From theory to practice

How to regulate anxiety in stressful situations

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In order to live a productive, less stressful and healthy life, it is very useful to learn how to regulate own emotions. Since we cannot completely avoid stressors of everyday living, the best thing to do is to try to make them less stressful for us. Seems straightforward, but - how to do it? This question is nothing new, and luckily, there is an answer (many eons old!).

Let's dig deep into the antics philosophy and cite the famous Greek philosopher Epictetus. He wrote: "People are disturbed not by things, but by the views which they take of them." This quote can be found in Epictetus's work, "Enchiridion" (or "Manual"), specifically in Chapter 5. It encapsulates the Stoic belief that our interpretations of events, rather than the events themselves, cause our emotional disturbances.

There are many contemporary therapies that embrace this belief, and good news is—it is proven to be quite effective in fostering resilience and well-being. Taking control over thoughts in the stressful situations changes how people feel and what they do—for the better.

For example, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and rational-emotive behavior therapy (REBT) search for "automatic thoughts" (CBT) or "irrational beliefs" (REBT) that shape our emotional and behavioral response to stressors. According to these therapies (and a bulk of scientific evidence that support them), people's emotional and behavioral reactions in any situation are primarily caused by their cognitions, i.e., the meaning they attribute to an event, or their own behavior, or behavior of others. Therefore, REBT aims to achieve a significant philosophical change in clients, helping them minimize their tendency to disturb themselves and replace irrational thinking with rational thinking (Vukosavljević-Gvozden, 2009).

Let's have a look at one example. One of the most stressful situation for a university student is taking an oral exam, isn't it? Well, you are not alone if you agree. It is one of the most prevalent, too. Can you remember the last time you took oral exam? How did you feel?

If your answer is that you felt anxious, panicked, choking, overwhelmingly nervous ... you described what is known as "performance anxiety" or, more commonly known, stage fright. It is a very prevalent phenomenon characterized by the fear of performing in front of an audience. This anxiety can manifest in various contexts, including public speaking, musical performances, sports competitions, and of course - academic exams.

Stage fright occurs as a combination of several factors: physiological, contextual, and cognitive. Most relevant physiological factor is activation of the body's fight-or-flight response, in the face of a challenge (such as being evaluated during the exam), leading to symptoms such as increased heart rate, sweating, and trembling. Yes, you are right: those are symptoms of stress, which are given to us evolutionary—in order to avoid danger. Situational, or contextual factors could include the importance of the performance itself, lack of preparation or time for learning, resulting in low familiarity with the material, and some previous failures at exams.

But, the most interesting are cognitive factors. Some of them are: concern about being negatively evaluated by others, perfectionism, self-doubt, catastrophizing about possible outcomes of failure, low frustration tolerance, doubt in own accomplishments and concern of being exposed as a fraud despite evident success (commonly known as "imposter syndrome"). All of them are based on the beliefs, or "the views that we take on the situation". Cognitive factors are also the ones that could be successfully modified in order to regulate our emotions.

Since REBT is teaching us that irrational beliefs are the cause of disturbing emotions, and that rational beliefs can take their place, let's have a look at possible irrational, and rational beliefs in the exam situations:

IRRATIONAL

"This is too hard for me!"
"I can't handle this, I'll not stand it!"

RATIONAL

"It is an important exam and it is challenging, but I could show what I know, and that's the only thing I can do right now – to give my best."

IRRATIONAL

"It will be terrible if I get confused!"

RATIONAL

"If I get confused during the oral exam, it's not the end of the world. Other people can get confused, too. I'll try to get back on track using my wit and knowledge".

IRRATIONAL

"If I fail, that will mean that I am stupid and incompetent!"

RATIONAL

"If I fail the exam, well, that will be pity, but this doesn't mean that I'm incompetent. My previous successful exams proved that!"
"My worth does not depend on my success in this performance."

IRRATIONAL

"I will embarrass myself if a make mistake! Everyone (or professor) will despise me!"
"It'll be a disaster!"

RATIONAL

"So what if I make a mistake - to err is human, and I am human. And it's definitely not a disaster".
It would be great if I could do this with as few mistakes as possible, so I will give it my all."

IRRATIONAL

"Stage fright is unacceptable; I must suppress it!"

RATIONAL

"The moderate stage fright I feel could be useful, and I won't try to suppress it, but rather use it, surf on it (metaphor of the wave and the surfer)"

Which side sounds more logical, realistic and useful for handling your exam? Can you switch from those illogical, not very useful irrational thoughts, to rational and more useful thoughts? What can you lose if you try? Only extreme stage fright.

With the rational thinking, your emotions will be moderate excitement or mild anxiety, that could help you in preparing and giving your best at the exam. So, go for it!