

Costs and Benefits of Unhelpful Behavior

Motivation

Exercise

10-15 min

Client

No

Why do clients often persist in problematic behaviors that will not bring them closer to their goals or may even reduce their 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 the person he/she may like. Although he/she knows that this behavior will not help him/her attain any positive outcomes, in the long run, he/she continues to avoid interaction with that person. The reason for doing so has much to do with the short-term benefits of avoidance.

Commonly, the benefit of avoidance is a short-term relief of discomfort. In this example, avoiding interactions with the person of affection prevents the client from possibly getting turned down. Over time, this behavior is maintained through what behaviorists refer to as negative reinforcement, a behavioral pattern (e.g., avoidance) that is kept alive because it either removes an aversive stimulus (e.g., fear) or prevents a situation (e.g., getting turned down) from happening.

At the very heart of the counterintuitive fact that clients often persist in problematic behaviors 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 lose weight (long-term outcome) and is confronted with a fascinating piece of pie may still choose to eat the pie because eating provides immediate pleasure (short-term outcome), even though it will decrease the likeliness of successfully losing weight. This example demonstrates the conflict that underlies many choices that clients make when attempting to change their behaviors. Clients often know what is right for them, but still, fail to act accordingly. In most cases, the short-term benefits of problematic behavior “win” over the long-term benefits of helpful behavior, 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 person of one’s affection may eventually result in a romantic relationship, avoiding that person offers immediate relief from fear and stress of possibly being turned down. While persisting in problematic behaviors offers immediate gratification or relief, it can also cause immediate harm or discomfort. The client who just avoided interaction with the person of his/her affection 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 regret or shame immediately afterward.

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

The long-term benefits of problematic behaviors are often more challenging 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 avoiding a person of affection might be to prevent facing a break-up (something that the client is already painfully familiar with). Second, a common long-term benefit of problematic behaviors in the context of traumas, illnesses, or other more severe difficulties is related to the sense of identity derived from the problematic behavior. A person who copes with the negative emotions of a traumatic event by drinking may identify with his/her problematic behavior 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 a short-term benefit of avoiding the traumatic pain, in the long-term, it also strengthens the victim identity.

Moreover, seeing oneself as and behaving like a victim often triggers the need to help 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 a dependent rather than an autonomous way. Moreover, having a victim identity protects oneself from the burden of responsibility because it implies that circumstances rather than the self are responsible for the creation of victim identity.

In sum, choosing to engage in problematic behavior depends on two dimensions: short-term versus long-term consequences and benefits versus 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 behaviors

	Benefits	Costs
<i>Short-term</i>	i.e., immediate gratification or stress relief, attention and care from others	i.e., distress, regret, feelings of incompetence and dependence
<i>Long-term</i>	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 behavior.



Goal

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



Advice

- Often, after completing this exercise, clients realize that their focus on the short-term benefits of problematic behavior causes the behavior to persist. To change their behavior, this exercise can be used as the first step to help them focus more on the long-term benefits of behavioral change or the costs of persisting in the current behavior. Shifting their focus may help them 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 analyze the behavior of another person before analyzing their situation. For this reason, the present exercise invites clients to analyze another person's behavior first.
- Note that many clients are unaware of their victim identity, and confronting this identity directly 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. Everyone creates stories about their selves, 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 affect his/her behavior 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 at 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 clarify the idea of a self-story further. When we believe our self-stories to be accurate, 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 realize when his/her victim identity is taking over.



References

- 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.

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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 behavior. More specifically, this exercise focuses on the costs and benefits of problematic behavior. That is behavior that is not helping the client reach his/her goals or is in conflict with his/her values. In short, this behavior does not promote the client's well-being, yet it continues to occur.

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

Explain the short-term and long-term costs and benefits and then present examples to the client.

Short-term benefits are the direct positive results we get from our actions. Long-term benefits are the positive results 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 the short-term benefit of eating high caloric food? (enjoying the taste of the food)
- What could be the short-term cost of eating high caloric food? (feeling regret or incompetent for failing to restrain oneself)
- What could be the long-term benefit of eating high caloric food? (not having to face the embarrassment of failing to lose weight)
- What could be the long-term cost of eating high caloric food? (weight gain, health issues)

Step 3: Analyze the client's behavior

Invite the client to consider his/her behavior. 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 does not do that prevents him/her from making the desired change?

List one action here:

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

	Benefits	Costs
Short-term		
Long-term		



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 behavior?