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REACTION CONTROL: HOW REBT IMPROVES A MARINE’S DECISION PROCESS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF OPERATIONAL STUDIES

MAJOR NOAH J. KOMNICK
USMC

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If I know what my body tells me, I know my deepest feelings and I can choose what to do.... Given a complete knowledge of myself, I can determine my life; lacking that mastery, I am controlled in ways that are often undesirable, unproductive, worrisome, and confusing.

William Schutz, *Here Comes Everybody*

General Charles C. Krulak wrote about what he termed the “strategic corporal” in his landmark 1999 essay, “The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War.” In the article he described modern and future battlefields where young, non-commissioned officers make tactical decisions with strategic consequences. His article is often cited in works that provide further evidence and assert that his postulations were correct. In that regard, articles in today’s military professional journals continue to argue for ethical decision making and moral judgment in order to avert extreme failures such as the infamous My Lai massacre in Vietnam and Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse case in Iraq. More recently, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General James F. Amos, traveled to Marine Corps bases delivering his “Heritage Brief,” aimed at correcting recent Marine misconduct by reminding all Marines of their institutional heritage and the values expected of every Marine. Unfortunately, there is far too little research and literature available that offer real solutions on how best to prepare Marines for critical decisions in often chaotic environments. Too frequently solutions are ill defined as simply “better small unit leadership,” character development, values-based education, and the like. This short essay offers one pragmatic solution supported by science, history, and philosophy, and recommends a method to better prepare strategic corporals. In short, the philosophy of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) will improve the decision making of Marines.

The deployed Marine is well prepared for military operations. From boot camp and beyond, s/he is indoctrinated into Marine Corps culture and the warrior code. Hand-to-hand combat and Marine Corps values are taught through the revered Marine Corps Martial Arts

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Program. Weapons, tactics, and tradecraft are taught at Marine Combat Training (MCT) and military occupational specialty (MOS) schools. Predeployment training continues this preparation of a Marine’s mind, body, and spirit. Trademark Navy and Marine Corps values of honor, courage, and commitment are reinforced in nearly all training evolutions. But, with all this quality education and training, why do some Marines continue to make bad decisions, decisions that go against their warrior code and inclusive values? The nominal answer is that bad decisions are a product of individual choice and how certain stimuli (the environment and situation) are perceived by the individual. This answer rests on two important assumptions: (1) the observer judges ex ante, without knowledge of the consequences of the individual’s decision and behavior; and, (2) the Marine knows what the “correct behavior” is for the given decision point (e.g., s/he knows the rules of engagement). If the first assumption is wrong, then judgment of the individual’s behavior is compromised by knowledge of the future relative to the time the behavior occurs (in other words, judgment is “20/20”). If the second assumption is false, then perhaps the more obvious reason for the poor decision and behavior is bad leadership, training, or education of the individual. The second assumption implies that good leadership exists and training has been provided (e.g., the Marine understands the rules of engagement); but bad decisions are still made – s/he chooses not to act in accordance with sound guidance. Ergo, it is the psychological decision making process of the individual that must be examined. In that light, then, the goal is to offer a practical solution for improving the decision making process of the strategic corporal.
Consider the figure above. An event occurs. This event can be the crack of a bullet narrowly missing your body or witnessing an automobile accident. The event includes your environment. You observe this given event, a moment in time, using your biological senses. Your information is finite. Up to this point you control nothing. Yet, after this observation, personal perception occurs. This is your reality, how you perceive an event at a given moment in time and space with finite information. The stimuli associated with the event cause emotions and thoughts based on your memory (experience) and beliefs. Emotions and thoughts are context-dependent. As Scott Plous, a professor of psychology at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, explains: “decision makers do not perceive and remember material in isolation; they interpret new information in light of past experience and the context in which the material occurs.”

