



## **ABCs OF BEHAVIORAL CHANGE**

Adapted from *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy* (6<sup>th</sup> Edition)  
by Gerald Corey

The A-B-C Theory of behavioral change states that most people operate under a formula that certain antecedents or activating events lead to specific behaviors (i.e. belief systems) that ultimately result in consequences. The theory holds that people's problems do not stem from activating events, but rather from their beliefs about such events. Thus, the best route to changing problematic emotions is to change one's beliefs about the antecedents or activating events. The following definitions further clarify the formula:

- A = Activating Event or Circumstance: The existence of a fact, an event, or the behavior or attitude of an individual.
- B = Belief System: Beliefs about the reasons or causes of "A," these are usually irrational or not based on logical analysis.
- C = Consequence (Emotional or Behavioral): The emotional and behavioral consequence or reaction of the individual to "A," the Activating Event.
- D = Disputing Intervention: The application of the scientific method to help challenge irrational beliefs; Uses the principles of logic, detecting, debating, and discriminating.
- Detecting: Identifying irrational beliefs, especially "shoulds," "musts," and "awefulizing, catastrophizing, or self-downing" thinking.
  - Debating: Learning how to logically and empirically question dysfunctional beliefs and arguing yourself out of believing them.
  - Discriminating: Telling the difference between irrational, self-defeating beliefs and rational or self-helping beliefs.
- E = Effect: The new outcomes resulting from challenging irrational thoughts and replacing them with healthy interpretations. What would you like to have happen?
- F = Feeling: The new feelings associated with the change in perspective that is no longer focused on making the individual feel guilty or wrong.

### Practicing The Steps

These steps are only helpful if you practice them regularly. While the principles are simple to understand, they may be difficult to consistently apply. This is why it is important to practice and give yourself permission not to be perfect. For many people, their belief systems are deeply ingrained. Here are a few simple tips to make it easier:

1. Start by identifying your upset feelings (C).
2. List your thoughts and beliefs (B) related to (C). Pay attention to unrealistic demands and negative exaggerations.
3. Describe the event (A). Be as objective as possible and stick to only the facts.
4. Question your logic (D). Have a debate with yourself. Challenge your thinking.
5. Describe what new results (E) you are looking for and how these will feel (F).



## ABCs WORKSHEET

A (Activating Event)

- Briefly summarize the situation you are disturbed about (what would a camera see?).
- An A can be internal or external, real or imagined
- An A can be an event in the past, present or future.

C (Consequences)

Major unhealthy negative **emotions**:

  

Major self-defeating **behaviors**:

**Unhealthy negative emotions include:**

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Low frustration tolerance
- Shame/embarrassment
- Hurt
- Rage
- Guilt
- Jealousy

IBs (Irrational Beliefs)	D (Disputing IBs)	RBs (Rational Beliefs)	E (New Effect)
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New healthy **negative behaviors**:

  
  

New constructive **behaviors**:

To identify IBs, look for:

- **Dogmatic Demands** (musts, absolutes, shoulds)
- **Awfulizing** (It's awful, terrible, horrible)
- **Low frustration tolerance** (I can't stand it)
- **Self/other rating** (I'm/she/he is bad, worthless)

To dispute, ask yourself:

- Where is holding this grief getting me? Is it *helpful* or *self-defeating*?
- Where is the evidence to support the existence of my irrational belief?
- Is my belief *logical*?
- Is it really *awful*?
- Can I really not stand it?

To think more rationally, strive for:

- **Non-Dogmatic Preferences** (wishes, wants, desires)
- **Evaluating Badness** (It's bad)
- **High frustration tolerance** (I don't like it, but I can stand it)
- **Not globally rating self and others** (I—and others—are fallible beings)

Healthy negative emotions include:

- Disappointment
- Concern
- Annoyance
- Sadness
- Regret
- Frustration