

DEMANDMENTS

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology, specifically Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT)

1. Core Definition

The concept of **Demandments** (often referred to as "musts" or "absolutistic demands" in clinical literature) represents a set of rigid, self-constructed imperatives that an individual imposes upon themselves, others, or the general conditions of life. These cognitive structures are inherently self-defeating and pathological because they convert reasonable goals, wishes, or preferences into inflexible, unconditional necessities. In essence, a demandment operates on the principle that specific outcomes or behaviors *must* occur, and failure to meet this absolute requirement is interpreted as catastrophic or damning. This rigid cognitive style stands in direct opposition to rational beliefs, which are flexible, non-absolute, and probabilistic.

Within the psychological framework, particularly Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) developed by Albert Ellis, demandments are considered the root cause of most unhealthy negative emotions, such as severe anxiety, debilitating depression, or chronic rage. Ellis argued that emotional disturbance is not primarily caused by external events, but by the individual's irrational beliefs (B) about those events (A). Demandments constitute the central feature of these irrational beliefs. They transform the healthy disappointment that follows the violation of a preference (e.g., "I wish I had succeeded, and I feel sad") into an unhealthy, extreme emotional consequence resulting from the violation of a demand (e.g., "I must succeed, and since I failed, I am worthless and the situation is unbearable").

Clinical definitions often highlight the functional aspect of demandments: they are statements where the individual uses the demand as an excuse for dysfunctional behavior or emotional avoidance. For example, if an individual holds the demandment, "People must always appreciate my efforts," and encounters criticism, they might use this violated demand to justify intense, destructive rage or complete social withdrawal, rather than engaging in rational problem-solving. This cognitive rigidity prevents the adoption of flexible, adaptive strategies necessary for navigating life's inherent frustrations and uncertainties, ensuring that the person remains chronically vulnerable to emotional distress.

2. Theoretical Context: Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT)

Demandments form the cornerstone of the REBT model, serving as the primary explanatory mechanism for neurotic disturbance. REBT posits a fundamental distinction between rational beliefs and irrational beliefs. Rational beliefs are probabilistic, logical, and help individuals achieve their goals, leading to healthy negative emotions (e.g., concern, regret, high frustration tolerance).

Irrational beliefs, synonymous with demandments, are absolute, illogical, often contradictory to reality, and sabotage long-term happiness, leading to unhealthy negative emotions (e.g., panic, shame, low frustration tolerance).

The therapeutic application of the REBT model relies on identifying these demandments using the A-B-C framework (Activating event, Belief, Consequence). Once identified, the therapist engages in vigorous Disputing (D) of the demandment, challenging its logical consistency, empirical verification, and pragmatic utility. The goal is to help the client replace the "B" (irrational demandment) with an "E" (Effective New Philosophy) based on flexible, preferential thinking. By relinquishing the need for absolute conditions, the client can achieve emotional control and functional behavior, even when facing significant adversity.

Albert Ellis systematized demandments into three core categories, often referred to as the three fundamental musts, arguing that all specific psychological problems stem from these global demands when they are frustrated:

The demand for self-acceptance: "I **must** perform well and win the approval of significant others." Failure to meet this leads to severe anxiety and depression.

The demand for fair treatment: "Other people **must** treat me fairly, kindly, and exactly as I want them to." Frustration of this demand results in chronic anger, hostility, and relationship problems.

The demand for easy conditions: "The world and my life conditions **must** be comfortable, predictable, and immediately gratifying." When the environment violates this, the result is Low Frustration Tolerance (LFT) and self-pity.

3. The Cognitive Shift from Preference to Imperative

The detrimental power of the demandment lies in its ability to transform a natural, adaptive preference (a desire) into an imperative (a non-negotiable command). This cognitive distortion is highly problematic because while preferences motivate action and allow for graceful adjustment upon disappointment, imperatives trigger a cascade of dysfunctional secondary beliefs that amplify distress exponentially. The subtle linguistic shift from "I would like to succeed" to "I must succeed" introduces an element of existential threat to the self should success not materialize.

This shift is typically reinforced by four interconnected, irrational cognitive derivatives, which REBT views as the behavioral and emotional consequences of the core demandment:

Awfulizing/Catastrophizing: The belief that the non-occurrence of the demanded event is 100% terrible or the worst thing imaginable, often expressed as, "I failed, and that is awful!"

