REBT Case Study of Hannibal Lecter:
A Case Conceptualization and Treatment Plan

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Abstract

Albert Ellis’ Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy operates on the idea that people’s thoughts, behaviors, and emotions are not separate functions, rather they are integrated. Individuals who suffer from mental health issues think, feel, and act in dysfunctional ways. REBT sees individuals as largely functioning from an overall irrational belief system through which they filter cognitions. Improvement in REBT sees people changing thoughts, behaviors, and activities, while continuing to vigorously dispute irrational beliefs. This paper will examine a fictional client, Hannibal Lecter, and a case conceptualization and treatment plan will be developed based on Ellis’ REBT. Hannibal suffers from post-traumatic stress that led to a series of destructive thoughts and behaviors. Hannibal’s post-traumatic stress led to a detachment from the feelings of others as well as the inability to feel emotions. Being a psychopath, Hannibal’s prognosis is not favorable; however, by treating Hannibal using REBT, the hope is that certain violent behavior incidents can be reduced, thus providing him a certain degree of relief from disturbance and making those who interact with him safer.
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In terms of REBT, Ellis proposed that individuals hold irrational beliefs that lead to such things as anger, anxiety, and depression. Ellis classified these irrational beliefs as falling under three main categories. Irrational beliefs (iB) related to anxiety and depression focused on performing well and being approved of by others. Anger and rage iB’s stemmed from the belief that others must treat them well at all times. Finally, there are the low frustration, anger, and depression iB’s that result from the individual’s belief that conditions must be a certain way (Ellis & Tafrate, 1997). Ellis believed that it was not what one actually experienced that caused unhealthy negative emotions, but what the individual tells him or herself about the experience. The result of this was Ellis’ famous ABC model: Activating event, Belief, Cognition. An individual encounters an activating event (A) which appears to lead to consequence (C). However, what is unattended to is the belief (B) that occurs in between A and C. Consequences are largely the result of attending to A via an irrational B. Ellis did, however, view affects, behaviors, and cognitions as interrelated and interconnected (Ellis & Ellis, 2011).

Presenting Concerns

Hannibal presents with post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of the killing of his family and witnessing his sister being murdered and cannibalized. Hannibal reports having flashbacks of this memory, yet indicates that it creates little anxiety in him. Though Hannibal seems to have loved his sister, Mischa, very much, he remains detached from these feelings due to the anxiety it would cause him were they allowed entering his conscious. The flashbacks are generally of her which led to the conclusion that Hannibal did, in fact, experience love for his sister at one time. Hannibal does not speak much of his parents apart from the fact that his
upbringing was quite normal; smugly remarking that he “had resolved every stage quite adequately”. His family lived on a very nice estate with his father holding the title of “Count” which seemed to elicit some pride in Hannibal (Gregory, 2002).

During the interview we discussed his crimes and Hannibal was amused at being labeled a psychopath. He appeared to take a certain pride in the moniker and indicated that, while he was considered a psychopath, he at least carried out his deeds with a certain refinement and elegance. Hannibal experienced no remorse for the killings, and opined that the killing of one of his victims improved the sound of the Baltimore Symphony (Gregory, 2002). Hannibal also showed no emotion when discussing the cannibalization of his victims.

**Case Conceptualization**

As was mentioned previously, the core of REBT is the ABC model with the addition of D and E. ‘A’ is the activating event which can be a thought, feeling, emotion, or event. ‘B’ is the beliefs that one holds about the activating event. Beliefs can fall under two categories: rational or irrational. Rational beliefs tend to be expressed as preferences or wishes (“I would prefer to have Dr. Gorbett as a Professor”) whereas irrational beliefs are generally expressed as absolutistic musts or demands (“I have to/must/demand to have Dr. Gorbett for the 510 class”). ‘C’ stands for consequences. The consequences are the result of either rational or irrational beliefs that one filters ‘A’ through. Irrational beliefs will lead to unhealthy negative emotions (anger, depression, rage), and rational beliefs will lead to healthy negative emotions (disappointment, regret, frustration) (Ellis & Ellis, 2011).