Sometimes emotions occur first, which then trigger thoughts. Other times thoughts occur first, which then trigger emotions. Indeed, a key insight from modern neuroscience is that “reasoning is actually suffused with emotion.” Thinking is the process of selecting information from stimuli, organizing it, and interpreting it. Additionally, the mind is processing this information (thinking) in two fashions: intuitively and deliberatively. These two processes are often labeled...
as system 1 thinking (fast, intuitive, implicit, automatic, effortless) and system 2 thinking (slow,
complex, explicit, deliberate). All this thinking leads to a decision and subsequent action or
inaction, in other words, behavior. Behavior, interacting with the environment, causes
consequences (good, bad, or indifferent). Finally, observed consequences provide a feedback to
our decision process giving us the ability to adapt. In summary, the human decision making
process is a quasi-linear process of event, perception, emotions and thoughts, behavior, and
consequence.

According to Peter Bradley, associate professor of military psychology and ethics at the
Royal Military College of Canada, “A major problem with decision making is that although
people make many decisions in their lives, the mixture of emotion, reason, biological drives and
social influences that are involved can lead to errors in judgment.” Purely rational thinking and
thus rational behavior is rare and difficult to assess. Rationality is defined differently in various
disciplines. This author defines rational thought as consistent, cost-benefit reasoning given a set
of information, opportunities, and perceived consequences. Therefore, rational thought is also
and Decision Making, rational thought is easily and frequently compromised by a host of
variables common to all individuals. Rational thought is compromised by cognitive dissonance,
context dependence, selective perception, heuristics, biases, social influences, and other
hindrances. The challenge against rational decision making is further compounded by the
environment or situations of the decision maker, as will be discussed more later. Examined in
isolation, each human decision can be dissected, examined, and flaws identified. Therefore, it is
impossible to rid a Marine of all compromising variables and achieve a truly consistent, rational
decision making strategic corporal. There is no panacea for completely ridding the Marine
Corps of poor decision making. People can improve their decision making, however, by becoming aware of hindrances to good decision making and improving their control over the effects of those hindrances. This paper focuses on one such hindrance—emotions—and offers a useful coping mechanism to limit the detriment to sound decision making of the strategic corporal.

As described earlier, emotions are inextricably linked to thinking and thus decision making. But, what are emotions and why do humans have emotions? Emotions are often distinguished from cognitive thought and volition. One definition of emotion is the process of feeling, or affective thought. Stanley Schachter's Two-Factor Theory of emotion asserts that emotions have two components: physical arousal and a cognitive label. Often emotions are physiologically similar; therefore, self-awareness and cognitive labeling of a given emotion are required to differentiate fear from surprise or sadness from anger. Robert Plutchik, professor emeritus at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York, further describes emotions as primary and mixed, explaining that some emotions (mixed) are derived from a combination of emotions (primary). Sometimes emotions occur before cognition, when visual cues reach the amygdala (the emotional control center of the brain) before the prefrontal cortex (the planning and reasoning center). In fact, research by David Amaral, professor of psychiatry at the University of California, shows that humans have more neural connections running from the amygdala to the prefrontal cortex than going in the other direction. This is likely a result of evolutionary development from five million years ago, when humans roamed "the savannah," as Robert Winston puts it. However, cognitive thought can also cause emotions. Complex emotions such as love, hate, and guilt clearly arise from interpretation and expectation.
All of the above matters; it illustrates that emotions are complex and often difficult for an individual to understand and separate from behavior. Some emotions are healthy and lead to increased physiological efficacy, while other emotions are behaviorally debilitative and unhealthy. But, as noted previously, emotions are an inescapable component of the thought process; learning to better cope with emotions can improve decision making, but emotions cannot be eliminated.

When bad decisions are made and when atrocities are committed, all too often the judging observer focuses on the actor alone. The observer tends to “overestimate the impact of dispositional factors (the individual traits) and to underestimate situational ones.” This understanding is crucial to understanding the decision making of the strategic corporal. It is readily known that the non-commissioned officer will be making decisions in situations that are uncertain, chaotic, violent, and morally ambiguous; indeed, the strategic corporal operates in “fundamentally abnormal situations.”

