

Aversives! The good, the bad, and the ugly!

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The good, the bad and the ugly

- The good: Aversives are a necessary and important part of life. No aversives No life. Know aversives, know life.
- The bad: We have typically done a poor job of teaching people how to effectively deal with them
- The ugly: Many people are convinced that the answer is to eliminate aversives and that any use of an aversive in the context of a behavior plan is unwarranted and abusive

Problems with Aversives



Problems with Aversives (overview)



- Children and Adults with disabilities are notoriously bad at dealing with what are sometimes even very minor aversives (inconveniences, disappointments, etc.). The problems with aversives are broken down into:
 - Tasks
 - Extinction conditions

Problems with Aversives (overview)



- Blocked access to reinforcers
- Reinforcer removal
- Words associated with reinforcer loss
- Aversive properties of positive reinforcement
- Private Aversives

Problems with Aversives (overview)



- Response produced aversives (you did it to yourself!)
 - erroneous
 - ineffective
 - inefficient
- Atypical aversives (OCD-like problems, phobias, minor aversives that produce problems equivalent to major ones).

Problems with Aversives (overview)



- Non-aversives that should be aversive
- Approaches for dealing with problems with aversives: The 6 “Ates”
 - Procrastinate
 - Eliminate
 - Terminate
 - Compensate
 - Acclimate
 - Tolerate

Problems with Aversives



- Antipsychotics and Aversives: Disruption of conditioned avoidance responding

Aversive

- **“A stimulus is aversive if its contingent removal, prevention, or postponement maintains behavior--that constitutes negative reinforcement--or if its contingent presentation suppresses behavior—punishment” (Perone 2003)**
- **Aversive is not defined by what something looks like or whether or not it is painful or unpleasant, it is defined, like reinforcement, functionally**

Is Tabasco an Aversive Stimulus?

- In your eye? Painful
- In your mouth? Delicious
- Is it aversive or isn't it?
- Aversive is NOT an inherent property of a stimulus (Mike Perone 2003). Context is king

Some (useful) categories of aversives

- 1. Naturally occurring socially-mediated
- 2. Naturally-occurring non-socially mediated
- 3. Programmed
- 4. Private aversives (often naturally occurring but could be socially-mediated)
- 5. Response-produced (inefficient, ineffective, incorrect)
- Keep these in mind as we talk about some common aversives

Tasks

- Tasks can be socially-mediated aversives
- If there is an indication that a child wants to escape in the presence of tasks I start asking questions about the tasks:
 - Does the child avoid all tasks or just academic tasks or just tasks at a table?
 - If it's ALL tasks, it could be that it isn't "working" per se, but DEMANDS from adults to do ANYTHING!

Tasks

- If the child likes to be helpful when asked to do something relatively easy then perhaps demands per se isn't the problem, but difficult and/or low stimulation work
- Some children are so sensitive to tasks that a "teaching situation" is all that is needed to generate problem behaviors
- Some even get sensitive to the "Sd Voice" (Brian)

Tasks

- Does the child avoid only certain academic tasks? Some children don't like anything that involves writing...
- If there are only certain tasks or a certain task, then you can start asking questions about the task.
- Why does James hate writing? It's difficult for him. Why is it difficult? His fine motor coordination is poor and it takes him a long time to make letters and he makes many errors.

Tasks

- Not liking certain tasks is a MUCH better problem than a general unwillingness to cooperate with the teacher.
- When looking at a problem with a specific task it's important to ask: What is the aversive nature of the task?
- Six potential factors to look at....

Six factors in task difficulty

- 1. Task-related skill deficits: We tend to avoid things that we...um, suck at. Is the child missing some critical skills?
- 2. Errors: Response-produced aversives. These can also result from skill deficits
- 3. Rate of reinforcement/magnitude of reinforcement: This can GREATLY offset the aversive nature of just about any task. Do you get a little something frequently or do you have to engage in a whole lotta responding to get anything out of it?

Six factors in task difficulty

- 4. Task Duration: Duration is a sneaky little bastard!
- 5 minutes no problem
- 10 minutes no problem
- 15 minutes no hair



Six factors in task difficulty

- 5. Does the task “make sense” from a developmental standpoint?
- Why are you learning to write your name when you can't talk yet?
- Did you learn to talk first or write first?
- How well could you talk by the time you learned to write your name???

