



Changing Behavior Through Positive Reinforcement

Motivation

Exercise

n/a

Client

No

Positive reinforcement is one of the most effective ways to promote behavior change and replace unwanted behaviors with more desirable ones. Unlike negative reinforcement, which involves the removal of something unpleasant to strengthen a particular behavior, positive reinforcement is the practice of adding a reward to encourage a desirable behavior [1]. Rewards (or reinforcers) help change behavior because they foster a positive association with an action, thus making it more appealing. In short, when it comes to behavior change, a rewarded action is more likely to be repeated in the future [2].

Because we prioritize immediate rewards over delayed rewards, a guaranteed reward in the present is typically viewed as more worthwhile than a future reward [2]. This present bias also means we tend to settle for a smaller immediate reward rather than wait for a larger future reward [3]. Compared to a delayed reward or no reward, immediate rewards have been shown to improve intrinsic motivation [4] - a central concept in behavior change - and increase the likelihood that a behavior will continue due to its inherent satisfaction [5].

In an ideal world, a desirable behavior would be rewarding enough to encourage sustained change. However, utilizing rewards to incentivize certain behaviors is an effective way to expedite the process. Positive reinforcement can be applied to diverse settings and, with practice and focus, is an effective way to promote behavior modification and habit formation [1]. This exercise will help clients reinforce desirable behaviors and cultivate new positive behavior patterns using small, immediate rewards.



Author

This tool was created by Elaine Houston.



Goal

The goal of this exercise is to help clients change their behavior using positive reinforcement. Receiving a small, immediate reward on completing the desired action will help clients become habituated to new positive behavior patterns.



Advice

- Changing behavior will take time, and clients should know that this process is different for everyone and depends on many factors. This is not a one-and-done exercise and must be repeated each time the desired behavior takes place. Clients should also have realistic expectations about what changes can be achieved and in what time frame.
- Clients should not attempt to change too many behaviors at once. This is likely to be overwhelming and result in frustration. By focusing on just one behavior at a time, clients are more likely to make sustainable changes.
- Clients should understand that setbacks are likely. This is completely normal and not a sign of failure - it is simply part of the process. Setbacks can be viewed as learning opportunities that allow clients to reassess their approach and perhaps rethink their chosen reward(s).
- The choice of reinforcer is subjective, and only the client will know what specific reward will sustain the desired behavior change. It is important to note, however, that certain types of rewards should be avoided. For instance, to make positive reinforcement an effective intervention, the rewards used in this exercise should not:
 1. Have a negative effect on the clients' physical or mental health
 2. Be a potential source of guilt or remorse
 3. Be chosen to gain approval or appreciation from other people.

Instead, clients should consider rewards that:

1. Are simple to carry out
2. Can be carried out immediately after the desired behavior
3. Are enjoyable to them personally.



References

1. Skinner, B. F. (1953). *Science and human behavior*. MacMillan.
2. Clear, J. (2018). *Atomic habits: Tiny changes, remarkable results*. Penguin Random House.
3. O'Donoghue, T., & Rabin, M. (1999). Doing it now or later. *American Economic Review*, 89, 103-124.
4. Woolley, K., & Fishbach, A. (2018). It's about time: Earlier rewards increase intrinsic motivation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 114, 877.
5. Flannery, M. (2017). Self-determination theory: Intrinsic motivation and behavioral change. *Oncology Nursing Forum*, 44, 155-156.



Changing Behavior Through Positive Reinforcement

Changing behavior can be challenging. It is a process that takes focus and practice, but it is certainly something that you can achieve. Whether it involves work, diet, family, exercise, completing chores, or anything else, positive reinforcement can be used to effectively change behavior.

Positive reinforcement is a way to reward behavior that you want to repeat, and it works so well because change is easier when it is enjoyable. In short, adding a reward will help you associate pleasant feelings with desirable behaviors and increase the likelihood of a behavior being repeated. Eventually, you will look forward to carrying out the new behavior because it makes you feel good.

Rewards do not need to be complex or expensive. Simple rewards increase the good feelings needed to reinforce a behavior. Rewards work best when they are small, enjoyable, and (because we value immediate rewards over delayed rewards) carried out promptly after the behavior has occurred. This exercise will guide you through the process of using positive reinforcement to help you forge a path towards a new, more desirable behavior.

Step 1: Identifying a behavior to reinforce

In this step, you will take a moment to consider a behavior you would like to change. When you think about what you wish to change, try to formulate it as making a positive change rather than avoiding something negative. For example, "I want to start working out twice a week" is much better than "I need to stop being so lazy."

Describe the behavior you would like to reinforce in the space below.



Step 2: Choosing a suitable reward

To change a behavior, you first need to find the right reward to reinforce it. Rewards do not have to cost money, and they can include activities like watching a movie, doing a hobby, or playing a game. The same reward may not work for everyone, so this is a personal choice for you to make. Below you will find some guidance on choosing a suitable reward.

The right reward is something;

- you value and enjoy
- simple and immediate, so ensure it is practical to carry out as soon as the behavior occurs.

Avoid rewards that:

- have a severe negative effect on your health (such as consuming large amounts of fattening food)
- will make you feel guilty later
- are chosen to gain approval or appreciation from other people.

Using the example above, “I want to start working out twice a week,” a small and immediate reward might be something like allowing yourself time to rest and relax after a gym session. To give another example, after finishing a homework assignment, an immediate reward could be playing a computer game. Or, after writing up a work report, a suitable reward might be enjoying a nice meal with your spouse.

Therefore, using the guidance above, what would be a suitable satisfying and pleasant reward? If required, a list of reward ideas can be found in Appendix.

Write down a selection of suitable rewards in the space below.



Step 3: Reflecting on your experience

Now that you have rewarded your chosen behavior, it is important to let yourself savor the positive feelings that it created. Immediately after you have enjoyed your reward, take a moment to think about the experience and ask yourself the following question:

What good feelings am I experiencing right now? Write your response in the space below.

Step 4: General reflection

- What was it like to complete this exercise?
- What did you enjoy most about this exercise?
- What did you find most challenging?
- In what ways has this exercise changed how you think about making behavior changes?
- After completing this exercise, what do you consider to be the main benefits of positive reinforcement?



Appendix: Examples of free or low-cost rewards

- Rest and relax
- Spend time doing a hobby
- Watch an episode of your favorite TV show
- Enjoy a coffee
- Read a chapter of a book
- Soak in a hot bubble bath
- Listen to a podcast
- Play a computer game
- Write about your accomplishment in your journal
- Listen to your favorite music playlist
- Watch a movie you've never seen before
- Rewatch your favorite movie
- Reflect on your achievement in your mind and allow yourself to savor the moment
- Find a peaceful spot to sit in the sun
- Spend some time in nature
- Call a friend
- Go for a leisurely walk
- Engage in positive self-talk. For example, "You did it, well done!" or "I'm so proud of you."
- Take a moment to be grateful and think about your success
- Use an app to track your achievement
- Fuel your body and mind with a healthy and delicious treat
- Color in a mindful coloring book
- Spend time learning a new hobby
- Listen to a chapter of an audiobook