

The background of the entire image is a dense field of small, oval-shaped jelly beans. Most are a bright, vibrant yellow, but one single red jelly bean stands out prominently in the lower-left quadrant. The lighting is soft, creating gentle highlights and shadows on the smooth surfaces of the beans.

# Go Suck a Lemon

Strategies for Improving  
Your Emotional Intelligence

Michael Cornwall PsyD PhD

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# Go Suck a Lemon: Strategies for Improving Your Emotional Intelligence

Michael Cornwall PsyD, PhD

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## Personal Reflection Statement

MY PRIMARY OBLIGATION IS TO RESPECT THE INTEGRITY and promote the welfare of all individuals, families and groups. When discussing particular individuals and my experiences with them, I must take precautions to protect them from any harm resulting from that discussion. Unless agreed upon by a party, I have taken every precaution to disguise the identity of the individuals discussed in this manuscript. Any data derived from a client relationship and used in this manuscript has been disguised so that that the informed client's identity is fully protected. Any data which could not or was not disguised was authorized by the individual's informed and un-coerced consent.

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## Dedication

ALBERT “AL” ELLIS (SEPTEMBER 27, 1913 – JULY 24, 2007) was an American psychologist who in 1955 developed rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT). He held M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in clinical psychology from Columbia University and was a member of the American Board of Professional Psychology (ABPP). He founded and was the president emeritus of the New York City–based Albert Ellis Institute. He is generally considered to be the originator of the cognitive revolutionary paradigm shift in psychotherapy and the founder of cognitive–behavioral therapies. Based on a 1982 professional survey of U.S. and Canadian psychologists, he was considered the second most influential psychotherapist in history. (Carl Rogers ranked first in the survey; Sigmund Freud was ranked third.) Prior to his death, *Psychology Today* described Albert Ellis as the greatest living psychologist.



# Foreword

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MANY OF THE EMOTIONAL RESPONSES to the issues you face in your life, regardless of how much strength you've given them through experience, can be brought down, deconstructed and reshaped. You will just have to learn how to give your knee-jerk response to emotional stimuli less strength – LESS OF A JERK. To do that you will have to commit to reinventing the way you think and behave. You will approach that task by accepting and then adapting to a no-nonsense style of emotional problem solving. You will learn and use a process of level-headed decision-making. You will try to become more efficient, flexible and open-minded when addressing your emotional problems. You will know that there is always another emotional option. You will make fact-based observations, something most of us are unfamiliar with doing; and, you will incorporate in vivo (in life) exposure, i.e., homework, to encourage you to independently act against your learned thoughts and behaviors.

In the end, you will become more informed, increasingly more capable and far more emotionally self-reliant. Instead of being your own worst enemy, you will become your own best friend, your own therapist.

We may be strengthened when we learn to be emotionally self-reliant, to free ourselves from emotional helplessness and our dependence on others for our emotional solutions.

It will take the force of will to do that.

\* \* \* \*

Since writing *Go Suck a Lemon* and publishing it in 2010, I have lived and learned and kept notes. That in mind, I decided to edit the Lemon to include a number of observations I believe will help my readers better grasp the emotional intelligence (EI) concepts I write about.

I am aware that this book is used in classrooms and I hope this new version will be more useful for your purposes. I want to thank everyone who has supported the Lemon over the years, particularly my friends in Wisconsin who have been sucking lemons since it was first published. Your support and encouragement have meant a great deal to me. I also want to thank my critics for, without your criticism, this second edition would not have been necessary.





# Introduction

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THERE IS NO ESCAPING emotional hardship. If you're lucky, emotion, in all of its glory, will always be a part of your life. Emotion is what makes us human, gives us drive to succeed, pause for thought, connects us to one another. Art, music and murder depend on it.

No book, technique or person who claims to offer safety from emotional hardship will ever fulfill that promise. You will always have ups and downs, good times and bad. Each time you experience some level of adversity, however, you can view it as a disaster, an impediment or an opportunity.