Considering these personally novel situations for the strategic corporal in light of the neurological processes described earlier, it is all too easy to appreciate that intuitive (system 1) and precognitive emotions are dominant drivers to perception and the decision making processes. Basic military training is replete with repetitive, muscle-memory, skill-based drilling and exercises. This “basic” training is intended precisely to improve system 1 thinking and the physiological reaction of the individual. It is designed to train a Marine to react instinctively in spite of fear. “When you are scared, just trust in your training,” is an old adage. But, this training neglects deliberate thought, system 2 thinking, and the profound influence that emotions have upon it. Whether the emotions are precognitive or a result of thoughts is relevant, as
discussed earlier; yet, it is of first order importance that the strategic corporal learns to first be aware of his or her emotions.

Fear, rage, desperation, sadness, and grief are but a few examples of common emotions experienced by Marines across a range of military operations. Frequently, these emotions can become behaviorally debilitating. Windy Dryden, professor of psychotherapeutic studies at Goldsmiths, University of London, lists eight major emotional problems that psychotherapists often treat: anxiety, depression, shame, guilt, unhealthy anger, hurt, unhealthy jealousy, and unhealthy envy.\(^{13}\) All eight emotional problems are plausible for any Marine to experience on a seven-month combat deployment.

This paper began with an overview of the human decision making process. It progressed by reviewing common impairments to the decision making process, and chose to focus on one common hindrance: emotions. Emotions, whether healthy or unhealthy, were examined in fair detail and further linked to the human decision process. Finally, the emotions frequently experienced by a strategic corporal were brought to the foreground. All this raises an important question: If emotions can compromise sound decision making of the strategic corporal, then how can we better prepare him or her to cope with those emotions in order to improve the decision making process?

One form of psychotherapy designed specifically for treating emotional problems is Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy, or REBT. The essential premise of REBT is that external circumstances (events) do not make people happy; rather, it is the perception of these events that create emotion. This premise complements and supports the decision making process previously explained. It is also congruent with stoicism, a philosophy commonly accepted by the Roman soldier. Epictetus said, “Men are not disturbed by things, but by the view which they take of"
them." REBT further asserts that irrational beliefs, or fallacies, are the root of debilitative emotions. Examples of such fallacies are the fallacy of "shoulds," fallacy of "perfection," fallacy of "approval," fallacy of "overgeneralization," fallacy of "causation," fallacy of "helplessness," and the fallacy of "catastrophic expectations" (see Appendix A). The trademark of REBT is teaching people their ABCs of emotional disturbance: (A) Activating event; (B) their Beliefs about those events; and (C) the resulting emotional Consequences. A + B = C. Therefore, "people are better off if they recognize that all their beliefs, schemas, perceptions, and cherished truths may be wrong." REBT has its critics and it is not the only popular form of psychological therapy. That said, REBT is distinctly different from psychoanalysis (psychodynamic therapy), humanistic therapies, and behavioral therapies. Psychoanalysis aims to gain insight from a client's unconsciousness, including dreams, childhood experiences, and defense mechanisms, in comparison to his or her psychological disorders. Humanistic therapy examines a client's conscious feelings, teaching the client to take more responsibility for emotions by means of active listening to express empathy and acceptance. Behavioral therapies are more concerned about directly correcting problematic behaviors than promoting self-awareness by using techniques such as desensitization, aversive conditioning, and behavioral modification. REBT is focused on actively challenging a client's beliefs in order for the client to learn what underlying irrational beliefs are responsible for identified emotional and behavioral problems, and helping the client change those respective beliefs. REBT does, however, have much in common with Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT).