In order to produce change in an individual, REBT seeks to teach the client to dispute (D) irrational beliefs that will then lead to new effective philosophies (E). There are three main forms of disputation: realistic, logical, and pragmatic (Ellis & Ellis, 2011). Realistic disputation
involves challenging iB’s by determining whether or not they are, in fact, true and consistent with reality. Second, logical disputation involves investigating the logical foundations of irrational beliefs. This would consist of determining if one’s beliefs follow necessarily from their premises, or whether or not their premises are valid. Lastly, pragmatic disputation involves examining the result of one’s iB’s. Individuals are asked to examine what the consequences are or would be if they persist in holding iB’s. Successful disputation of iB’s is expected to lead to an individual forming effective new philosophies which are “healthy, functional, and realistic positions from which to perceive oneself, others, and one’s world” (Ellis & Ellis, 2011, p. 25).

The ideas of Unconditional Self-Acceptance, Unconditional Other-Acceptance, and Unconditional Life-Acceptance are also important in REBT. Unconditional self-acceptance is just that, accepting one’s self unconditionally. The individual does not damn the self or their being for the mistakes they have made. Despite mistakes the individuals retains the possibility for positive growth (Ellis & Ellis, 2011). Unconditional other-acceptance entails refusing to damn others for their mistakes. Another’s mistakes do not necessarily define who they are as person, and though one may dislike or disagree with another, a person should “strive to feel compassion for wrongdoers” (Ellis & Ellis, 2011, p. 23). Finally, there is Unconditional life-acceptance. While one may see unjust, hurtful, or evil acts, it is not logical to conclude that life is necessarily that way. A person should be optimistic about the possibility for improvement and change (Ellis & Ellis, 2011).

Hannibal’s parents suffered a violent death followed by Hannibal witnessing the cannibalization of his sister. Hannibal’s first loss was that of his parents at age 5. Following the death of his parents, Hannibal reported being captured by army deserters where he and his sister were held as food for the soldiers. While Hannibal was not found to be a suitable meal, his sister...
was which led to Hannibal witnessing his sister being murdered and cannibalized (Gregory, 2002). The result of these events was the development of post-traumatic stress disorder in Hannibal. One of the major characterizations of PTSD is the re-experiencing of the trauma through flashbacks, as Hannibal reported. The result of these constant flashbacks led Hannibal to develop “emotional blunting”, “feelings of detachment or estrangement from others”, and “a decreased ability to feel emotions” which are all avoidance symptoms (Otto, Pollack, Jenike, & Rosenbaum, 1999, p. 228). Having never been treated for PTSD, Hannibal’s symptoms remained and persisted throughout his life. The traumatic stress that Hannibal experienced along with his failure to grieve properly led to his irrational beliefs about himself, others, and life. For most individuals, the reactions to grief are immediately intense, but will decrease with time (Malkinson, 2010). According to Malkinson (2010), “the individual grief process often includes grief for the individual lost as well as a process of searching and constructing meaning to life without the deceased” (p. 290).

Unfortunately, Hannibal’s method for coping with the post-traumatic stress and fear were to use cognitive strategies designed to change the fear into anger. According to Vien and Beech (2006), psychopaths see fear and anxiety as a sign of “weakness and vulnerability in their character” (p.163). As the psychopath converts the fear and anxiety into anger, violent behavior obtains. The result is that Hannibal’s psychopathy became an “evolved life strategy” (Vien & Beech, 2006, p. 163). Hannibal’s irrational belief system makes him unable to unconditionally accept himself, others, or what has happened in his life, and the constant reminders through his flashbacks reinforce this irrational thinking. As Ellis and McLaren (2005) note, “In PTSD, the intensity, unexpectedness, and strangeness of traumas vastly shock people and lead to thoughts
of severe rage, guilt, and self-deprecation” (p. 30) Thus, Hannibal’s response to this stimulus is the continuing behavior of murder and cannibalization (Vien & Beech, 2006).