Mental health is not achieved by seeking perfect emotional balance. Instead, we may seek to adapt to emotional imbalance. We may start by defining happiness as a combination of failures and successes, joys and sorrows. Expect that things will sometimes not go your way and know in advance that you can and will stand it.

Your definition of happiness is entirely up to you.

It has always been up to you.

Much of how you respond to life is very much potentially under your control. If you don't approach each day with that confidence, your emotional life may be quite impulsive, externally influenced, a powerless journey that relies on how you are treated, always vulnerable to what happens to you. But if you know where your emotions live, and you learn how to take charge of them, to make them work for you instead of against you, you could knock on the door of your emotional mind and have a chat. The first thing you might say is, "We've not formally met, but I'm about to take control."

The experience of emotional hardship is not a time for being impulsive, relying on taking direction from others or simply doing what you've always done. It is a time for thinking clearly and planning. That is only possible if you know how your emotions are brought to life and how well you have gotten to know and understand them.

Time is an astonishing treatment for emotional difficulties.

Do you remember your first love?

In high school, perhaps?

If you're like most of us, it was a whirlwind, 3.5-day romance, filled with your commitment to one another, together, FOREVER! You imagined the two of you struggling to make ends meet, possibly in a run-down flat in some glamorous city. You'd be poor, but you'd be happy! After all, you had your love! No matter what happened, you knew your love would be the only food and water you would ever need, cemented together for life, nourished by your mutual embrace.

And then KAPOW!

The note, passed clandestinely in the hallway, from one friend to another, between classes.

No eye contact.

Finis!

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Just like that, down the toilet.

Your life was over!

The phenomenon of losing the person of your dreams, you believed, was an insurmountable problem unique only to you and possibly sulky, gloomy poets. You hung a new poster over your bed that read: The hunger for love is much more difficult to remove than the hunger for bread.

And you cried.

Then one day you found yourself free of the burden of pining away your life in your room with your new puppy, and you wondered instead what all the fuss was about. That question became even more perplexing when you showed up at your ten-year high school reunion and saw the object of your love balancing a plate of pasta salad on his belly.

Time is never wasted on emotional problems. Time, it seems, helps us prepare for the next time shit happens. For, while you were suffering through the loss of your first love, you were influencing, building and fine-tuning your emotional vocabulary, having an inner dialogue that was designed to help you cope with future episodes of rejection. You see, time doesn't usually erase these connections to your past. Time actually strengthens. Your thoughts become a blueprint of sorts, charting the course for how you will behave in similar situations later in life. The inner dialogue you may have had after losing your first love might resemble text messaging with yourself:

He broke up with me.

I can't stand it.

It's horrible.

I don't know what to do!

I must be too ugly.

I should get my hair cut.

My acne was out of control.

I need to lose 20 pounds.

Then I will be perfect.

He will wish he didn't break up with me.

I'm going to ask Mom if I can have implants!

I will need 'em if I want to make him feel like shit.

That is totally a plan!

Depending on what you attributed the rejection to, you developed an emotional text, a self-talk dialogue representing what you will do next time someone rejects you. And you cemented it in your mind through repetitious thought. Your self-talk became very logical to you, because you told

yourself the same thing so many times it just took on a dimension of logic through reiteration and echo. In the above case, the person associated appearance with being rejected.

Just like text messaging, there will always be a trace of the text left somewhere on your internal hard drive. For example, the person in the above dialogue may, when establishing future intimate relationships, attempt to portray a perfect appearance, using old texts to navigate present challenges and overcome immediate difficulties. *If I look perfect, I cannot be rejected. If I am rejected I must not have been perfect enough.* Although some self-talk is not likely to result in achieving the intended goal or overcoming the adversity, it is, after all, the only text available at the moment to meet the challenge.

Not even shredding will destroy whole text beyond all recovery. Likewise, improving your EI will not eliminate any of the emotional texts you now use to address the particular issues you face in your life. You will have to review what you now have stored and make rational judgments about its value to solving your present emotional difficulties.

