

FACT AND INFORMATION SHEET

Why People Behave

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The first step in treating a problem behavior is figuring out the reason(s) for the behavior. In some cases this seems nearly impossible. In other cases the cause seems very apparent. Most often, the truth lies somewhere in between. Behaviors that seem easy to understand often turn out to be more complex than first thought. On the other hand, proper assessment methods will allow us to understand even difficult behavior.

We view behavior as occurring according to the following model:

A → B → C

where A stands for Antecedent, B stands for Behavior, and C stands for Consequence. From this viewpoint, behavior is a product of the events that come just before it (antecedents) and just after it (consequences).

Consequences determine how likely it is that the behavior will occur again in the future. Behaviors will be repeated if they are followed by positive consequences. Behaviors will not be repeated if they are followed by negative consequences. We are using "positive" and "negative" from the standpoint of the person behaving. What may be a positive consequence to you may not be a positive consequence, and may actually be a negative consequence, to another person.

Antecedents determine when and where the behavior will occur. If a behavior receives positive consequences in the presence of a certain antecedent, the behavior is likely to occur when that antecedent is again present. If a behavior does not receive positive consequences in the presence of an antecedent, the behavior is not likely to occur when that antecedent is again present. Consider, for example, the behavior of answering the phone. We are more likely to pick up the phone and say "Hello?" after the phone rings than when the phone does not ring. Why? Because only when the phone rings (antecedent) has answering

the phone (behavior) been followed by someone being on the line (positive consequence). Therefore, over time we learn to behave only when it is likely to "pay off" (i.e., get positive consequences). If a behavior is occurring, it is "paying off" for the person. Our job, then, is to determine why the behavior is occurring. We do this by analyzing its antecedents and consequences.

Research and experience shows us that even though antecedents exert considerable control over behavior, consequences are more important in effecting long-term behavior change. Consider what would happen in the above example if the only consequence for picking up the phone and saying "Hello?" was a bill collector asking for money. Even though the antecedent (phone ringing) remained the same, we would be less likely to answer the phone. The behavior of answering the phone does not now "pay off." Clearly, we must identify the consequence(s) for the undesired behavior to fully understand it. Only then can we select the most effective and least restrictive treatment.

Generally speaking, there are two main categories of consequences: obtaining something and escaping or avoiding something. Of course, the "something" within each of the categories is nearly limitless. However, with a bit of systematic observation, we can usually figure out the specific reason or reasons for the behavior. Below we will examine each of the causes of behavior.

Obtaining Something

Many problem behaviors occur because they produce access to desired (from the individual's standpoint) consequences. This may occur even when unintended. For instance, a child may repeatedly cry and whine for a toy and her father may eventually "give in" and give her the toy. Although the father did not intend to strengthen

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crying and whining, she is now more likely to cry and whine the next time she wants a toy.

There are many events whose occurrence after a behavior can make that behavior occur more frequently again in the future. These rewards include attention (even "negative" attention), toys, food, drinks, smiles, hugs, television, games, music, books, and so on. The rewards can be provided by others or obtained by the person himself or herself. It is important to recognize that what may be rewarding to one person is not necessarily rewarding to another person. By carefully observing the behavior and its antecedents and consequences, we can figure out the reward(s) responsible for the problem behavior.

Avoiding Something

Some problem behaviors occur because they are successful in allowing the individual to escape or avoid something. Again, this may occur unintentionally. For example, a person may have a tantrum after being asked to clean his room (antecedent). If he is allowed to avoid cleaning his room (consequence) after the tantrum, he will be more likely to tantrum again when asked to clean the room.

There are numerous events whose escape or avoidance can strengthen behavior. Allowing escape or avoidance of household chores, academic tasks, changing activities, eating certain foods, going to bed, certain persons, physical contact, and so on can all increase the frequency of behavior problems. Again, careful and systematic observation of the antecedents, behavior, and consequences will help us figure out exactly what the person is trying to escape or avoid.

Sometimes the person will exhibit different problem behaviors for different reasons. For example, a child may scream and cry to avoid going to bed but may fall to the floor and kick to have his mother come and pick him up. It is also possible that the same behavior may occur for different reasons at different times. For instance, a young child may cry to gain attention from her parents and may cry at other times to avoid having to pick up her toys. We must know both reasons if we are to develop a comprehensive treatment plan.

As we mentioned above, careful observation is necessary to truly understand the reason for the problem behavior. Although your therapist will ask you questions about the behavior and its antecedents and consequences, there is no substitute for observing behavior directly. When the therapist cannot directly observe the behavior occurring or if the therapist is unsure about the reason(s) for the behavior, you may be asked to write down your observations about the ABC's of the behavior. You will be given data sheets to guide you observations and will be trained to complete the data sheets accurately. Sometimes, even with these observations, we do not get a clear picture of the behavior and its antecedents and consequences. In this case, your therapist may have to conduct a small experiment where certain antecedents and consequences are presented and any change in behavior noted.

This may seem like a lot of work. It is! But developing a treatment without knowing (or at least strongly suspecting) the cause is unethical and not likely to be effective. This will waste everyone's time and money. Basing our intervention on known causes of behavior will increase the likelihood of developing an effective intervention the first time around. It will also facilitate use of less intrusive and more humane treatment procedures. Another reason for carefully determining the cause of behavior is that this will allow us to find a behavior to replace the unwanted behavior. We do not simply want to stop the problem behavior; we want to replace it with something useful for the person. If the person is behaving to obtain something, we want to teach him or her appropriate ways to get what is desired. If the person is behaving to escape or avoid something, we want to teach him or her alternative ways of escaping or avoiding the undesired event. Teaching alternative behavior is central to our approach.

You can see that we have made no reference to inferred inner activities such as what the person is thinking or feeling. We don't need to appeal to these events because, ultimately, these must be explained by looking at the person's environment. Such an approach has been highly successful for tens of thousands of people and this person should be no exception.