# Managing Stress at Workplace Using
# The Rational-Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT) Approach

Mastura Mahfar[1]

Aslan Amat Senin[2]
Faculty of Management, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

**Abstract** This paper discusses how the Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT) approach can be applied on employees at workplace to manage their stress. Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) is a useful cognitive-behavioral approach in understanding the sources of stress among individuals who are frequently associated with irrational beliefs. Previous literatures shows that the REBT approach which consists of the multimodal, psychoeducational and comprehensive characteristics has demonstrated its effectiveness in helping to reduce the irrational beliefs system among employees. The REBT approach has contributed mainly to cognitive-behavioral therapy in presenting the roles of beliefs system and its differences on occuring psychological disturbances using the ABCDE Model. This paper also discusses types of irrational belief held by employees such as demandingness, awfulizing, low frustation tolerance, and global evaluation which are a great help to the REBT practitioners to understand emotional disturbances and behavior of employees and the implications on their well-being.

**Keywords**: irrational beliefs, stress, REBT

## 1. Introduction

Individuals cannot be separated from experiencing distress in their lives from work to family and society (Beriman, 2007). According to Lazarus and Folkman (1985), each individual experiences different kinds of stress. Stress experienced in a positive manner might motivate or influence an individual to acquire his/her maximum potential (Ellis & Wildle, 2002). Nonetheless, if the stress level exceeds a certain treshold and can no longer be controlled, it may create psychological, physical, mental or physiological problems to the individual (Romas & Sharma, 2004).

Employees who exposed to high levels of job distress are more likely to report more frequent illness symptoms, require more time off work for medical complaints, and increase the company's health care costs (Lazuras, Rodafinos, Matsiggos, & Stamatoulakis, 2009). In addition, job stress has become a significant issue that leads to absenteeism and poor performance among employees (Lazarus et al., 2009). The higher levels of distress will also result in the immune system, exacerbating various medical conditions (Beriman, 2007). After cardiovascular disease and cancer, distress disorders have shown the third biggest health problem worldwide (Alonso et al., 2004).

In addition, 20% of the adult working population was found to present some type of mental health problem (Lahtinen & Lehtinen, 1999). According to the data from the European Agency for Safety and Health Work, at least 28% of the employees in the European Union have experienced stress (Greiner, 2005). Employability, employee performance, interpersonal relations, rates of illness, absenteeism, errors, accidents and staff turnover are result from employees' psychological distress (Simon, Barber & Birnbaum, 2001). Besides that, the American Institute of Stress reported that distress is a major factor that leads to 80% of all work related injuries and 40% of work place turnover (Richardson & Rothstein, 2008).

However, research on job stress is not merely found in Western countries but also found in Asia particularly in Malaysian. For instance, the finding of study by Mohd Awang Idris, Dollard and Winefield (2010) on job stress revealed that 77% of respondents agreed that job stress had increased recently when 48 employees were interviewed.

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[+] Corresponding author. Tel.: + (013-7009356)
  *E-mail address*: (mastura@management.utm.my)

Nilufar et al. (2009) stated that it is crucial for employer and employees in Malaysia to realize the stress and the stressor that result in negative feelings which may impact to organization itself. On top of that, Nurnazirah et al. (2015) stated that the study of job stress predictors is crucial to improve stress management programs in Malaysian organizations.

Although there were many studies on sources of stress that can contribute to stress at workplace such as individual and family factors, socio-economic and financial status, and mental and physical health factors, until now there are limited studies on managing stress among employees based on the cognitive aspects in Malaysian working environment. Ellis (1997) inspired by the view that it is not the event that causes emotional disturbance, but ones view of the event based on the Rational-Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT) approach. REBT is currently one of the predominant techniques associated with cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), asserting that beliefs individuals hold in relation to failure, rejection, and poor treatment will mediate their perceptions of events, influencing subsequent emotional and behavioral responses (Ellis & Dryden, 1997). Hence, this paper will discuss how the Rational-Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT) could be employed to explain the causes of employees' stress as well as the job stress management using ABCDE Model.

## 1.1    Research Background

Due to its implication in organizational life, distress among employees is often perceived negatively because it could affect the reduction in productivity (Beriman, 2007). Therefore, there are many stress intervention programs designed to reduce stress among employees in organizations. Generally, the aims of stress intervention programs are to increase individual psychological resources and coping skills and/or changing the environment (Van der Klink, Blonk, Schene, & Van Dijk, 2001). In addition, there are many literatures conducted on the effectiveness of distress intervention programs and outcome variables. Nevertheless, the researchers have debated to find out which of these interventions is the most effective.