You will have to learn to think twice.

Your original texts may always be there. They don't, however, have to be the text you continue to use to guide your emotional responses. You can always rethink your emotional texting and you can add new text.

As a lecturer, I regularly tell my audience, to their surprise and amusement, that mental health treatment is best applied to those who are not particularly in need of it. The best place for happy, content people is in therapy! The therapy couch is NOT a place set aside exclusively for the anxious, depressed or angry!

Are you happy?

Make an appointment with a therapist.

Think about it.

Have you ever tried to teach new skills to someone who is in an emotional crisis? Playing old texts over and over? Using the same self-talk? Playing the same tapes? It's like when a computer gets a virus and the screen starts rolling thousands of messages across your monitor and you can't shut them off. Do disturbed people listen to reason? Do angry people want to actually solve problems? What, pray tell, could anyone have ever said to help you adjust to losing your first love? And we wonder why medication is our first option when seeing people in therapy. We must prepare for emotional hardship if we are going to confidently and successfully meet the challenge.

I am a firm believer in strengthening one's coping skills before those skills are actually needed. The worst time to prepare for a computer virus is when the computer is infected.

As a culture, we don't adequately prepare our young ones for misfortune and hardship. In fact we do what we can to shield our children from the unfortunate side of life; making reality even more of a shocker later on.

Emotional adversity will likely to be part of your life until the end of your days. There is no way to escape unhappiness, in all of its emotional forms. We will be better served by preparing for it by building coping skills that will be available when life isn't going as well as we had planned.

STOP! avoiding and reacting to adversity.

PREPARE! for it.

I will be most happy when, somewhere on this planet, a therapist has the following dialogue with a client, "What brings you in today?"

"Well, doc, I am as happy as a clam."

"OK, so you've never been happier?"

"You bet'cha!"

"Great! Let's begin."

"I'm ready!"

The best way out is always through. Improvement in your EI may provide you with the tools you will need to navigate that path.

It will, however, take the force of will to do that.





# Chapter One

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## Something Truer

I RECEIVED MY UNDERGRADUATE education in English. I fancied myself a fiction writer. Soon after graduation I realized that I had taken a degree in nothing more than a dream; so, to get better in touch with my dreams, I logically pursued my graduate education in psychology. Where else are dreams more examined than by a psychologist in active practice? Given that a majority of psychological theory is a product of fiction and dreams, I rarely run out of things to write about.

I studied counseling theory, particularly the interpretation of dreams and any hidden motivations I may have had for wanting to be a writer. I discovered that I didn't have any hidden motivations. Sometimes it simply is what it is and there is nothing more to it. I did, in the process, discover a theory of helping that I liked more than any other of the more than 700 + established theories of psychotherapy. Rational emotive behavior theory (REBT) provided me with the most personal value. REBT helped me understand myself. To that end, I attended a conference in Chicago, my last year of graduate school, organized to train new practitioners in the effective and professional use of REBT. While I waited for everyone to be seated, and the conference to get started, I remember hearing a commotion in the back of the room.

“It's him.”

“It's Al.”

“Look, it's him!”

“That isn't him.”

“Yes it is!”

I turned to see a small, very thin and frail man heading up the aisle, carrying a can of juice and a cookie wrapped in cellophane. He didn't really say nor do anything unusual, but everything about him provoked an emotional reaction in me. Grumpiness wafted after him like dust. He grinned but his grin was somewhat sinister, boyish. His long nose and horn rimmed glasses made him look unapproachable, yet he shook hands with those who reached out to welcome him, showing a certain measure of enthusiasm and caring. The man could have passed for a janitor, the guy who adjusts the audio-visual equipment or the president of some small, impoverished eastern European nation. He was no one and everyone, all at the same time. His clothing was disheveled, pants pulled up well past his hips, close to the collar of his shirt, and he was hunched over, as if carrying a huge bundle of kindling in a bunch on his back. He ascended the single step to the stage, carefully shuffled across to his seat and sat down in front of the assembled audience. He paused for a moment, squinting through his glasses at everyone in attendance, as if looking painfully into the sun. He tapped the microphone, pushed his glasses up closer to his eyes, leaned to one side and farted!



