Actions can be Effective or Ineffective

Some of our actions are effective in helping us adapt to environments and meet important needs and goals. Other behaviors are ineffective and may interfere with adaptation. Behavior therapist Joseph Wolpe (1958) suggested that adaptive behaviors support "progress toward the satisfaction of a need or the avoidance of possible damage or deprivation" (p. 32). In contrast, maladaptive behaviors result in "the expenditure of energy or the occurrence of damage or deprivation" (Wolpe, 1958, p. 32). A similar idea is recognized by William Glasser's (1998) Choice Theory. Glasser suggested that almost all behavior is chosen and that effective actions are those that meet important needs like survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, or fun. 3D Recovery summarizes these ideas with the following definitions:

Effective Actions help people…

- Meet their needs
- Accomplish valued goals
- Develop meaningful relationships
- Avoid dangerous or unpleasant situations
- Survive and adapt to changing environments

Ineffective Actions…

- Interfere with need fulfillment
- Are inconsistent with long-term goals and values
- Waste energy without fulfilling needs or meeting goals
- Result in dangerous or unpleasant consequences
- May result in short-term rewards but hinder long-term progress
- Interfere with meaningful relationships
- Threaten long-term survival

Common Patterns of Ineffective Actions

1. **Short-Term Gain, Long-Term Pain**

   Sometimes there is a conflict between short-term and long-term goals. If your goal is to temporarily forget your problems, then playing video games with your friends may be an effective action in the short-term. If your long-term goal is to pass tomorrow's chemistry exam so you can graduate from college, then gaming may impede your progress. Social psychologists Baumeister and Scher (1988) referred to this pattern as "tradeoffs" in which people frequently make judgment errors, "favoring short-term benefits that are associated with long-term costs" (p. 8). Here are some examples of tradeoffs resulting in short-term gains that may lead to long-term pain:

- **Rewards without Effort** – If you start with the easy tasks in life, you may not have the stamina for difficult but important endeavors later. It is often necessary to learn to face difficult tasks first and then use rewards to reinforce your efforts (Klatt & Morris, 2011).
- **Procrastination** – Procrastination is commonly defined as an attempt to avoid, or momentarily delay, a specific action despite awareness that the delay may lead to adverse consequences on performance, stress, and well-being (Baumeister & Scher, 1988; Rice, Richardson, Clark, 2012; Steel, 2007).
- **Alcohol & Substance Abuse** – The short-term benefits of substance use are immediate, but the long-term costs are often self-destructive and problematic (Baumeister & Scher, 1988).
- **Compulsive Behaviors** – Similar to substance abuse, there are other compulsive behaviors that can provide temporary relief from short-term pain—such as gambling, eating, sex, shopping, or video games—but possess the potential to be harmful in the long-run (Baumeister & Scher, 1988).
- **Health-Care Negligence** – Many people eat too much, avoid exercise, or negalect their health in other ways. Some individuals choose to ignore advice from a health care professional despite the fact that disregarding the doctor's orders may increase the level of frequency or severity of illnesses, may slow recovery, or lead to death (Baumeister & Scher, 1988).

Practicing Effective Actions. In order to break the pattern of short-term / long-term trade-offs, it may be helpful to pair an unpleasant task with a pleasurable reward. Think about ways you can achieve your long-term goals by acting in the present and rewarding yourself for actions that move you toward the end result.

2. **Outdated Responses**

A current situation may remind you of an earlier experience and you may react to the new situation as if you were facing the old one. For example, after a car accident, you may associate cars with danger in a way that interferes with driving to work. After a bad break-up, you may assume that all relationships will be painful and you may isolate yourself and neglect your social needs.   Different psychological theories explain these outdated responses in different ways:

- **Conditioned Response** – Classical conditioning occurs when a particular stimulus, such as a swerving car, triggers a response, such as anxiety, that has been conditioned over time due the experiences of a car accident (Pavlov, 1957; Wolpe, 1990).
- **Transference Distortion** – Psychodynamic theory suggests that we often respond to people based on interpersonal patterns learned earlier in life. In many cases, these responses may be inaccurate or distorted and may make it difficult to adapt to new relationships (Book, 1998).

Practicing Effective Actions. Through the process of exposure and extinction, you can learn to let go of the past and recondition your behavioral responses to focus on life in the present. Exposure over time without engaging in avoidant or escape responses will gradually lead to the extinction of the conditioned response. For example, if someone spends time in a car without having an accident, gradually their fear will subside. When we recognize distorted interpersonal perceptions that have been learned in the past, we can begin to recognize that new relationship will not always meet our outdated expectations.

3. **Impulsivity**

Sometimes people act without considering the consequences of their behaviors. Impulsive actions are often primitive reactions to basic emotions such as hitting someone out of anger or running away from danger. These types of fight or flight responses have been hard-wired but may be more effective if brought under more conscious control.

- **Acting on Emotional Impulses** – The requirements of living with others according to rules often include using self-control to restrain or redirect desires, otherwise acting outside of restrictions may result in physical, legal, or social consequences (Baumeister & Exline, 1999).

Practicing Effective Actions. Before engaging in a specific action, it is important to evaluate the behavior and determine if the potential outcomes are worth the effort.

4. **Not Trying Hard Enough**

In order to reap the benefits of a good idea or to accomplish important goals, hard work is often necessary. Without endurance or perseverance, you may give up too easily and be unable to obtain the rewards you desire.

- **Giving Up or Saving Face** – When confronted with a task of perceived difficulty or discomfort, it may seem easier to throw in the towel or not even try. While these actions may provide temporary relief by avoiding potential embarrassment, more challenging goals will not be accomplished because of the perseverance required (Baumeister & Scher, 1988).