At present, Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) is one of the most prominent cognitive-behavioral approaches which could help employees to understand the mechanisms of employee distress (Ellis, 1962). This theoretical approach which is always being associated with individuals' irrational beliefs system was introduced in 1995 by Albert Ellis (Weinrach et al., 2006). Emotional disturbance of an individual does not originate from external events but due to the individual's perceptions and evaluation on those events (Kachman & Mazer, 1990). This philosophy serves as a foundation of the new formation of therapy (DiGuiseppe, 2007). In fact, employees cognitions are result in their emotional reactions and behavioral reactions (Harris, Davies, & Dryden, 2006; Sporrle, Welpe, & Forsterling, 2006).

According to the ABCDE Model of REBT (Ellis & Bernard, 2006), people's reactions (Cs; behavioral and emotional) are not determined by the activating events (As), but by their beliefs (Bs) which represents the individual's view about events. Many researchers had examined the relationship between irrational beliefs and emotional distress in organizations, indicating strong correlations between irrationality and various measures of distress, such as emotional distress, anxiety, depression, self-esteem, job satisfaction, etc. (Daly & Burton, 1993; DiLorenzo, David, & Montgomery, 2007; Harris, Davies, & Dryden, 2006; Sporrle & Welpe, 2006).

On top of that, a study by Van der Klink et al. (2001) using meta-analytic techniques examined the effectiveness of distress interventions in organizational environment showed that cognitive behavioral based on tehniques are the most effective techniques compared with other interventions, such as multimodal approach, relaxation and organization focused programs. Indeed, intervention programs based on cognitive behavioral therapy were most effective in reducing the distress levels in organizations (Richardson & Rothstein, 2008).

## 2.0    Literature Review

## 2.1    Rational-Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT)

Ellis was more influenced by previous philosophers rather than psychologists, mainly Epictetus, a Roman philosopher, who stated that 'men are disturbed not by things, but by their views of things' (Ellis & Bernard, 1985; Dryden & Neenan, 2004). Since Rational Therapy that was introduced before merely focusing on cognition and did not prepare professionals or clients with integrated views on psychological problems, especially on the roles of emotion, the name of this therapy was later converted to Rational-Emotive Therapy in 1961 to formally recognize

the role emotions have in mental processes and in therapy. (DiGiuseppe, 2007). In 1993, RET then became Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) because REBT practitioners encourage their clients actively to put into practice what they learn in therapy through the use of behavioral methods (Dryden & Neenan, 2004; Weinrach *et al.,* 2006).

As indicated by Ellis (1993), this change was necessary because REBT does not only focus on cognitive aspects, but also on emotive and behavioral aspects to help change an individual. These three aspects are a psychological process which is interactional, dynamic and inseparable from each other. For instance, the change in cognitive aspect will also produce change to others (Ellis & Bernard, 1985; Ellis, 1994; Ellis, Shaughnessy & Mahan, 2003). Though the above three aspects are interactional, the REBT approach also looks at the aspect of thinking as a major determinant to disturbance and happiness of an individual (Walen, DiGiuseppe & Dryden, 1992). Moreover, REBT is distinct from other cognitive-behavioral approaches as it specifically proposes that rigid and extreme beliefs in relation to adversity are considered irrational beliefs, leading to dysfunctional (unhealthy) emotions such as anxiety, unhealthy anger and depression. On the contrary, flexible and nonextreme beliefs are considered rational beliefs, leading to functional (healthy) emotions such as concern, healthy anger and sadness (Dryden, 2009).

As stated by Koffler (2005), the difference between irrational beliefs and rational beliefs system and the roles of beliefs system on emotional disturbance are the main contribution of REBT on cognitive behavior. There are 30 cognitive methods, 30 emotive methods, and 30 behavioral methods in the REBT approach and these methods keep on increasing perpetually (Ellis, 2002). Based on the widespread development of REBT, beside focusing on children and adolescents, this approach could also be focused on adults in helping change irrational beliefs system, (Knaus, 1974; Bernard & Joyce, 1984; Vernon, 2004; Ellis & Bernard, 2006). For instance, it was found that some of the cognitions employees may behold are irrational and self-defeating that are important mechanisms for work distress (Harris, Davies, & Dryden, 2006; Sporrle, Welpe, & Forsterling, 2006). Hence, particularly, taking into account the increased level of distress in work context (Alonso et al., 2004), it becomes essential to understand how employees could manage the mechanisms of job stress based on the REBT approach.