“How dreadful!”

“Is this a serious person?”

“What kind of crackpot is this?”

He continued squinting over his glasses, while inspecting the microphone and looking out over the crowd gathered in his honor. In his nasally New York accent, he grouched, If I have a seizure, someone come up here and feed me this juice and tapped the tin can with his yellowing fingernail.

It was 1992.

His name was Albert Ellis.

\* \* \* \*

Dr. Ellis (who liked to be called Al) was fond of quoting Epictetus by saying as repeatedly, reminding his listeners that *People are disturbed NOT by things but by their VIEW of things*. He is also remembered for his overuse of the word *fuck*. He used it in diverse and mixed company as a noun, an adjective, a verb and an adverb.

According to Al, people possess a fucking innate human potential for deciding their fucking emotions. He stressed that this innate human potential was a product of humankind’s ability to think about h/er own thinking. This innate ability, however, is frequently left undeveloped in most people. Instead, we believe our emotions are fixed and the product of how events unfold or how we are treated by other people, making emotion something outside our control. Instead of taking responsibility for our own emotions, we want to whine and complain about how other people have to change for us to be content in our own lives. Al grumped and grouched, “People don’t just get upset. They contribute to their own fucking upset–ness. They always have the power to think, and to think about their thinking, and to think about thinking about their thinking, which the goddamn dolphin, as far as we know, can’t do. Therefore they have much greater ability to change themselves than any other animal has, and I hope that REBT teaches them how to do that.”

He made exaggerated squeaky and whiney sounds to emphasize his points. “There are three basic musts that hold us back,” he said, “I must do well; you must treat me well and the world must be easy. We’d better work hard on getting rid of those ideas. We’d better do something about that,” he said.

It was an idea worth pursuing, I thought.

\* \* \* \*

Over the course of that weekend in Chicago, Al shared his bodily gases and unapologetically used cuss words to describe everything from his childhood, his inability early in life to get a date and his lifetime of precarious physical health. Later, as a newly–minted therapist in eastern Kentucky, I decided that, in order to practice Al’s REBT more authentically, I would have to say fuck as regularly as he did. No experience left more of an impression on me than when a man and his wife came for marriage counseling.

The man was well over six feet tall, died black hair, three piece suit, gold crucifix hanging from a chain over his polyester, blue tie. He clutched a well-worn Bible under his arm. His wife was quite plain, diminutive. Her hair was piled at least a foot in the air, making her seem a bit taller. She stood close to her husband's shoulder, as if relying on its firmness to maintain her balance. There was no sign that there was anything askew in their relationship. They seemed like a particularly well-matched couple.

The man spoke first.

Apparently he was concerned that men were looking longingly at his wife while she shopped at the grocery store. "It makes me angry," he said, looking at his knees. He hinted that the only solution to his problem was divorce.

It was tough for me to generate discussion with this man and his wife. If I asked a question, they looked at each other, shrugged, and then back at their laps.

No answer.

I thought, considering their obvious religious convictions and their apparent affinity for one another, the man had some very strong beliefs about how women should behave in the presence of their husbands' (and vice versa) beliefs that were so strongly held these same beliefs would lead the man to conclude that divorce was his only option. I talked about thinking and how thinking contributed to how we express emotions. I talked about getting in touch with thoughts and how doing that would reveal the information we would need to address the problems they faced. *What were you saying to yourself when you noticed men looking at your wife in the grocery store? What was your self-talk?* I talked about how we could change our thinking, by changing our self-talk and, by doing so, change our emotions.

"We can feel better. We just have to think better," I stressed.

