Reinforcement: Why Behaviours Repeat

BEHAVIOUR & CONSEQUENCES

Understanding reinforcement, relief, punishment and the consequences that shape behaviour

01 The basic idea

our behaviour is shaped by what happens after it



When a consequence makes a behaviour more likely to happen again, that consequence is called **reinforcement**. Reinforcement means the behaviour increases or becomes more likely (Skinner, 1953).

+ **POSITIVE** *something is added*	− **NEGATIVE** *something is removed*	↑ **REINFORCEMENT** *behaviour increases*	↓ **PUNISHMENT** *behaviour decreases*

Positive does not mean good. Negative does not mean bad.

02 The consequence window

reinforcement versus punishment

	SOMETHING IS **ADDED** (+)	SOMETHING IS **REMOVED** (−)
BEHAVIOUR **INCREASES** ↑	**REINFORCEMENT · ADDED** ### Positive reinforcement Something desirable is added after a behaviour, making it more likely to happen again. **EXAMPLES** *Homework done → praise → more homework* *A joke gets laughs → you joke more*	**REINFORCEMENT · REMOVED** ### Negative reinforcement Something unpleasant is removed or reduced, making the behaviour more likely. Not punishment. **EXAMPLES** *Seatbelt alarm → buckle up → alarm stops* *Headache → painkiller → pain eases*
BEHAVIOUR **DECREASES** ↓	**PUNISHMENT · ADDED** ### Positive punishment Something unpleasant is added after a behaviour, making it less likely. **EXAMPLES** *Breaks a rule → reprimand → may happen less* *Touch a hot pan → a burn → touch it less*	**PUNISHMENT · REMOVED** ### Negative punishment Something desirable is removed after a behaviour, making it less likely. **EXAMPLES** *Breaks an agreement → loses a privilege* *Home late → loses screen time*

FIRST ASK
Did the behaviour increase, or decrease?

THEN ASK
Was something added, or removed?

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03 Positive reinforcement

something desirable is added

EXAMPLE

Homework and praise

1. A child completes their homework
2. A parent praises them
3. The child is more likely to do homework again

The praise is the positive reinforcer.

OTHER EXAMPLES

- You contribute an idea at work → colleagues respond positively → you contribute more often.
- You exercise → you feel a sense of accomplishment → you are more likely to exercise again.
- You complete a difficult task → you reward yourself → completing tasks becomes more likely.

Think about your own behaviour

What behaviour occurred?	What was added afterwards?	Did it become more likely?
		☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not sure

04 Negative reinforcement

something unpleasant is removed

NOT PUNISHMENT

"Negative" simply means removed

When something unpleasant is removed or reduced after a behaviour, that behaviour becomes more likely. The behaviour **increases**, so this is reinforcement.

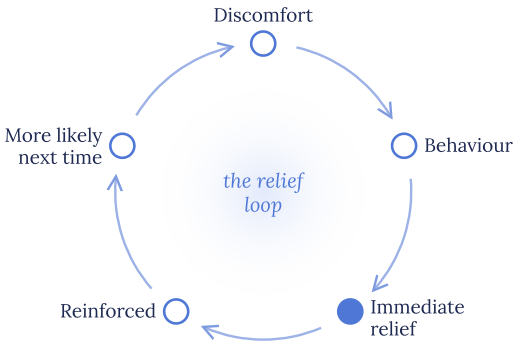
- Taking a painkiller → the headache eases
- Leaving a noisy room → the overwhelm settles
- Paying a bill → the worry about it stops

EXAMPLE

1. A seatbelt alarm sounds
2. You fasten your seatbelt
3. The alarm stops
4. You're more likely to buckle up next time

05 Why relief can be so powerful

negative reinforcement in everyday life



One of the most important forms of negative reinforcement is a behaviour that brings **immediate relief** from discomfort. Quick relief can strengthen a behaviour very effectively (Salkovskis, 1991).

Anxiety	→	reassurance seeking	→ *relief*
Fear	→	avoidance	→ *relief*
Uncertainty	→	checking	→ *relief*
Awkwardness	→	leaving	→ *relief*
Difficult emotion	→	distraction	→ *relief*

The behaviour may make complete sense in the short term. But if relief repeatedly reinforces it, it can sometimes keep the **longer-term problem** going.

My own relief loop

The discomfort	What I do	The relief I get

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06 Intermittent reinforcement

when reward comes only some of the time

A behaviour does not have to be rewarded every time to become persistent. When reinforcement happens occasionally, unpredictably, after several attempts or at varying intervals, a behaviour can become **particularly persistent**.

EACH DOT IS ONE ATTEMPT

↓ an unexpected, especially warm reward



tries with no reward — *...so the behaviour keeps going*

A SIMPLE EXAMPLE

You send someone a message. Sometimes they respond immediately. Sometimes they don't. Sometimes the reply is especially warm. The uncertainty can encourage you to keep checking, waiting or trying again.