## 2.2 Managing Job Stress Using ABCDE Model

Model of ABCDE which is the main component in the REBT approach has explained in great details on how emotional disturbance or stress experienced by an individual is due to irrational beliefs system and not negative events experienced (Ellis, 1962; Ellis & Bernard, 1983; Ellis & Dryden, 1997). There are three main components in the ABCDE Model which consists of, activating events (A), belief system (B) and emotional and behavioral consequences (C). The other three components are disputation (D), and new effect (E). Most individuals assume that emotional disturbances and behaviors (C) originate from activating events (A) which may be external or internal. The therapeutic process of REBT first encourages the client or group to understand that their dysfunctional emotional and behavioral responses (C) are largely due to their irrational beliefs (B), not the activating event (A) itself as following:

**Activating event (A) -** (A) could be defined as activating events which something that occurs in people's life (Walen et al., 1992). People believe it as the cause of their problems (David et al., 2005).

**Beliefs (B)** - Beliefs (B) represent an individual's view about events (Dryden, 1999). Ellis (2004) proposed that beliefs (B) mediate the impact of activating events (A) on emotions and behavior (C). Beliefs can be held about oneself, others and/or life events. REBT theory advocates that beliefs can either be rational and healthy or irrational and unhealthy (David et al., 2005; Dryden, 1999). Rational beliefs represent any thoughts which are flexible, logical, realistic, and will aid goal attainment. Contrary to rational beliefs, irrational beliefs represent any thoughts that are unrealistic, rigid, extreme, illogical, absolutistic demands toward self, others, or life and prevent peoples from attaining their goals. Irrational beliefs are one of the main long-term sources and factors that maintain the distress and, as a consequence, may lead to many anxiety and mood disorders (David, Szentagotai, Lupu, & Cosman, 2008).

The irrational beliefs will act as a mediator for the relationship between an event that will happen and reaction towards emotional disturbance and behavior (Ellis, 1993; Jacofsky, 2005). To explain in details the irrational beliefs of an individual, Ellis (1962) initially classified 11 irrational beliefs causing emotional disturbances. However, subsequent research has identified four categories of irrational beliefs namely, demandingness, awfulizing, low frustation tolerance, and global evaluation (Ellis & Dryden, 1997; Dryden & Ellis, 2003; DiLorenzo *et al.*, 2007; DiGiuseppe et al., 2012).

### i)   Demandingness vs Preference

Demandingness is viewed as a core belief in which a person ultimately will emphasize a situation as "must" or "must not" (Dryden & Neenan, 2004). There are three types of demandingness, which are, demands towards self, other people and life situation (Dryden & Neenan, 2004; DiGiuseppe, 2007). For instances, *"I must be accepted by colleagues"*, *"My boss must respect me at all times"* and *"Work environment must be conducive at all times"* (DiGiuseppe et al., 2012). On the contrary, belief of preference has flexible option in which individual's belief toward any desire without insistent (Dryden & Neenan, 2004). Instead of using absolute phrase such as "must" and "should", employees were taught in therapy about how to express their rational beliefs in a more flexible context employing flexible phrases "want to", "want" or "choose" (DiLorenzo *et al.*, 2007). For example. *"I want my boss to respect me, but not necessarily I get it"*

### ii)   Awfulizing /Catastrophizing vs Non-Awfulizing

Awfulizing refers to an employee's belief that an event is so awful, that is, more than 100 percent bad (Ellis & Dryden, 2003). Typically, the characteristics of awfulizing are expressed through an example such as, *"It's awful if my boss does not respect me".* On the contrary, non-awfulizing belief is a non-extreme belief of individual when his/her demand was not fulfilled (Dryden and Neenan, 2004). Individual who have non-awfulizing beliefs believed that there are advantages and benefits from the event occured. For example, *"It is not good if my boss does not respect me but the situation happened to me is not awful actually"*.