Low Frustration Tolerance (LFT): The conviction that one cannot bear or endure the uncomfortable feelings or circumstances resulting from the frustrated demand, asserting, "I can't

stand this disappointment!"

Global Condemnation/Damnation: The tendency to globally label and judge the inherent worth of the self or others based on the violation of the demandment (e.g., "Because I failed the test, I am a total failure/worthless person").

Demand for Certainty: The insistence that life must provide guarantees and predictability, contradicting the probabilistic nature of reality.

The maintenance of demandments is paradoxical; although they appear to be high standards designed to maximize achievement, they often guarantee underperformance. The intense performance anxiety generated by the belief that one's fundamental worth hinges on absolute success frequently leads to cognitive paralysis, avoidance, and self-sabotaging behaviors. The rigidity intrinsic to the demandment restricts the individual's ability to adapt to changing circumstances or learn constructively from mistakes, perpetuating a cycle of fear, failure, and self-recrimination.

4. Key Characteristics and Psychological Impact

Demandments are characterized by their rigid, unrealistic nature and their destructive impact on emotional regulation. Their central feature is their absolutism; they operate outside the bounds of empirical reality, where outcomes are generally distributed along a continuum rather than being confined to all-or-nothing extremes. This absolute nature dictates that even minor deviations from the demanded outcome are treated as catastrophic failures.

The psychological impact of demandments is profound, primarily because they link extrinsic, variable factors (performance, approval, comfort) directly to intrinsic, non-variable self-worth. By making self-acceptance conditional upon absolute achievement or external validation, the individual creates a fragile psychological state. Any challenge to the demandment--whether it be criticism, failure, or inconvenience--is interpreted not merely as a setback, but as an indictment of the person's fundamental value. This conditional self-acceptance is directly responsible for intense feelings of shame, deep-seated inadequacy, and vulnerability to narcissistic injuries.

Furthermore, demandments significantly hinder resilience. Since the belief insists that discomfort cannot be borne (LFT), the individual develops poor coping mechanisms when faced with frustration. Instead of engaging in persistent, effortful behavior, they resort to immediate emotional release or avoidance. This response prevents them from developing competence in handling adversity, reinforcing the core belief that life must be easy and that they are incapable of tolerating hardship. The maladaptive function of the demandment is therefore to maintain emotional distress by guaranteeing that the individual interprets normal life adversity as an intolerable catastrophe.

5. Therapeutic Disputation and Rational Alternatives

Therapeutic intervention in REBT is dedicated to the systematic identification and challenging of demandments, ultimately aiming for their replacement with three core rational philosophies: Unconditional Self-Acceptance (USA), Unconditional Other-Acceptance (UOA), and Unconditional Life-Acceptance (ULA).

The process of disputation typically involves the following steps:

Identification: Pinpointing the exact "must" or "should" statement underlying the disturbance (e.g., "I must be loved by everyone important to me").

Logical Challenge: Asking questions such as, "Is it logically consistent to believe that your preference for being loved means you absolutely *have* to be loved?" and demonstrating that no logical necessity exists.

Empirical Challenge: Asking for evidence to support the demandment (e.g., "Where is the proof in the universe that you are a worthless person just because one person disapproves of you?").

Pragmatic Challenge: Highlighting the negative emotional and behavioral outcomes of holding the demandment (e.g., "Does this belief help you achieve your goals, or does it lead to paralysis and resentment?").

The rational replacement for a demandment is always a flexible preference. For instance, the demandment, "The world must be fair," is replaced by the rational belief, "I highly prefer the world to be fair, but when it is not, it is merely inconvenient or frustrating, and I can still cope with it." This shift from necessity to preference mitigates the emotional intensity of setbacks, allowing the client to experience healthy negative emotions (e.g., sadness, high concern) that motivate constructive action, rather than debilitating emotional paralysis (e.g., depression, panic). By consistently applying these rational alternatives, clients build greater psychological resilience and emotional stability, fostering a realistic and acceptance-based view of themselves and their environment.

6. Further Reading

[Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy \(REBT\) \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Albert Ellis Institute \(Official Website\)](#)

[Psychology Tools: REBT and the Four Main Irrational Beliefs](#)