In fact, REBT is an earlier form of CBT, arguably the most popular psychotherapy used by therapists today. Albert Ellis is the father of REBT (earliest form, rational therapy, published
in 1957) and regarded by many to be the grandfather of CBT. REBT is practiced today as “an integrated therapy that borrows all of the CBT techniques.” Both REBT and CBT teach their clients the ABCs of their disturbances. However, REBT includes a philosophical component that CBT does not. Secondly, in REBT “therapists vigorously, actively, and directly dispute clients’ irrational beliefs,” whereas CBT therapies “do so more indirectly and slowly.” Third, REBT uses a binary model for emotions when CBT uses a unitary model. The unitary model differentiates functional from dysfunctional emotions on a linear scale of emotional distress (greater the distress, the more dysfunctional the emotion becomes). Contrastingly, the binary model has a qualitative component of measurement and considers the distinction of mixed emotions. More evidence supports the binary model of emotions.

In addressing any emotional problems of the strategic corporal that hinder decision making, REBT is the best psychotherapeutic option for several reasons. First, REBT has existed for over 50 years and has an abundance of clinical research to support its theories. Second, its strong, philosophical underpinnings are more compatible with Marine Corps culture, and the philosophy of REBT can be inculcated into Marine culture much like stoicism was for the Romans. Third, REBT is already in use with helping soldiers cope with combat stress and is a key component of the US Army’s Warrior Resilience Training program used during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). Fourth, REBT’s didactic nature serves as a self-awareness and self-help mechanism that an individual Marine can personally incorporate into his or her daily life. Finally, REBT is designed to teach methods to cope with the most common emotional disturbances of Marines: fear, anxiety, hurt, depression, hate, and rage.

However, Douglas MacInnes, a mental health nurse in Canterbury, England, argues in a 2004 essay that REBT lacks sufficient evidence to support its central principle that irrational
beliefs lead to dysfunctional emotions. On the surface, his research appears extensive, systematic, and meticulous. However, his argument against REBT rests on only 18 research studies spanning from 1986 to 2000. Conversely, Raymond DiGiuseppe, professor and chair, Department of Psychology, St. John’s University, New York City, offers a much more comprehensive and thorough review of REBT research studies. He surveys more than 430 studies from 1977 to 2009. He admits that the research is difficult to evaluate based on the large deviation in research techniques and sampling, and he highlights some studies that do not support REBT core principles, yet, he emphasizes, “The number of studies supporting the efficacy and effectiveness of REBT is substantial.” He concludes, “Overall, considerable research supports the basic tenets of REBT and its effectiveness.”

Empirical evidence shows that REBT helps resolve emotional problems, and together with its philosophical and didactic nature makes REBT uniquely qualified to improve the strategic corporal’s decision process. Armed with REBT philosophy, the strategic corporal will be more aware of his emotional state and more in control of his behavior in spite of his emotions. The question now becomes: How should the Marine Corps implement REBT into its training regimen and warrior code?

REBT should only be administered by a qualified therapist. That said, as Albert Ellis notes, individuals can use the essential principles and philosophy of REBT to minimize their debilitating emotions and subsequent behavior without a therapist. This idea of self-help and self-regulation is nothing novel. As alluded to earlier, stoics like Marcus Aurelius and more recent warriors like Admiral James Stockdale disciplined their minds to distinguish what they can control from what they cannot. The lessons from REBT are not much different from stoic philosophy, just improved by modern scientific research. The goal of REBT training is to
empower the Marine to self-correct his or her debilitative emotions. Marine Corps REBT training should, therefore, include at least an introductory course of instruction, career sustainment training, and inculcation into the warrior code.

From a junior Marine’s perspective, “Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy” does not sound like an exciting period of instruction. Possibly a more rousing and virile title may be “Reaction Control.” A Reaction Control course would have four modules: taking ownership of emotions; learning to monitor and recognize emotions; isolating fallacies; and reaction control (see Appendix B). The course of instruction, an introduction of Reaction Control, would be taught at MCT and The Basic School (TBS). It is not essential that recruits or officer candidates learn Reaction Control since they are attending “basic” schools that already screen for insufficient mental or physical attributes to become a Marine. Sustainment or refresher instruction may be given at follow-on MOS schools. But, the best means for continued development of Reaction Control is incorporation of the disputation method (Appendix B, module 4) into existing unit training regimens. Prime examples include the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program (MCMAP) and unit field exercises (annual, sustainment, and predeployment training).