### iii)   Low frustation tolerance vs High frustation tolerance

An employee who has low frustation tolerance will not be able to endure the negative events or have any happiness if what he/she wants does not exist (Dryden & Neenan, 2004; DiLorenzo *et al.*, 2007). The characteristics of this irrational belief will be expressed in a statement such as, *"I can't stand when my boss does not respect me".* On the other hand, high frustration tolerance is a rational belief that is not extreme although demand of an individual was not fulfilled (Dryden & Neenan, 2004). Individual holding rational belief will have high frustration tolerance even when admitting hard to withstand toward a negative event (Dryden & Ellis, 2003). For example, *"I want to be respected by my boss but I can tolerate if it did not achieve".*

### iv)   Global Evaluation vs Self / Others Acceptance

Global evaluation appears when employees overgeneralize about others, themselves, and the world when their demands are not met (Walen, DiGiuseppe & Dryden, 1992; DiLorenzo *et al.*, 2007). This belief also causes the tendency of an employee to downgrade oneself and others by putting failure as part of their life (Ellis & Dryden, 1997). For example, *"I am worthless if my boss does not respect me,* others – *"My boss is worthless if he/she does not respect me."* and / or life - *"Life is bad if my boss does not respect me".* In contrast to global evaluation, acceptance beliefs refer to employees holding rational beliefs which they learn to accept themselves, other people, and their living conditions even met in uncomfortable situations (Dryden & Neenan, 2004). For example, *"I can accept myself as a valuable human being even when I am not respected by others".*

In short, demandingness, awfulizing, low frustration tolerance, and global evaluation beliefs are rigid and extreme, leading to dysfunctional emotions, while preferences, non-awfulizing, high frustration tolerance and self/other acceptance beliefs are flexible and non-extreme, leading to functional emotions. In relation to job stress, Palmer (1995) suggested that low frustration tolerance beliefs such as *"I can't stand my working conditions"*, awfulizing beliefs such as *"I won't do well and that would be awful"* and global evaluation beliefs such as *"If people don't like me, I am pretty worthless"* often led to stress among employees.

**Consequences (C) –** Consequences (C) represent the undesirable emotional consequences (ueC) and the undesirable behavioral consequences (ubC). Therefore, C is the result from the people's beliefs or perceptions. Rational beliefs (RBs) lead to functional consequences, whereas irrational beliefs (IBs) lead to dysfunctional consequences (David, et al., 2005). For example: ueC = *"I feel angry / anxious"*; ubC = withdrawal, yelling, throwing things, etc.

**Dispute (D)** – The principle goal of REBT is to replace irrational beliefs with rational beliefs to promote functional emotions (Ellis & Dryden, 1997). Once the ABC Model framework is understood, the client is encouraged to dispute (D) their irrational beliefs and replace them with rational alternatives (E) (Dryden, 2009). Disputation helps the client to understand that their irrational beliefs are false, illogical, and unhelpful, and that rational beliefs are true, logical, and helpful (Dryden, 2009). In order to reduce emotional disturbances of employee, the person actively challenges or disputes his/her irrational beliefs (D) (Dryden, 1999; David, et al., 2005). Disputation comprises three main arguments such as logical, empirical, and pragmatic

i)    logical – employee is asked to question the logic of his/her irrational beliefs (*does the belief make sense*?). The employee's irrational beliefs will not be logically supported.
ii)   empirical - employee is asked to provide evidence for the irrational beliefs (*is there any evidence for the beliefs?; where is written for the beliefs?*). The employee's irrational belief will usually flounder under empirical questioning.
iii)  pragmatic – employee is asked to reflect on the consequences of holding irrational beliefs (*is the belief helpful?*)

Once the irrational beliefs have been successfully disputed and acknowledged as being false, illogical, and unhelpful, the rational alternatives are also disputed, but acknowledged as being true, logical, and helpful (Dryden, 2009; Dryden & Branch, 2008). Through integration of techniques and concepts such as cognitive, emotion and behavioral techniques the REBT approach also helps individuals to change their tendency in thinking from irrational beliefs to the rational one (Ellis, 1997).