Practicing Effective Actions. It may be helpful to build up your endurance for a particular action by breaking the larger goal into several smaller steps. Rewarding yourself for each moderate effort will help you maintain momentum. It may take time, so practice patience and remember that slow-and-steady can win the race.

5. **Trying Too Hard**

Sometimes people continue to put time and effort into an endeavor which will never pay off or continue to use an ineffective strategy. This may involve investing in an unprofitable business or pursuing a relationship with someone who is not interested. This is the opposite of not trying hard enough.

- Perseveration – Time and energy are often wasted in pursuit of a futile endeavor because maximum achievement depends on knowing when to quit (Baumeister & Scher, 1988).
- Perfectionism – If achievements are never viewed as good enough, energy is expended believing that you should do better. Putting too many demands on yourself may lead you to either fail to complete the task or choke under pressure (Stoltz & Ashby, 2007).

Practicing Effective Actions. Effort and time-management is best organized by an appropriate evaluation of the costs and benefits of a specific task. It is important to know when it is time to give up and move on.

6. **Passivity and Avoidance**

If you avoid conflict or fail to stand up for yourself, it will be difficult to succeed. If you dodge important tasks in life, they usually don't go away and often get worse. For example, if you don't pay your bills on time, you will be paying the original bills as well as additional late fees. Some people spend all of their time and effort complaining about their circumstances and this pattern may interfere with the search for corrective actions.

- Passivity – Passive activity is seen as self-defeating due to the tendency to remain stuck. For example, complaining is seen as a passive activity that often fails to lend itself to change (Baumeister & Scher, 1988).
- Avoidance – When people feel depressed, they often withdraw in order to avoid discomfort but they also miss out on opportunities for rewarding experiences that could alleviate some of their negative symptoms (Martel, Dimidjian, & Herman-Dunn, 2010).
- Learned Helplessness – Sometimes when people have faced repeated failures they may lose a sense of control about outcomes in their lives which often leads to a state of inertia known as learned helplessness (Baumeister & Scher, 1988).
- Shyness – Passivity is sometimes associated with shyness where anxiety leads to behavioral inhibition, which leads to an avoidance of social interactions. This pattern hinders the opportunity for experiencing connections with others (Baumeister & Scher, 1988; Snyder, Smith, Augelli, & Ingram, 1985).
- Turning Away – When conflict is experienced within a relationship, one person may reject, ignore, or criticize the other person, thereby shutting the door on the potential to repair or rebuild the relationship, fueling future distance (Gottman & Nan, 1999).

Practicing Effective Actions.   Instead of focusing on past disappointments, it may be more effective to spend time and energy trying to change things in the present. Learning to assert your needs and address conflicts when they arise often results in positive changes.

7. **Aggression**

Some people express feelings of anger with aggressive or hostile actions. This may temporarily intimidate people and you may get what you want in the short run. However, the damage to the relationship will often result in loss of friends or conflicts at work.

- Engaging in Aggression – People who act out their aggression are more likely to experience subsequent aggression. In its extreme form, aggression becomes rage and should be addressed appropriately in order to become reduced (Bushman, Baumesiter, & Phillips, 2001).
- Turning Against – There may be times in a relationship where one person feels hurt and decides to "turn against" the other person with actions of retaliation or harm even if it restricts relationship development (Gottman & Nan, 1999).
- Hostility – Similar to engaging in aggression, researcher suggest that expressing feelings of hostility cannot reduce the experience of hostility, therefore acting out hostility can be viewed as ineffective (Rothaus & Worchel, 1964).

Practicing Effective Actions.   In order to change a pattern of aggression, it may be helpful to express feelings in a more effective way before they build up and lead to hostile action. If you begin to feel upset or angry, stop and take a deep breath and scan your body for sensations that may lead you to evaluate what you are feeling and the thoughts associated with these feelings. By attending to your feelings and actions, you may find more adaptive ways of expressing yourself that do not involve aggression.

8. **Trying to Control Others**

Ultimately, the only person you can control is yourself. Trying to control others is often a futile effort that wastes time and energy. People will rarely do exactly what you want them to do and efforts to control others may damage relationships.

- Interpersonal Dominance – Attempts to establish dominance over one partner in a relationship by physically or emotionally restricting the partner are often signs of abuse and may be related to unresolved insecurity (Lyon & Greenburg, 1991).
- Codependency – Partners of addicts often lose themselves trying to "control" the addictive behavior either through passive actions or proactive actions, often telling themselves that if they stayed home to monitor the partner's behavior or if they made themselves more available that the partner would not engage in their addiction (Lyon & Greenburg, 1991).

Practicing Effective Actions. It may be helpful for you to establish limits around what you are willing to do in your relationship and what you are not willing to do. As you take responsibility for your own life, you may be able to let go of attempts to control others.

Summary of Understanding Actions
Elizabeth Aranda & Jeff E. Harris © 2013
3D Recovery ® Resource 4.1

Eight Patterns of Ineffective Actions

SHORT-TERM GAIN, LONG-TERM PAIN	
Rewards without Effort Procrastination Substance Abuse	Compulsive Behaviors Health-Care Negligence
OUTDATED RESPONSES Conditioned Responses Transference Distortions	**IMPULSIVITY** Acting on Emotional Impulses
NOT TRYING HARD ENOUGH Giving Up Saving Face	**TRYING TOO HARD** Perseveration Perfectionism
PASSIVITY & AVOIDANCE Passivity Avoidance Learned Helplessness Shyness Turning Away	**AGGRESSION** Engaging in Aggression Turning Against Hostility
TRYING TO CONTROL OTHERS Interpersonal Dominance Codependency	

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