Six factors in task difficulty

- 6. Does the task make sense to the child?
- This is more of a “intrinsic motivation” issue
- Ever had a job where you were asked to do tasks that made absolutely no sense to you?
- How enthusiastic were you about performing that task?
- Did you even give a %&*! whether or not it was done well or did you just want to get the damn thing done with?

Six factors in task difficulty

- Even if you were well compensated, did you feel good about doing the task???
- Did the task produce its own conditioned reinforcers?
- Would you be excited about learning to identify the value of coins if you are never in a position to use a vending machine to get candy?
- Would you be excited to learn how to write your name when you have no idea how handy it can be to keep other people from taking your stuff?

Six factors in task difficulty

- Skill deficits?
- Errors?
- Sufficient rate of reinforcement/magnitude?
- Duration is reasonable?
- Developmentally ready for it?
- “Makes sense” to the kid?

Some may make the point that...

- Typically developing children do all sorts of things that don't make sense to them and they learn that they just "have" to do it!
- True! But they have MANY more skills, follow all sorts of rules, have great self-control, and display few or no behavior problems

Extinction Conditions



Paleontology texts have changed a lot since dinosaurs took over the school board

Extinction Conditions

- Naturally occurring: These are typically unplanned sources of aversive stimulation, like when things just don't work right
- Socially-Mediated: They can also happen when reinforcers are purposefully withheld (like attention)
- I VERY RARELY recommend programmed extinction unless you are absolutely certain you can cut off the source of reinforcement AND you can withstand the extinction burst!

Extinction Conditions

- Try to avoid programmed extinction by providing small, fast, predictable, reinforcers for the very start of behavior problems when they are not yet dangerous
- This is to be contrasted with big-time reinforcement of appropriate replacement behaviors
- Example: Non-reactive response to “junk” behavior

Extinction Conditions

- Try to turn naturally-occurring extinction conditions into socially-mediated by contriving the condition
- Sheila the mouse mangler!

Blocked Access to Reinforcement

Suddenly, Squeeker felt much



better about the whole cage thing.

Blocked Access to Reinforcement

- Not truly a separate behavioral phenomenon, it is more a description of a condition in which any behavior will likely meet with extinction, but the MO may be MUCH greater because of the proximity of the reinforcer and/or seeing smelling or hearing the reinforcer
- Asking for a coke when no coke is present and you are told “There is none” is VERY different from seeing the coke and being told “You can’t have it!”

Blocked Access to Reinforcement

- There can be both naturally-occurring and socially-mediated blocked access conditions
- Either condition may be a “surprise” to the kid
- WE MUST CONTRIVE BLOCKED ACCESS CONDITIONS OVER AND OVER IN A HIGHLY CONTROLLED MANNER TO OVERCOME THIS PROBLEM!

Blocked Access to Reinforcement

- We overcome this problem by teaching how to wait (even for just seconds) and by using conditioned reinforcers, by providing alternatives (and teaching how to accept alternatives)
- For higher functioning individuals we teach manding for information and negotiating (muffin-boy)
- Remember, for many kids, if they come across a blocked access condition their “go-to” response is often aggression or some other problem behavior

Reinforcer Removal



Reinforcer Removal

- You can take candy from the baby or you can take the baby from the candy
- Either way you're going to have one pissed-off baby...
- Interrupting reinforcement must be done on occasion and kids have to be able to handle it!

Reinforcer Removal

- Like many other aversive events, you must contrive them to do good teaching
- We typically are “caught off guard” by reinforcer removal situations and the child is caught off guard as well. Many kids don’t know WHEN or IF they will ever get the item back again
- We can do several things by contriving these situations and get a whole lotta bang for the buck...

Reinforcer Removal

- Let the child acclimate (habituate) to brief programmed removal/interruption of the reinforcer (maybe even only seconds) SMILE AND LOOK HAPPY AND EXCITED WHEN YOU DO THIS!!!
- Once the child has learned to “unpucker” and stops freaking out about 3 second interruption you can prompt a “re-acquisition” response. It is a mand, but not a mand to get something, it’s a mand to **get something back again** “that’s mine!”
- After this step you prompt a small act of compliance, then mand, then return item TO A CALM CHILD!