THE PATTERN

Behaviour → No reward → Try again →
Unexpected reward → Strong relief or reward →
Behaviour continues

07 Reinforcement schedules

the pattern shapes persistence

CONTINUOUS
reinforced every time



Praise whenever a child practises a new skill.

FIXED RATIO
after a predictable number



A reward after every five completed tasks.

VARIABLE RATIO
after an unpredictable number



Some forms of gambling work this way.

FIXED INTERVAL
after a predictable time



A regular weekly reward.

VARIABLE INTERVAL
after unpredictable time



Unexpected messages or notifications.

Why does this matter? The pattern of reinforcement can influence how often a behaviour occurs and how persistent it becomes (Ferster & Skinner, 1957).

Which schedule might be keeping one of my habits going?

08 Reinforcement in relationships

a careful lens

ONE POSSIBLE PATTERN

Intermittent reinforcement can sometimes help explain why inconsistent responses can be difficult to disengage from.

Distance → Uncertainty → Reaching out →
Occasional warmth or connection → Relief →
More reaching out next time

USE THIS CAREFULLY

A process, not an intention

Intermittent reinforcement does not, by itself, prove that another person is deliberately manipulating someone. It describes a behavioural process, not someone's intention.

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09 Punishment

consequences that decrease behaviour

POSITIVE PUNISHMENT · SOMETHING UNPLEASANT ADDED

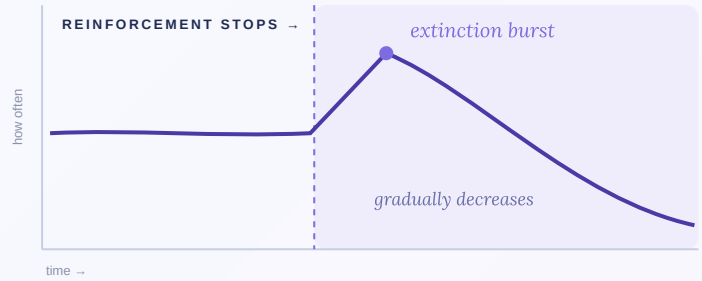
A person breaks a rule → receives a reprimand → the behaviour may decrease.

NEGATIVE PUNISHMENT · SOMETHING DESIRABLE REMOVED

A teenager breaks an agreed rule → loses a privilege → the behaviour may decrease.

10 Extinction

what happens when reinforcement stops



When a previously reinforced behaviour stops being reinforced, it may gradually decrease. Sometimes it first becomes **more frequent or intense**: an extinction burst.

One review found extinction bursts in about a quarter of cases. They were less common when extinction was combined with other procedures than when it was used alone (Lerman & Iwata, 1995).

EXAMPLE

Someone usually receives reassurance after repeatedly asking a question. The reassurance stops. At first they may ask more often, more urgently, or try new ways of getting reassurance. If reinforcement continues not to occur, the behaviour may eventually decrease.

If I change a pattern

What might a burst look like for me?

What could help me ride it out?

11 Spot the reinforcement

a behaviour you'd like to understand

What happened before?

What did I do?

What happened afterwards?

Was something desirable added?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not sure

Was something unpleasant removed or reduced?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not sure

Did the behaviour become more likely?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not sure

What might be maintaining it?

☐ Positive reinforcement ☐ Negative reinforcement ☐ Punishment ☐ Relief from discomfort ☐ Intermittent reinforcement ☐ Something else: _____

12 The short-term payoff

immediate benefit, later cost

What does this behaviour give me immediately?

What feeling does it reduce or remove?

What do I get from doing it?

What might it cost me later?

BEHAVIOUR	IMMEDIATE PAYOFF	POSSIBLE LATER COST
Checking	Relief, certainty	More checking; less tolerance of uncertainty
Avoiding	Relief from fear	Fear may remain or grow
Procrastinating	Relief from discomfort	More pressure later
Reassurance seeking	Certainty, relief	Less confidence in tolerating uncertainty

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13 Finding an alternative

"just stop" is rarely enough

If a behaviour is being reinforced because it brings immediate relief, simply telling yourself to stop may not be enough. It often helps to find another way to meet some of the same need.

What need is the behaviour meeting?

What immediate benefit am I getting?

Is there another behaviour that could meet some of the same need?

What could I try instead?

What might be uncomfortable about changing the pattern?

What could help me tolerate that discomfort?

14 The bigger picture

behaviour is rarely random

A behaviour may be maintained by what happens immediately afterwards. Sometimes the consequence is rewarding. Sometimes it removes discomfort. Sometimes it provides relief. Sometimes the reward is unpredictable. Understanding the pattern can create a point of choice.

BEFORE
What happens before my behaviour?

AFTER
What happens after it?

MAINTAINING
What might be reinforcing it?

CHOICE
What would I like to do differently?

The goal is not to judge the behaviour. *The goal is to understand what keeps it going.*

IMPORTANT NOTE

This resource is for general education and self-reflection. Behaviour is influenced by many factors, and reinforcement is only one way of understanding why patterns develop and persist. If a behaviour is causing significant distress, impairment or risk, individual assessment and professional support may be appropriate.

SOURCES

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