**Treatment Plan**

**Goals for Counseling**

The goals of REBT are to “eliminate irrational thinking and thereby the associated dysfunctional emotions and behaviors” and to “teach the client REBT philosophy” (Murdock, 2009, p. 291). The beliefs of the individual are the main target of REBT therapy as it is the beliefs about the events of one’s life that largely determine how one thinks. The individual is believed through the techniques of REBT to be able to change the way one thinks, however, little control can sometimes be exerted over the activating events of life (Murdock, 2009). Moreover, REBT seeks to increase the individual’s frustration tolerance, teach unconditional self and other acceptance, and change destructive philosophies. In order to accomplish these goals, the individual must accomplish three things. First, one must take responsibility for their own irrational thinking, feeling, and acting by not blaming others or the environment. Next, the client must be able to see how the way they think is causing them to feel disturbed. Lastly, the client will need to continue to vigorously persist in changing their “neurotic cognitions, emotions, and performances” (Murdock, 2009, p. 291). These will be the goals for Hannibal, but, considering the psychopathy, if his therapy can simply reduce future harm to individuals it will be considered a success.

**Interventions**

**Disputing.** Due to Hannibal’s intelligence, it would be wise to engage in disputing the irrational beliefs he holds about himself, others, and the world. Logical disputation is one of the most common methods of REBT (Corey, 1996). For Hannibal, it would be logical to begin by
disputing the logic that he cannot really stand what happened to him. Though he experienced a traumatic event, he was still able to become a successful psychiatrist. It’s not that he cannot stand it, rather he uses irrational beliefs in order hide his true feelings. Other pertinent questions for Hannibal would be, “Does it follow logically that I will be perceived as weak and vulnerable if I feel fear and anxiety?” Pragmatically, Hannibal will be challenged to examine how these irrational beliefs have helped or hurt him throughout his life, and possibly what his life could have been like had he engaged in more rational thinking. Because Hannibal was a successful psychiatrist and was able to assist the FBI at one time, Hannibal could still have a limited future doing what he loves. This disputation should produce an increased level of unconditional self-acceptance as Hannibal can see that although what he did was evil that it does not logically follow that he himself is evil. With treatment, he can begin the process of healing and use the remainder of his life to stop future crimes.

**In Vivo Desensitization.** This technique requires having the client re-experience the situation. For Hannibal, however, his constant recurrent flashbacks are a constant source of pain that has largely led to where he is now. It is believed that if Hannibal can experience this pain under the care of a trained psychotherapist that he may be able to successfully and rationally process the emotions. Ellis and Ellis (2001) suggest for individuals experiencing social anxiety that they begin by attending a small party and talk with a few people, and then progress by becoming more intimately acquainted with some people. At each phase the person goes one step further. In order to treat Hannibal, it will be necessary to travel to the place where he experienced the trauma. The hypothesis is that by Hannibal returning to the source of his trauma with a trained psychotherapist, along with a Navy Seal team, that Hannibal will get a “do over”.
By successfully processing these emotions, Hannibal will then be able to properly experience the emotions leading to an increased ability to accept his life circumstances.

**Cognitive Homework.** According to Murdock (2009), homework is often given to clients in REBT. One task that could be assigned to Hannibal is that of bibliotherapy. It is well known that Hannibal is a voracious reader, and being limited in what homework he is able to do in a cell, this appears to be the most appropriate task. The therapist will arrange for the facility to provide Hannibal with a complete set of Albert Ellis’ works. Each week he will read one of Ellis’ books and during therapy will discuss what he found helpful and how he could apply those lessons to his own thinking. As some of Ellis’ works are written at a more popular level, Lecter will also be provided with issues of the *Journal of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy* so that he can interact with this theory on a scholarly level. Bibliotherapy will be a necessary part of therapy in order to reinforce the principles and techniques that will be used to challenge Hannibal’s irrational beliefs (Ellis & McLaren, 2005).