**Effect (E)** - If employees are able to actively and persistently dispute (D) their irrational beliefs, they will be able to create an effective new philosophy (E) which includes strong rational coping statements that can help them to feel better, get better and stay better (David, et al., 2005). The effective rational belief phase (E) represents the final part of the REBT process after successfully locating the adversities (A), the beliefs (B), and the emotional and behavioral consequences (C), and having successfully disputed (D) the irrational beliefs (Turner & Barker, 2014). Figure 1.1 illustrates the main components of the ABC Model comprehensively.
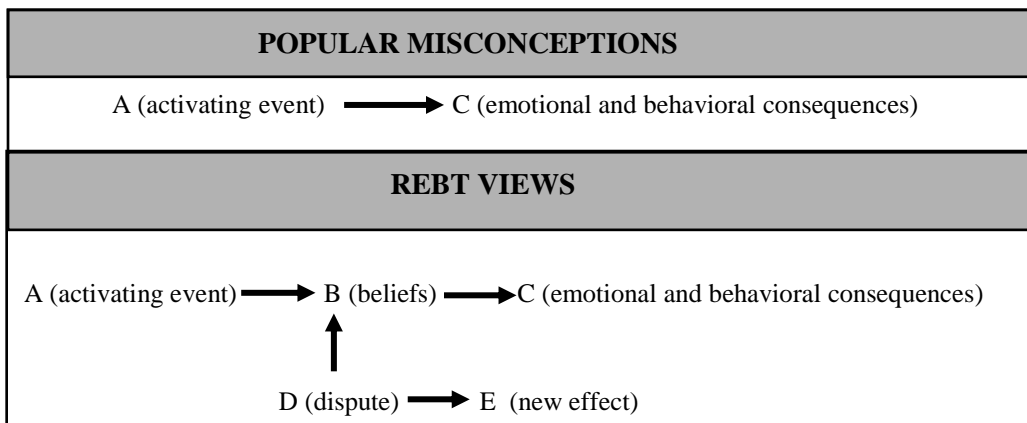


| POPULAR MISCONCEPTIONS |
| --- |
| A (activating event) ⟶ C (emotional and behavioral consequences) |

| REBT VIEWS |
| --- |
| A (activating event) ⟶ B (beliefs) ⟶ C (emotional and behavioral consequences)<br>⬆<br>D (dispute) ⟶ E (new effect) |

**Figure 1.1 :**
ABCDE Model (Source: Adapted from Theory & Practice of
Counseling and Psychotherapy, Corey (1986)

Hence, early assessment and diagnosis of distress-related beliefs is one of the fundamental components of distress management and other psychological therapies oriented towards reducing distress (David, 2006). On the whole, Ellis (1994) stated that demandingness is the main cause of emotional disturbance and is associated with negative effects (DiGiuseppe, 1996). Hence, demandingness is the core to irrational beliefs among employees in the REBT approach. Other irrational beliefs such as, awfulizing, low frustation tolerance, and global evaluation derived from demandingness (Walen *et al.,* 1992; Dryden & Ellis, 2003).

### 2.3    Previous Studies

Numerous studies found that ABCDE Model based on the REBT approach could help employees to understand and managing their stress at workplace. This is because most of the organizations now are more demanding for the better job stress management which could impact job outcomes.

For instances, David and Szamoskozi (2011) investigated the effectiveness of psychological programs on reducing emotional distress and its consequences in occupational settings. A meta-analysis was carried out to determine the effectiveness of programs based on Rational Emotional Behavioral Therapy (REBT) and other CBT programs. After separating the studies in two categories the effect size increased for REBT based intervention programs (d= -1.14), while the effect size for the rest of CBT based programs slightly decreased (d= -0.52). In addition, the effect sizes for irrationality (d= -1.6), direct evaluation of emotional distress (d= -0.73), and for measures of distress consequences (d= -0.69). The results demonstrated the effectiveness of CBT-based intervention programs in reducing emotional distress, distress consequences and in reducing the level of irrationality in occupational settings.

Gavita and Duta (2013) conducted a study in order to preliminary validate the Employee Rational and Irrational Beliefs Scale (E-RIBS), a new self-report measure for identifying irrational and rational cognitions relevant for employees. 161 employees participated to the study, working in Romanian national and international companies whereby 46% of them were males and 52.2 were females. One to five of the adult working population was found to present some type of mental health problem which affect their employability, employee performance and quality of life. Irrational and rational beliefs represent evaluative cognitive structures, consistently associated with distress and psychopathology. In contrast, rational thinking is considered important for emotional resiliency. Profile of Emotional Distress (PED; Opris & Macavei, 2005) and the General Attitudes and Beliefs Scale–Short Form (GABS-SF; Lindner, Kirkby, Wertheim, & Birch, 1999) were used to measure psychological distress and irrational beliefs. Results show a three-factor solution for the E-RIBS, with an irrational beliefs subscale, a global evaluation subscale, and a rational beliefs subscale. The E-RIBS displayed adequate internal consistencies and concurrent validity. Significant correlations were also found between E-RIBS scores and emotional distress. E-RIBS total score correlates positively with the total emotional distress score reported by the employees [r = -.24, *p=.003*].

