

Controlling Your Emotions and Behavior When Your Child Is Disrespectful

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Learn how to stay cool and maintain a steady course when your child is "rocking the boat."

- Dad: Michelle, I've told you **three times** to wash up for bed.
- Michelle: I'm going as fast as I can; I'm not some track star!
- Dad: Listen, young lady, it's late, I've had a long day at work, and the last thing I need from you is back talk.
- Michelle: (Under her breath) Why don't you just shut up and leave me alone?
- Dad: (Clenching his jaw, thinking) She shouldn't have said 'shut up' to me; that's an awful thing to say; I can't stand it when she does that! She's in trouble for making my evening so terrible.
- (Red-faced and yelling) I'm not going to tell you again, get in that bathroom and wash up!

It is not always easy to keep your cool when a child is refusing to follow your directions — especially after a long day at work. But when you allow yourself to react emotionally, as Michelle's father did, you are more likely to respond ineffectively — and even to make the situation worse. In this article, a very powerful system is described for learning how to control your emotions and behavior regardless of how disagreeably your child treats you. The approach is based on rational-emotive therapy (RET) which was developed by psychologist Albert Ellis, Ph. D., and has subsequently been elaborated on by many professionals, including Tom Miller, who studied under Ellis. Miller developed an innovative way to help people recognize and combat four common irrational thinking styles, which you'll learn about in this article.

Recognizing Your Irrational Beliefs Most people engage in a variety of irrational thinking styles. An irrational thought is simply one that does not match the facts of a given situation. For example, a person who says, "I'll never get into graduate school because I have low entrance exam scores," fails to acknowledge the other factors considered in the admission process — grade-point average, letters of recommendation, and relevant past experiences. Ellis believed that irrational thinking styles stem from both heredity and environment. Miller considered that, of the many irrational thinking styles, four contribute most to the difficulty people experience controlling their emotions and behavior: "Demandingness," "Awfulizing," "I-can't-stand-it," and "Condemning and damning."

It's important to note that we often engage in these four irrational thinking styles automatically and unconsciously. The chart below presents a "generic" irrational statement (left column), and the type of irrational thinking involved in each part of the statement (right column).

What we say to ourselves or others...	... and 4 types of irrational thinking behind it.
"That event (for example, a child telling you to shut up) shouldn't have happened, and..."	Demandingness: The use of the words "should/shouldn't," "have to," "need to," and "must." These words represent a magical way to change reality to the way we want it.
...it's awful that it did, and...	Awfulizing: The belief that a situation is more than 100% worse than it is, catastrophizing, making mountains out of mole hills.
...I can't stand it, and...	I-can't-stand-it: Imagining one can't tolerate situations or have any happiness if the situation persists.
....somebody around here needs to be condemned and damned as rotten and worthless — let's see, is it me? Is it you? Is it the way the world works?"	Condemning and damning: The tendency to be excessively critical of oneself, others, or the world.

Combating Irrational Thinking The irrational beliefs you use to interpret situations have become unconscious through repeated use. Consequently, it takes a tremendous amount of conscious effort to combat them effectively. Doing so requires that you understand the two most important factors in making a fundamental change in your own behavior. You must be able to:

- Force yourself to behave differently from how you're feeling
- Generate the power within yourself to turn your intention to change, into actual change

Gaining greater emotional and behavioral control first requires you to take a close look at how you experience events. Think about any experience you encounter as having the following four parts:

- **Event.** Any situation of which we are a part, and/or our interactions with others.
- **Belief.** The interpretation or the meaning we attach to the event or situation.
- **Emotion.** The feelings we experience as a result of our interpretation about an event: happiness, sadness, anger, frustration, anxiety, depression, guilt, joy, etc.

- **Behavior.** Our actions — how we respond both verbally and nonverbally when confronted with a situation, based on our beliefs and feelings about it.

Although it may not be obvious when you're angry or frustrated, you always have a choice about how you respond to another person's disagreeable behavior. You can either:

- Use a rational interpretation of the person's actions to control your own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in an effective way, or
- Allow others to control your behavior by interpreting in an irrational way what they say or do.

Demandingness — How We Get Drawn in Demandingness is the most difficult irrational thinking style to combat because the strategies for doing so go against social convention. But it's worth rethinking these automatic reactions. Every time you allow yourself to become overly upset, you are, in effect, demanding something of others or of yourself. For example, you may respond to a child who tells you to "shut up" by saying to yourself in an indignant way, "**He should not** have told me to 'shut up'." or "He **needs to** be more respectful." But, if you think about the facts of the event, these statements demand that the child change an action that has already happened, and over which neither of you has any real control. (Further approaches to dealing with children's non-compliant behavior are presented in my article on strategies for managing resistance.)

However much you might wish to, you cannot turn back time so that the child was respectful and did not tell you to "shut up." When you place these kinds of demands on others, you fail to acknowledge the reality of a situation. It is a futile attempt to change reality to the way you wanted it to be.

It's often very difficult for parents to use demanding words such as "must," "have to," or "should" in a factual way to describe the reality of a child's behavior. The reason is because, when people evaluate behavior, there's a tendency to lump together the idea of whether we accept the behavior with the idea of whether we approve of the behavior. However, these two notions are actually separate from each other.

