

Costs and Benefits of Unhelpful Behaviour

Motivation

Exercise

10-15 min.

Client

No

Why do clients often persist in problematic behaviours that will not bring them closer to their goals or may even reduce well-being? For instance, a client may continue to avoid certain activities, even when doing so creates harm in the long run. Imagine a client who would like to get involved in a romantic relationship but is afraid of getting turned down. This fear causes him/her to avoid encounters with women. Although he/she knows that this behaviour will not help him/her to attain any positive outcomes in the long run, he/she continues to avoid interaction with women. The reason for doing so has much to do with the short-term benefits of the avoidance.

Commonly, the benefit of avoidance is short-term relief of discomfort. In this example, avoiding interactions with women prevents the client from possibly getting turned down. Over time, this behaviour is maintained through what behaviourists refer to as negative reinforcement; a behavioural pattern (e.g. avoidance) that is kept alive because it helps to either remove an aversive stimulus (e.g. fear) or prevent a situation (e.g. getting turned down) from happening.

At the very heart of the counterintuitive fact that clients often persist in problematic behaviours lies the conflict between perceived short-term and long-term outcomes of activities (Ainslie, 1992; Loewenstein, 1996; Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999). Short-term outcomes are immediate but not long lasting. In contrast, long-term outcomes are remote but long lasting. For instance, a dieter who wants to loose weight (long-term outcome) and is confronted with a tempting piece of pie may still choose to eat the pie because of the immediate pleasure eating provides (short-term outcome), despite the fact that it will decrease the likeliness of successfully loosing weight. This example clearly demonstrates the conflict that underlies many choices that clients have to make when attempting to change their behaviours. Clients often know what is right for them, but still fail to act accordingly. In most cases, the short-term benefits of problematic behaviour “win” from the long-term benefits of helpful behaviour, simply because the short-term benefits are more immediate. While seeing the results of losing weight may take weeks or months, eating a tempting piece of pie offers direct pleasure, here and now.

Likewise, while approaching a woman may eventually result in a romantic relationship, avoiding her offers the immediate relief from fear and stress of possibly getting turned down. Obviously, while persisting in problematic behaviours offers immediate gratification or relief, it can also cause immediate harm or discomfort. The client who just avoided an interaction with a women, may feel relief but may also feel incompetent at the same time. The dieter who decides to eat the tempting piece of pie may experience joy while eating and also regret or shame immediately afterwards.

The long-term costs of problematic behaviours are often clear. In most cases, they involve a lack of autonomy and feelings of incompetence and dependence. They prevent people from living a happy, fulfilling life.

The long-term benefits of problematic behaviours are often more difficult to identify. First, long-term benefits may involve the prevention of negative consequences that may arise from engaging in the action. For example, a person who refrains from starting his/her own business may believe

that the possibility of failure is too great to take the initial risk. The benefit of not starting is the prevention of risk. A long-term benefit of the person who avoids women may be not having to face a break-up (something that the client is already painfully familiar with). Second, a common long-term benefit of problematic behaviours in the context of traumas, illnesses or other more severe difficulties is related to the sense of identity that is derived from the problematic behaviour. A person who copes with the negative emotions of a traumatic event by drinking, may become identified with his/her problematic behaviour by seeing him/herself as an “alcoholic.” Having a drinking problem becomes a central part of his/her self-story. This person’s sense of self is primarily based on his/her problematic relationship with alcohol. While drinking provides the short-term benefit of avoiding the traumatic pain, it also strengthens a victim identity in the long-term. Moreover, seeing oneself as and behaving like a victim often triggers the need to help in others. These others may feel pity for the person’s problems or guilty when leaving him/her and offer long lasting support, care and advice. Over time, being an “alcoholic” thus offers a way to connect to people (long-term benefit), albeit in dependent rather than autonomous way. Moreover, having a victim identity protects oneself from the burden of responsibility, because it implies that circumstances rather than the self created a victim.

In sum, choosing to engage in problematic behaviour involves two dimensions: short-term and long-term consequences, and benefits and costs. The matrix displayed in Fig. 1 provides an overview of these dimensions.

Fig. 1. Two important dimensions underlying the choice to continue engaging in problematic behaviours

	Benefits	Costs
Short-term	i.e., immediate gratification or stress relief, attention and care from others	i.e., distress, regret, feelings of incompetence and dependence
Long-term	Sense of identity (victim), relationships with others because of problems, lack of responsibility	Failure to reach goals, decreased autonomy and well-being

In this step of the assessment, the client is invited to construct a matrix as shown in Fig.1. By constructing this matrix, the client becomes aware of the motivational forces that cause him/her to persist in problematic behaviour.

Goal

The goal of this exercise is to assess why the client persists in problematic behaviours and/or thinking patterns.