Jacofsky (2005) conducted a study on mediating and moderating effects of irrationality on stress among psychology students in U.S. The target respondent of the research was 634 current graduate students from the National Association of School Psychologists' (NASP) membership base. The purpose of the research was to examine the potential role of irrationality, as conceptualizes in REBT, as either a mediator or moderator variable within the relationship between stress exposure and stress severity among the respondents. The finding of the study revealed that the mediating and moderating effects of irrationality on stress in school psychology students was found to be partially mediated the relationship between stress exposure and stress severities but irrationality was not found to be moderate in the relationship between stress exposure and stress severity.

Van der Klink et al. (2001) examined the effectiveness of distress interventions in organizational environment using meta-analytic techniques. The finding of the study shows that cognitive behavioral interventions have been found to have the largest effect size (d= 0.68) compared with other interventions which had smaller effect sizes (multimodal d= 0.51; relaxation d= 0.35; organization focused programs d= 0.08). Their analysis was conducted on studies published up to 1996. A mean effect size of d=0.34 was found. Concerning intervention type, cognitive behavioral interventions have been found to have the largest effect size, d= 0.68, while the other had smaller effect sizes (multimodal d= 0.51; relaxation d= 0.35; organization focused programs d= 0.08).

Jesus and Conboy (2001) examined the implementation of stress management course among elementary and secondary-level teachers in Coimbra, Portugal. Teachers were between the ages of 30 and 48 (M= 41.7 years) with teaching experience ranging from three to 29 years (M = 18 years). The sample was predominantly female (N = 22; 88 percent). The stress management training was conducted in 10 sessions whereby one of the sessions focused on assessing and helping teachers to alter their irrational beliefs using REBT approach. To assess irrational beliefs, a four-point summative scale was used, anchored from "disagree to agree" which consisting of 17 items. The significance of the difference between the means was calculated for each variable with the t-test for paired samples. The finding of the study revealed that there was significant reductions were observed in stress [t (24) = ±3.07, *p< .01*] and irrational beliefs  [t (24) = ±2.80, *p< 0.02*] among the teachers.

Another meta-analysis conducted by Richardson and Rothstein (2008) extended the analysis including studies published up to 2006. A significant effect size across all studies was found (d= 0.52). Based on the intervention type, again cognitive behavioral based interventions had the larger effect size (d= 1.11), followed by relaxation (d= 0.49); organizational (d= 0.14), multimodal (d= 0.23), alternative interventions (d= 0.90). Both meta-analytical

studies presented showed that cognitive behavioral-based techniques are the most effective techniques, but none of them made a distinction within this category (i.e., CBT versus REBT). In general, the REBT approach was found to prove its effectiveness when implemented on employees who experiencing various problems at workplace.

### 3.0    Conclusion

   From the above explanation, we can conclude that it is important for an employee to recognize the causes of stress as well as managing their stress at workplace. Based on the explanation of the ABC Model in the REBT approach, emotional disturbance and behavior problem among employees truly does not exist alone. On the contrary, the emotional and behavioral disturbance come to life based on perception and reaction of those experiencing them (Palmer & Dryden, 1994). Individuals who experience stress will put less effort to manage it when they think that the event is more prominent than their irrational beliefs system as a reaction to stress. Consequently, they tend to blame the event as a cause to stress that they are facing and will deny the opportunities to improve the situation (Ellis & Dryden, 1997).

   Since the REBT approach assumes that human beings have the biological tendency to think rationally and irrationally, the best way to control the irrational beliefs is to change the thinking of an individual (Walen *et al.,* 1992; Ellis, 1994; DiGuiseppe, 2007). Through rational thinking skills learned, employees will have the opportunities to learn problem solving strategies based on rational thinking that enables them to manage their job stress more successfully. Hence, the ABCDE Model introduced in the REBT approach may assist employees in understanding their emotional disturbance owing to their irrational belief system. Through integration of techniques and concepts the REBT approach also helps individuals to change their tendency in thinking which is considered irrational beliefs. Thus, REBT is seen as a cognitive orientation which has the characteristics of being comprehensive, multimodal and psychoeducational to help employees facing with the emotional and behavioral disturbance as inappropriate and to change it to rational beliefs (Bernard & Joyce, 1984; Vernon, 2004; Ellis & Bernard, 2006).

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