The man said, "I don't want to feel better when men look at my wife."

"How would you like to feel?"

"I would like them to stop doing it."

"Is there anything you can do to stop it?"

"Yeah, we can go our separate ways. I ain't living with that."

"Is there no other solution?"

"Nope."

I tried to stimulate more discussion about thinking, self-talk and perception. (Al's therapist endorsed the idea that if we can create emotional events in the therapy session, gather in-vivo, real-time thoughts, the client would provide more useful information than just relying on h/er memory.) My goal, at that moment, was to encourage the man and the woman to locate their thoughts, but it wasn't going well. I chose to use a technique where I would say various words, and they would just tell me what their immediate thought was in relation to those words. That way they could be guided

into hearing their self-talk. I used words like home, love, church and meatloaf.

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“How about the word *fuck*?”

They seemed unperturbed. After a few seconds, however, the man said, “Mister, my thoughts is that if you say that ag’in, we’ll be leavin’. Me and her don’t talk like that.”

“Great! What else do you say to yourself when you hear that word? Do you tell yourself that you can’t stand it when I say that? Do you tell yourself that I have no right to say that word? Do you tell yourself that people should live according to your rules so that you can be happy? How about you might tell yourself that you can’t stand it when men look at your wife in the meat section of the grocery store and that because you can’t stand it, they should stop doing it. Do you tell yourself that people should live by your rules and forfeit their own just so you can be happy?”

“I don’t think we think all that. We just think you shouldn’t talk to us that way. That’s about it.”

I turned to the man’s woman. “What about you? Do you find the word *fuck* offensive? Do you think I should stop saying it simply because you don’t like it? Do you think I should live by your husband’s rules? How about what you think, eh? How about your thoughts about how men look at you in the grocery store? Do you have any ideas on the issue?” The woman recoiled, as if I had sprayed her with a water gun.

“I done toll’d you, mister,” the man said. He stood and ushered his wife to the door. “We thank you for your time. We wish you a fine day.”

I learned that day that REBT is easy to practice poorly.

\* \* \* \*

Working in eastern Kentucky presented me with many REBT learning opportunities, especially where language was concerned, and its extraordinary potential to offer so many unexpected twists and turns. I learned primarily that we should never assume we are being understood or that we understand. For instance, in addition to my job as a therapist, I was also tasked with investigating allegations of maltreatment of children. Our office regularly received anonymous calls from concerned citizens who, ostensibly, hoped to report occurrences of abuse and neglect they had either heard about, saw firsthand, or simply imagined. In truth, a majority of the callers were unhappy with their neighbors for one reason or another and used our office to settle the score. In one particular case the caller reported a mother of two children who wasn’t feeding them.

“She never feeds them?” I asked.

“Nope,” the caller said, “Never!”

When I arrived, I was met at the door by a rotund eight-year-old boy and his equally-well-fed sister. I came inside and discussed the allegations of neglect with the children’s mother. She invited me to inspect the food in her kitchen. “C’mon in. Have a look around. See for yourself.”

I found the cabinets well-stocked and a thirty pound turkey, frozen solid, sitting in the

freezer. I reached up and took a can of soup off the shelf. "I like this soup," I said. "I buy it all the time." Upon picking it up, I realized immediately that the can was empty, staged to look as if the contents were still inside. The bottom had been removed, the contents emptied and the can placed back in the cabinet. I reached for a box of cereal, a can of beans, a can of ravioli. Each of the containers was empty. "I don't get it," I said, looking into an empty can of Spaghettios.

"Well," the mother said, "we eat hot meals at the corner grocery twiced a day. They take our stamps down there. They cook better than I do."

"Why do you put these empty containers in your cabinet?"

"For people like you comin' around snoopin' and passin' judgment. Makin' me think I'm a bad momma and a bad person. Takes me a week to get over how bad you people make me feel."

