

## Behavioural therapy

Behavioural therapy is a term used to describe a broad range of techniques used to change maladaptive behaviours. The goal is to reinforce desirable behaviours and eliminate unwanted ones. Behavioural therapy is rooted in the principles of behaviourism, a school of thought focused on the idea that we learn from our environment. This approach emerged during the early part of the 20th-century and became a dominant force in the field for many years. Edward Thorndike was one of the first to refer to the idea of modifying behaviour. Unlike some other types of therapy that are rooted in insight (such as psychoanalytic therapy and humanistic therapies), behavioural therapy is action-based. Because of this, behavioural therapy tends to be highly focused. The behaviour itself is the problem and the goal is to teach people new behaviours to minimize or eliminate the issue.

### Types of Behavioural Therapy

There are a number of different types of behavioural therapy. The type of therapy used can depend on a variety of factors, including the condition that is being treated and the severity of the symptoms.

- Applied behaviour analysis uses operant conditioning to shape and modify problematic behaviours.
- Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) relies on behavioural techniques, but adds a cognitive element, focusing on the problematic thoughts that lie behind behaviours.
- Dialectical behavioural therapy is a form of CBT that utilizes both behavioural and cognitive techniques to help people learn to manage their emotions, cope with distress, and improve interpersonal relationships.
- Exposure therapy utilizes behavioural techniques to help people overcome their fears of situations or objects. This approach incorporates techniques that expose people to the source of their fears while practicing relaxation strategies. It is useful for treating specific phobias and other forms of anxiety.
- Rational emotive behaviour therapy (REBT) focuses on identifying negative or destructive thoughts and feelings. People then actively challenge those thoughts and replace them with more rational, realistic ones.
- Social learning theory centers on how people learn through observation. Observing others being rewarded or punished for their actions can lead to learning and behaviour change.

### Techniques

In order to understand how behavioural therapy works, it is important to know more about the basic principles that contribute to behavioural therapy. The techniques used in this type of treatment are based on the theories of classical conditioning and operant conditioning.

**Classical Conditioning:** Classical conditioning involves forming associations between stimuli. Previously neutral stimuli are paired with a stimulus that naturally and automatically evokes a response. After repeated pairings, an association is formed and the previously

neutral stimulus will come to evoke the response on its own. Classical conditioning is one way to alter behaviour. Several different techniques and strategies are used in this approach to therapy.

**Aversion therapy:** This process involves pairing an undesirable behaviour with an aversive stimulus in the hope that the unwanted behaviour will eventually be reduced. For example, someone with an alcohol use disorder might take Antabuse (disulfiram), a drug that causes severe symptoms (such as headaches, nausea, anxiety, and vomiting) when combined with alcohol.

**Flooding:** This process involves exposing people to fear-invoking objects or situations intensely and rapidly. It is often used to treat phobias. During the process, the individual is prevented from escaping or avoiding the situation.

**Systematic desensitization:** In this technique, people make a list of fears and then learn to relax while concentrating on these fears. Starting with the least fear-inducing item and working their way to the most fear-inducing item, people systematically confront these fears under the guidance of a therapist. Systematic desensitization is often used to treat phobias and other anxiety disorders.

**Operant Conditioning:** Operant conditioning focuses on how reinforcement and punishment can be utilized to either increase or decrease the frequency of behaviour. Behaviours followed by desirable consequences are more likely to occur again in the future, while those followed by negative consequences become less likely to occur.

Behavioural therapy techniques use reinforcement, punishment, shaping, modelling, and related techniques to alter behaviour. These methods have the benefit of being highly focused, which means they can produce fast and effective results.

**Contingency management:** This approach uses a formal written contract between a client and a therapist (or parent or teacher) that outlines behaviour-change goals, reinforcements, rewards, and penalties. Contingency contracts can be very effective in producing behaviour changes since the rules are spelled out clearly, preventing both parties from backing down on their promises.

**Extinction:** Another way to produce behaviour change is to stop reinforcing behaviour in order to eliminate the response. Time-outs are a perfect example of the extinction process. During a time-out, a person is removed from a situation that provides reinforcement. By taking away what the person found rewarding, unwanted behaviour is eventually extinguished.

**Behaviour modelling:** This technique involves learning through observation and modelling the behaviour of others. Rather than relying simply on reinforcement or punishment, modelling allows individuals to learn new skills or acceptable behaviours by watching someone else perform those desired skills.

**Token economies:** This strategy relies on reinforcement to modify behaviour. Parents and teachers often use token economies, allowing kids to earn tokens for engaging in preferred behaviours and lose tokens for undesirable behaviours. These tokens can then be traded for rewards such as candy, toys, or extra time playing with a favourite toy.

### What Behavioural Therapy Can Help With

Behavioural therapy can be utilized to treat a wide range of psychological conditions and disorders, including:

- Alcohol and substance use disorders
- Anxiety
- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Autism spectrum disorders
- Bipolar disorder<sup>4</sup>
- Borderline personality disorder (BPD)
- Depression
- Eating disorders
- Panic disorder
- Phobias
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)

Behavioural therapy is problem-focused and action-oriented. For this reason, it can also be useful for addressing specific psychological concerns such as anger management and stress management. Treatments that incorporate behavioural techniques are usually focused on producing results in a relatively short period of time.

### Benefits

Behavioural therapy is widely used and has been shown to be effective in treating a number of different conditions. Cognitive behavioural therapy, in particular, is often considered the "gold standard" in the treatment of many disorders.

Research has shown that CBT is most effective for the treatment of:

- Anger issues
- Anxiety
- Bulimia
- Depression
- Somatic symptom disorder
- Stress
- Substance abuse
- Effectiveness

How well behavioural therapy works depends on factors such as the specific type of treatment used as well as the condition that is being treated. Overall, research has found that

approximately 75% of people who try psychotherapy experience some type of positive improvement. This does not mean that CBT or other behavioural approaches are the only types of therapy that can treat mental illness. It also doesn't mean that behaviour therapy is the right choice for every situation. Anxiety disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder, panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder and phobia, for example, often respond well to behavioural treatments. However, researchers found that CBT's effectiveness in the treatment of substance use disorders can vary depending on the substance that is misused. CBT was also shown to have beneficial effects on some symptoms of schizophrenia but showed no benefits on relapse and hospital admission when compared to other forms of treatment.