

Activity 4.1

Developing Your Own Behavioural Self Control Programme: Promoting Studying Behaviour

How often do you sit down to write an essay or a lab report or do some reading for a seminar, only for your attention to begin to wander almost immediately? After just a few minutes, you are up making a cup of coffee to distract yourself from the difficulty of concentrating on the task in hand.

Below are some examples of how you might apply behavioural self-control principles to help you concentrate more easily when you are studying. All of these principles are based on operant or classical conditioning. When you have read these principles, sit down and write a behavioural self-control programme for your own studying behaviour that takes into account your own learning environment and your personal circumstances.

Reinforcement/punishment

Always try and find some way of rewarding yourself whenever you have achieved a study goal, and make sure that you take this reward immediately on completion of the task. It may be something as simple as a refreshing cup of coffee, a chat with friends, trip to the cinema, or just listening to your favourite music CD.

Response-reinforcer contiguity/contingency

While many people claim to be aware of the principle of operant reinforcement, most rarely apply it consistently. For instance, you may decide to spend two hours in the library writing an essay and then reward yourself for this effort by going and having a coffee and a chat with friends. However, you may find that you are working so well that you continue writing until your concentration and motivation begins to wane - then you go off for coffee. With all the good intentions in the world, what has happened is that you have inadvertently reinforced behaviours consistent with falling levels of concentration and motivation rather than the two hours focused work that preceded this. Always ensure that the things you like doing (i.e. rewards) occur *immediately after* the behaviour you want to foster (i.e. concentrating).

Stimulus Control (Environmental Planning)

If you study in an environment that also controls other behaviours, then you will inevitably find it difficult to concentrate solely on studying. For example, if you try and write an essay in your kitchen, that could be very difficult, because a kitchen will also have come to elicit other competing behaviours such as eating, putting on the kettle, etc. To study effectively, you need to do this in an environment that does not control alternatives to studying (e.g. a Library is a good example).

Response shaping and the setting of attainable targets

All behavioural programs set attainment targets of some kind, and it is extremely important that any sub-goals in the program are attainable. For example, if studying you must set yourself a goal that you are certain you can achieve (e.g. reading a text book for 15 minutes rather than 6 hours!). It is critical that goals are attainable: if they are not met

because they are over-ambitious, then this is tantamount to punishing the effort that was expended in attempting to meet the goal.

Response discrimination/feedback

Can you recall accurately how many hours you have spent studying in the last week? Probably not, and this is because most people have poor recall of the frequency of behaviours they are trying to develop or reinforce. This being the case, it is perhaps not surprising that you may have difficulty controlling your studying – because you are unable to accurately discriminate it or to remember it. One way in which this can be overcome is by including in the program a period of self-observation, where the you record or chart information relevant to studying behaviour (e.g. how many hours you studied each day, what you achieved, and where you studied). This will give you an idea of the baseline frequency with which you study and will allow you to set some future goals that can increase this baseline level.

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