The nature of MCMAP training, hand-to-hand combat, easily stimulates emotions like fear and anger. It is an apposite environment for Reaction Control sustainment training. When MCMAP students show debilitating fear or anger their instructors should immediately challenge the student’s Reaction Control by asking questions: What is the emotion you are feeling right now? Who is responsible for that emotion? Why are you experiencing this emotion? Consider the following hypothetical exchange in which one student becomes enraged and strikes another student:

Instructor: Stop! Listen to me. Why did you lose control?
Student: Corporal Smith pissed me off when he twisted my ankle.
Instructor: No, you chose to get ‘pissed off.’ Who is in control of your emotions?
Student: I am.
Instructor: Do you believe that every Marine you ever spar with will never disrespect you or cause you pain? Does that sound like reality?
Student: No.
Instructor: Remember, Reaction Control! So, what are your fallacies?
Student: Fallacy of causation?
Instructor: Yes, and fallacy of shoulds. Training time-out is over; let’s get back to sparring.

This method of questioning is very similar to REBT clinical practice techniques, but only goes so far as to help the student recognize emotions and identify the thoughts and beliefs that caused the emotions (in rare cases, more extreme or reoccurring emotional behavioral problems may require a qualified REBT therapist). This technique reminds the student that s/he is in control of behavior and emotions, and it quickly helps the individual identify inappropriate thoughts and irrational beliefs. Over time, the Marine will be become more effective and quicker at controlling his or her emotional behavior. Moreover, Marines trained in Reaction Control will learn to monitor and self-correct their own debilitating emotions, much like Admiral James Stockdale did when he was a prisoner of war in Vietnam.27

History shows that the best method for controlling the behavior of warriors is by means of a cultural norm, that is, a warrior's code. An excellent history of warrior codes, their roots of inception and application, and their effectiveness is offered by Shannon French in her book, The Code of the Warrior: Exploring Warrior Values Past and Present. A warrior code establishes limits and defines how a warrior should interact with comrades, civilians, and enemies. As French explains, “The code restrains the warrior. It sets boundaries on his behavior. It distinguishes honorable acts from shameful acts.” Greeks, Romans, Vikings, Native Americans, and the Samurai are all examples of warrior groups restrained by a self-imposed code. It is important to note that such codes are only successful over the long term if those codes originate
from within the group of warriors themselves, not from an external entity such as a fearful population.  

The principles of REBT can be integrated into the Marine Corps warrior code. The Marines’ warrior code is not simply honor, courage, and commitment; neither is it the law of armed conflict or codified leadership traits and principles. A code is eternalized as a personal identity based on attributes “constitutive of good soldiering.” A genuine representation of the Marine Corps code is the saying, “Marines don’t do that.” When a Marine hears that statement, s/he needs no further explanation. Yet, it is difficult to explain the meaning to someone who is not a Marine. A Marine just knows – because s/he has learned from fellow Marines and their shared experiences. Another phrase that is frequent among Marines is “OODA loop.” In contrast to its intended meaning by its creator Colonel John Boyd, saying “OODA loop” reminds Marines to keep their wits about them and to guard against distractions in decision making. In this respect, REBT could easily be included in the code of Marines by simply saying, “Check your reaction control, Marine.”

General Krulak wrote, “Today’s Marines will often operate far ‘from the flagpole’ without the direct supervision of senior leadership. In order to succeed under such demanding conditions they will require unwavering maturity, judgment, and strength of character.” Small unit leadership will continue to be the backstop for all deficiencies of the battlefield. However, sometimes, small unit leaders need assistance from the institution. Intelligent leaders know there will always be a few Marines who will make poor tactical decisions resulting in strategic costs. But, leaders cannot stop trying to find ways to prevent bad decisions and prepare their Marines for tomorrow’s challenges. The goal is a habit of excellence, not an illusion of perfection. The Marine Corps as an institution will undoubtedly continue its quest for operational excellence
across all its forces. Reaction Control, derived from REBT, can be one more pragmatic method for helping the small unit leader and the institution achieve the common goal of tactical and operational excellence. Reaction Control will better prepare the strategic corporal for a challenging Marine Corps career, empowering every Marine to manage emotions and improve his or her decision making process. Maybe someday in the not too distant future, it will be common for a confident Marine corporal to challenge his tearful fellow Marine, “Who is the master of your fate, who is the captain of your soul?”31
### Summary of irrational beliefs, fallacies, that lead to unhealthy emotions

