I won’t survive.’
- ‘This is too difficult for me.’
- ‘I can’t handle it.’

The underlying idea is that life should really be much easier than it is. With this type of thinking, difficulties and possible setbacks grow in the mind of the person into insurmountable obstacles.

The irrationality here is found in the exaggeration. Difficult things are sometimes very uncomfortable, but bearable. They can also be a challenge. By trying out things that are difficult, you will often see that you are quite able to deal with it. At any rate, you’ll survive. The demand that life should be easier than it is, is as absurd as the demand that the sun should shine every day.

The low frustration line of thinking results in much unnecessary tension and displeasure, a half-hearted effort with lots of moaning and groaning and giving up quickly: ‘Like I said, it’s much too hard.’

4 THE LOVE JUNKIE: ADDITION TO RESPECT AND LOVE

A favourite notion of the love junkie is the idea that it is necessary for others to love and respect them. Examples of this type of irrational thinking are:

- 'It is horrible if people reject me.'
- 'If I am not in a serious relationship, I am worthless.'
- 'I can't stand the fact that my colleague has been ignoring me since I told her off.'
- 'I can't stand the fact that the computer doesn't work – right when I need it most!'
- 'I'm going to keep my mouth shut from now on because we'll only end up arguing and won't be able to work together.'
- 'If I refuse to do this assignment, he'll get angry at me and then I've had it.'

The exaggeration lies in the notion that it is absolutely necessary for others to like you and approve of your behaviour. Naturally life would be much more pleasant if everyone around you liked you. But love and respect are not basic needs of human beings, like food and water. Here, too, we see how a rational desire becomes an irrational demand.

The irrational thoughts of the love junkie lead to anxiety when they are faced with the possibility of getting on someone's wrong side. 'What if that person stops liking me? That would be horrible.'

It is clear that this attitude and the fear it produces leads to conflict avoidance and the inability to speak your mind. Presenting new ideas also always entails the risk of rejection. The love junkie thought pattern often leads to compromise and a lack of commitment.

5 DEMANDS ON OTHERS AND THE WORLD

A common irrational demand is that others need to behave differently and that the world should be different. Others should behave according to one's own beliefs and the world should be different, better, more fair.

- 'I've worked really hard, so he has no right to treat me like that.'
- 'There's too much going wrong in this organisation and that's got to change.'
- 'Colleagues should always treat each other fairly.'
- 'People need to stick to their agreements.'
- 'My colleague goes home earlier, which means I have to work harder and that's not fair.'
- 'I'm on holiday and now it's raining; I don't deserve that.'
- 'There should be no such thing as war.'

These demanding thought patterns usually concern fairness and values and how others, organisations and even nature should be. They can result in anger, holding a grudge and unnecessary irritation. The irrationality lies in the fact that the person does not want to accept reality and demands that it be different. 'It should be different because that's what I believe.' Again, a desire is turned into a demand. After all, acceptance does not necessarily have to mean approval.