Advice

- Often, after completing this exercise, clients realise that their focus on the short-term benefits resulting from the problematic behaviour cause the behaviour to persist. In order for them to change their behaviour, this exercise can be used as a first step to focus more on the long-term benefits of behavioural change or the costs of persisting in the current behaviour. Shifting their focus may help to increase the motivation needed to take appropriate action.
- This exercise requires a high level of self-reflection. For many clients, it is easier (and less confronting) to first analyse the behaviour of another person before analysing their own situation. For this reason, the present exercise invites clients to first analyse another person's behaviour.
- Note that many clients are unaware of their victim identity and a direct confrontation with this identity is most likely to result in resistance. In these cases, the confrontation causes the client to experience emotions like anger and frustration that often directly guide the client's way of responding. Typical responses include: "it is easy for you to say, you don't know what it is like to be in my shoes", "I feel you are not taking my problems seriously" or "Are you suggesting this is all my fault?" Rather than "attacking" the victim identity of clients, it is generally more helpful to first explain the concept of a victim identity by using the term "self-story" because this term is less threatening and negative than the term "victim identity." The practitioner may start by giving some personal examples of how he/she and others create stories about the self. In fact, everyone creates stories about the self, both positive and negative ones. These stories are not problematic. What is problematic is that we believe them to be true. The practitioner may ask the client whether the client can think of any self-stories that may his/her behaviour to persist. The practitioner asks the client "what is the story that you are telling yourself in this situation?"
- When emotions arise during this exercise, it is advisable to take some time to focus on these emotions. The practitioner may ask the client to become silent for a moment, close his/her eyes, and direct attention inward. The practitioner may effectively invite the client to do this by saying: "I notice that your emotions are running high in this moment, I wonder if we could take a pause, and a deep breath..." By mindfully observing what is happening, the practitioner prevents him/herself from getting caught in a verbal discussion that is more likely to increase the victim identity of the client rather than to reduce it. Moreover, the space that is created through this silence allows the client to take a step back and prevent him/herself from getting lost in emotions. The practitioner can also use these emotions to further clarify the idea of a self-story. When we believe our self-stories to be true, anything that challenges the self-stories typically results in intense emotions. Over time, the practitioner may agree with the client to refer to his/her self-stories whenever the practitioner feels that these stories are being triggered. In this way, the practitioner can help the client to realise when his/her victim identity is taking over.



Suggested Readings

Ainslie, G. (1992). *Pico economics: The strategic interaction of successive motivational states within the person*. Cambridge University Press.

Loewenstein, G. (1996). Out of control: Visceral influences on behavior. *Organizational behavior and human decision processes*, 65, 272-292.

Metcalfe, J., & Mischel, W. (1999). A hot/cool-system analysis of delay of gratification: dynamics of willpower. *Psychological review*, 106, 3-19.

Tool Description

Instructions

Step 1: Explain the purpose

Explain to the client that the purpose of this exercise is to examine the cost and benefits of his/her behaviour. More specifically, this exercise will focus on the costs and benefits of problematic behaviour. That is, behaviour that is not helping the client to reach his/her goals or is at conflict with his/her personal values. In short, this behaviour does not promote the client's well-being, but it continues to occur.

Step 2: Explain short-term and long-term costs and benefits

Explain what short-term and long-term costs and benefits are and then present an example case to the client.

Short-term benefits are the direct positive results we get from our actions. Long-term benefits are the positive result we get from our actions in the long run. Short-term costs are the direct negative consequences of our actions. Long-term costs are the negative consequences of our actions in the long run.

Imagine a person who would like to lose weight. Although he/she knows eating high caloric food will not help him/her to reach his/her goal, he/she continues to do so.

- What could be a short-term benefit of eating high caloric food?
(enjoying the taste of the food)
- What could be a short-term cost of eating high caloric food?
(feeling regret or incompetent for failing to restrain oneself)
- What could be a long-term benefit of eating high caloric food?
(not having to face the embarrassment of failing to lose weight)
- What could be a long-term cost of eating high caloric food?
(weight gain, health issues)

Step 3: Analyse the client's behaviour

Invite the client to consider his/her own behaviour. Is there currently anything that the client wishes to change?

Choose one thing and list this here:

Can your client think of something he/she does or not do that prevents him/her from making the desired change?

List one action here:

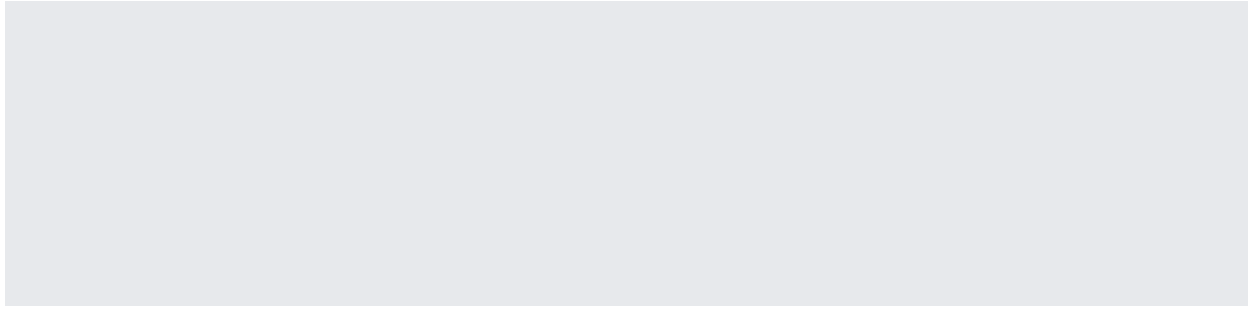
Now ask the client to analyse his/her behaviour like he/she did in the example case. Why does the client keep engaging in these problematic behaviours? Consider the short-term and long-term costs and benefits of your client's actions and list them in the matrix below.

	<i>Benefits</i>	<i>Costs</i>
<i>Short-term</i>		
<i>Long-term</i>		

Reflection

What stood out most for your client from this exercise?

What did your client learn about him/herself?



How may your client use the insights from this exercise to promote more helpful behaviour?