Hearing that the woman believed that I was responsible for how she felt, and obviously didn't know it was her thinking that made her feel that way, I felt my therapist antennae rise up through the back of my head and I launched right into my role as an REBT therapist.

"What do you tell yourself when people like me come snoopin' around? Do you tell yourself that if I think you are a bad mother that you truly are a bad mother? Do you tell yourself that my opinion of you outweighs your own opinion of yourself? Aren't you responsible for your own thoughts and emotions?"

The mother pulled her children close to her hips. "What in hell are you talking about?" Three of them looked at me as if I were speaking French.

"If you think about it, you will quickly realize that I don't make you feel. You make yourself feel by what you tell yourself about me and what I'm doing."

"Are we done? You're scaring the children."

"I guess you don't get it?"

"No. Do I have to? Is that another one of your tricks?"

"HMMMMMM . . . so, anyway, why do you think someone would call social services and report you for not feeding your children?"

"They're jealous of my suit case."

"Your suitcase?"

"Yeah, I got a suit case down at the courthouse and they're just jealous of it."

"I'm sorry. I'm not following."

"I got a suit case. Ain't you never heard of a suit case? From a car wreck. I could get \$5,000.00 from my neck. They're just jealous."

"Oh, you have a lawsuit."

"No, honey, I got a suit case."

It will be important to remember, as we progress toward improved emotional intelligence (EI), that language plays such an important role in how we understand one another, and how we

interpret the actions we take and observe other people taking, that the slightest change in inflection, twist of meaning or misunderstanding in pronunciation can present a number of unexpected emotional and behavioral challenges. We should never expect that anyone will immediately make the connection between their thoughts and their feelings without first committing to a great deal more explanation than I was, so far, used to providing.

It would take me the force of will to change that.





# Chapter Two

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## Self-Talk

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING is a process for acquiring life skills, primarily skills in cooperation, collaboration (and, at some point, copulation) in a manner familiar to others, to achieve personal or group goal. Unfortunately, most social and emotional learning takes place within the confines of a single culture, making the acquisition of a broader appreciation of social skills more difficult to attain, prior to adult independence.

Like most of us, my own social-emotional education began at birth; and, like most of us, seemed to pick up steam in elementary school, where I learned that burping loudly in the lunchroom, eating chalk, throwing burrs onto woolen hats, clowning and teasing could set people ablaze with emotional color merely by fine-tuning my skills at needling, nettling, nudging, peeving, perturbing, pestering, plaguing, provoking, riding, riling, teasing, ruffling feathers and, notably, pushing buttons

“You really know how to push my buttons!”

“Stop doing that! You’re making me nervous.”

“You’re a bad boy!”

At the doctor’s office, for example, I watched as children waited for their vaccinations, but when the stings, they were euphemistically called. These bee stings seemed to have a unique, distinctive effect on each child. Some children were stunned with fear, crying and pleading. Some bargained; some implored. Some played with toys, while others slept. Always on the lookout for evidence of my sister’s weaknesses, and making a careful accounting of her fears, I was delighted to watch as she bolted upright, eyes bulging from her head, frozen with fear simply at the sound of her own name coming from the nurse. (To this day I cannot imagine why anyone would tell a child something felt only like a bee sting, to calm them before an injection. As if the similarity between an injection and a bee sting would somehow help reduce or even eliminate a child’s anxiety.)

The House of Horrors at Nantasket Beach was an opportunity for me to be on the receiving end of the needling, nettling, nudging, peeving, perturbing, pestering, plaguing, provoking, riding, riling, ruffling feathers, teasing and button pushing.

*Come on, it will be fun.*

The clown’s big, plastic left eye was hanging over its laughing rouged cheek, bobbing back and forth, keeping time with its pink, slick tongue.

*I don’ wanna.*

I noticed very keenly how boys my same age went willingly inside, not even hesitating, grinning at me as they ran up the metal ramp and into the dark black hole that served as both the clown’s mouth and the entrance to evil. Why couldn’t I go inside and have as much fun as everyone



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