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<tr>
<th>Fallacy</th>
<th>Belief</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tr>
<td>Fallacy of Approval</td>
<td>Belief that it is vital to get the approval of virtually every person</td>
<td>feeling nervous because people you really don't like seem to disapprove of you</td>
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<td><em>Example</em></td>
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<td>Fallacy of Catastrophic Expectations</td>
<td>Belief if something bad can happen, it will</td>
<td>&quot;If I tell share my idea, they'll probably laugh at me.&quot;</td>
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<td><em>Example</em></td>
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<td>Fallacy of Causation</td>
<td>Belief that emotions are caused by others</td>
<td>&quot;You made me feel horrible&quot;</td>
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<td>Fallacy of Helplessness</td>
<td>Belief that satisfaction in life is determined by forces beyond your control</td>
<td>&quot;I can't get promoted; my boss is always working against me.&quot;</td>
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<td><em>Example</em></td>
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<td>Fallacy of Overgeneralization</td>
<td>Belief based on limited evidence or exaggerated shortcomings</td>
<td>&quot;You never listen to me&quot; or &quot;I'm so stupid. I always forget my keys.&quot;</td>
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<td><em>Example</em></td>
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<td>Fallacy of Perfection</td>
<td>Belief that one should handle every situation with complete confidence and skill</td>
<td>assuming people won't appreciate you if you are imperfect</td>
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<td>Fallacy of Shoulds</td>
<td>Inability to distinguish what <em>is</em> and what <em>should be</em></td>
<td>&quot;There should be no traffic when I am driving.&quot;</td>
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APPENDIX B

Introductory course for Reaction Control

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<tr>
<td>Albert Ellis’ Irrational Thinking:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awfulizes &amp; Exaggerates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demands (shoulds, musts)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damns &amp; Judges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frustration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolerance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MODULE 4: Reaction Control</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The 4 Steps of Reaction Control:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1  Monitor your emotions (E)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2  Identify activating event (A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3  Identify thought(s) linking A to E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4  Dispute irrational thought/belief</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


4 Keith E. Stanovich and Richard West, "Individual Difference in Reasoning: Implications for the Rationality Debate," *Behavioural and Brain Sciences* 23 (2000): 645–726. Dual-process thinking, system 1 and system 2, can be traced back to the theories of William James when he wrote about thinking by association and thinking by reasoning. Though, the terms "system 1" and "system 2" were likely first used by Stanovich and West, and more recently became popular by way of Daniel Kahneman in his book, *Thinking, Fast & Slow*.


6 To be pragmatic, derived from the philosophy of pragmatism, is to interpret each choice by its practical consequences. Pragmatic thought asks: what practical difference results from choice A over choice B? The philosophy of pragmatism is frequently attributed to William James, Charles Peirce, and John Dewey.


12 Ibid., 204.


15 Debbie Ellis and Albert Ellis, *Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy* (Washington, DC: American Psychology Association, 2011), 19-20. In REBT, rational thinking is based on empirical reality; keeps things in perspective; prefers, as opposed to demands, that things be the way we want them to be; non-damning of self, others, and life; and contains high frustration tolerance and creates appropriate and healthy emotions." Irrational thinking "exaggerates, awfullyizes, and catastrophizes; demands (with shoulds, musts, oughts) that things be the way one wants them to be; judges and damns; has low frustration tolerance; and, creates debilitating and unhealthy negative emotions."


20 Ibid., 118.


29 Ibid., 14.


31 Author’s rephrase of quote from Ernest Henley’s poem *Invictus*.