**Spiritual Application**

As a Christian counselor, a spiritual approach is of utmost importance to Hannibal’s treatment. The necessity of the Holy Spirit being present in the therapeutic process was very important. The evil within Hannibal necessitates His presence both for Hannibal’s sake as well as that of the therapist. He was interested to see how a Christian psychologist could explain why such evil could have happened to him if he was one of “God’s children”, as he stated. Hannibal was open to the idea of reading Christian works as part of therapy. The problem arises in the compatibility of REBT with a Christian worldview. As with many forms of psychotherapy, REBT developed from a secular humanist worldview. From Ellis’ atheistic presuppositions it follows that REBT is largely materialistic, relativistic, and reductionist thus coming into conflict
with Christian presuppositions (Jones & Butman, 2011). Another problem with REBT is the minimization of personal sin. In fact, Ellis went so far as to assert that the concept of sin is at the core of psychopathology. Ellis felt that absolutistic religious belief was contrary to mental health (Jones & Butman, 2011). One final critique of REBT from a Christian perspective is the assumption that truth is determined via humans rather than directly revealed by God (Jones & Butman, 2011). In terms of Ellis, it appears that he thought himself capable of determining the rationality or irrationality of individuals’ thoughts (Jones & Butman, 2011).

Despite the criticisms of REBT, there are areas where Christianity and REBT meet. Throughout both the Old and New Testaments one sees how beliefs are used in seeing and acting differently in the world, and the New Testament even seems “to emphasize the importance of belief over action” (Johnson, 2006, p. 48). 2 Corinthians 5:16-17 is one example where Paul instructs that individuals are new creations in Christ, no longer viewing others from a human point of view. In other words, their beliefs had been changed resulting in different actions. Another passage would be that of Ephesians 4 where one reads how while people were formerly corrupted in their sin nature, they are made new in the attitudes of their minds (Johnson, 2006). A second area where we find agreement is in the area of self and other acceptance. Scripture teaches that people are created in the image of God as well as the universal nature of sin. Because the image of God is good, each person thus has some good that resides within them though they may deny the Creator. It is consistent with REBT then to not evaluate either one’s self or others based on either actions or behaviors. Johnson (2006) writes, “Human sin is real, but we can never reduce a person to their sin” (p. 52). Another key area of agreement is noted by Jones and Butman (2011), they write, “most cognitive therapies avoid the radical suggestion of autonomous freedom embraced by the humanistic psychologies, and they stop short of the
suffocating determinism of classical psychoanalysis and behavior modification” (p. 232). Thus, this view lends itself well to a Reformed understanding of the relationship between God’s sovereignty and human will as well as an understanding of God ordaining all events, yet working through secondary causes.

My approach would be to attempt to logically dispute Hannibal’s belief that, essentially, the evil he experienced disproves the existence of God. This is an argument that has been used by philosophers throughout the centuries, and many Christian philosophers have offered successful rebuttals to this. Hannibal would need to understand that, unless he is omnipotent, he cannot assert that what happened to him was gratuitous evil. God may have used that to bring about a greater good, such as he did with Joseph and his brothers. The Holy Spirit is able to use any situation, even an apologetic encounter, to change a sinner’s heart of stone into a heart of flesh. Along with Hannibal’s bibliotherapy, I would challenge him to read through Scripture as well as one systematic theology text and apologetics book of my choosing. These topics could then be discussed, and perhaps Hannibal could come to a greater understanding of God.

Conclusion

Though REBT is an effective cognitive-behavioral therapy, Hannibal is not expected to respond to treatment well. His psychopathy and post-traumatic stress are well ingrained and severe, however, reduction of some of his disturbance will provide relief for him and increased safety for others. At the very least, one could hope that Hannibal will gain a larger degree of insight into some of the basic thoughts that keep him disturbed (Corey, 1996). Using REBT, it is possible that Hannibal can both achieve some degree of lasting change, as well as, learning how to uncreate the emotional disturbances that have brought him to where he is now (Ellis & Ellis, 2011). Should the use of REBT result in reduced harm to those around him, therapy can be
considered a success. While REBT is generally designed to be brief, it is understood that
Hannibal’s case will require months if not years of continued therapy depending on levels of
resistance. Consistent with the values of REBT, though Hannibal committed very evil acts, one
must not view him as inherently evil and persist in providing him with the best treatment
possible in order that he experience some degree of relief from his symptoms.
References