People tend to not accept a behavior if they don't approve of it. However, **it is possible to accept the fact that a behavior has occurred, without having to approve of it.** For example, you may come home from work to discover that your child has spilled a glass of milk on the floor and hasn't cleaned it up. The milk "should be" on the floor because it is. No amount of saying "It shouldn't be there" or "He should have cleaned it up" is going to magically reverse time and put the milk back in the glass. To continue to do so simply wastes time, emotional energy, and the ability to respond effectively. You do not have to approve of it being on the floor to accept the reality of the situation. Once you accept that the milk "should be" on the floor, you can then figure out how to respond to it.

Combating Demandingness Combating the irrational thinking involved in demandingness is deceptively simple: Instead of using demanding words as an attempt to magically change reality, you merely use demanding words to describe reality. Here are the most common demanding words:

- **Must**
- **Need to**

- **Have to**
- **Got to**

- **Ought to**
- **Should/shouldn't**

According to the American Heritage Dictionary, the definition for "must" is "imperative requirement," "compelled to." The word "must," and the others above, indicate that there is no choice involved. Therefore, the rule for not engaging in demandingness is to test whether the "demanding words" that pop into your mind live up to their definition and match the reality of the situation. If a behavior is a "must" or "have to," then there is no choice involved — you are compelled by forces beyond your control to do something. For example, dying is a must — we cannot live forever. Or, if we drop a pen or pencil, it must fall to the ground because of the law of gravity.

But, if you use demanding words when there is any choice at all, then you are engaging in demandingness. For example, if you say "I must be on time to work," as you leave the house 10 minutes late, you are engaging in demandingness. The only thing you accomplish by repeating the word "must" is to keep yourself in a state of emotional upset that gets worse with every red light you encounter. So ask yourself, "Is it possible for me not to be on time?" The answer is yes. You may not like the consequences, but it is possible not to be on time.

Another way to test whether a situation offers absolutely no choice is to imagine using a non-demanding word to describe it: For example, you might try saying, "It would be "preferable" to be on time." As silly as it may sound at first, when you actually say "It would be preferable . . .," you automatically decrease how emotionally upset you become.

Combating Awfulizing Other terms for awfulizing that you may have heard are "catastrophizing," "making mountains out of mole hills," or "blowing things out of proportion." Awfulizing is a logical consequence when you engage in demandingness. If you say that something should or shouldn't have happened, your next interpretation of the event will be that it is awful that it did, in fact, happen. In order to effectively combat awfulizing, it is important to understand and accept the fact that bad (i.e., negative) things do happen to us.

To avoid awfulizing, put "bad events" into perspective so that you can prevent overreacting and respond rationally and effectively. The "physical injury scale" (below; adapted from Miller) is one tool you can use to combat awfulizing. The idea behind the scale is that when you are able to compare a negative event to physical injury — a tangible situation that we all understand and try to avoid — you will only get upset in proportion to the real unpleasantness of the event. If you train yourself to use the physical injury scale whenever you encounter a situation that you label as "bad," you will generate a response within yourself that is logical based on the "badness" percentage you select.

The Physical Injury Scale

100% — death 90% — paralyzed from waist down 80% — dominant arm cut off
 70% — 1 hand cut off 60% — 2 fingers cut off 50% — 3 broken limbs
 40% — dominant arm broken 30% — broken nose 20% — gash requiring stitches
 10% — bruise 0% — nothing

So, for example, when a child tells you to "shut up," you can place that event on the physical injury scale and ask yourself, "How bad is it?", which you determine by looking at the scale and asking yourself: "How much physical pain would I be willing to trade to have prevented my child from saying 'shut up'." It's a good bet no one wants to go higher than 10% (bruise). Therefore, you choose to keep yourself calm by telling yourself that the incident only warrants your being 10% upset, which leaves you with 90% of your rational thinking capabilities to figure out how to deal with the situation. This takes practice, so be patient with yourself while you're learning.

Combating "I-Can't-Stand-It" and "Condemning and Damning" If you work first on reducing your demandingness and awfulizing, which are strongly interconnected, you'll have an easier time controlling the other two kinds of irrational responses: The "I-can't-stand-it" and "Condemning and damning." When you say "I can't stand this anymore," you're grossly exaggerating reality and increasing your chances for overreacting. As is the case with many demanding terms such as "must" and "should," saying "I can't stand it" is a fallacy. We are living proof that we have stood everything that has ever happened to us. Death is the only thing we cannot stand.

Finally, if you let the other irrational thinking styles take over, you are more likely to condemn and damn others, yourself, or the world. On the other hand, if you successfully combat the first three thinking styles — demandingness, awfulizing, and I can't stand it — you reduce your tendency to condemn and damn.

When you avoid irrational thinking about a child's behavior, your level of emotional upset automatically decreases, giving you the emotional control to figure out an effective response. As a result, you're less likely to feel hurt and disrespected, and to be overly punitive with your child. A child with challenging behaviors seeks the sense of power and control he gets when he can successfully "push your buttons." Recognizing and combating irrational thinking styles will help you handle any disagreeable behaviors your child throws at you — and reduce the likelihood of the child "getting your goat."

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