Reinforcer Removal

- Now you've taught a child to tolerate reinforcer removal/interruption
- Broken any "behave badly = get item back" contingency that may have existed (people aren't always aggressive because it caused the item to be returned.)
- Taught the child how to get the item back again
- Taught the child how to work to get the item back again

Words associated with reinforcer loss



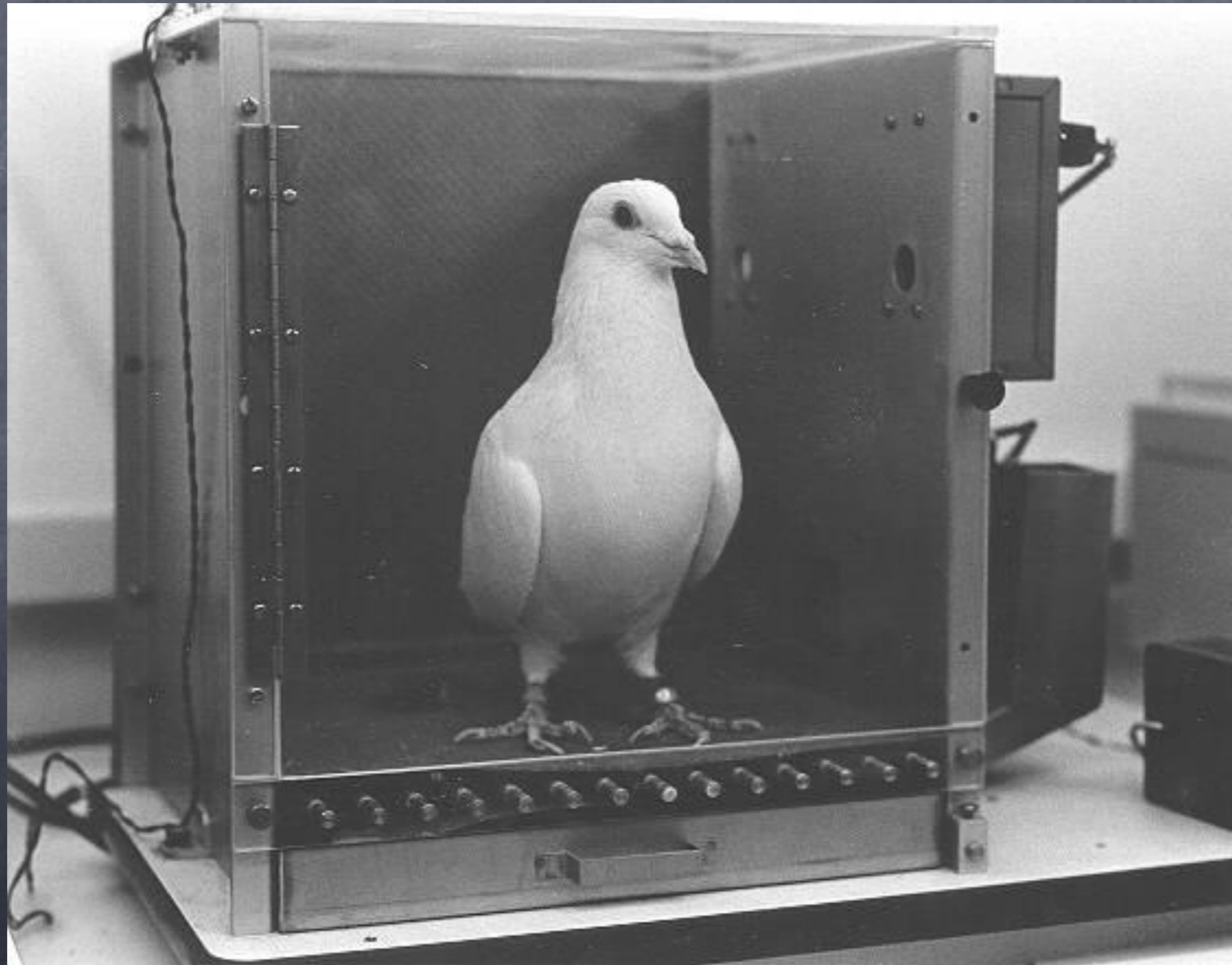
Words associated with reinforcer loss

- This is the weirdest one of the bunch
- This is when you verbally take something that the kid never had!
- That's it! You've just lost your opportunity to go to the pizza party on Friday!
- Yet you took NOTHING...You presented a conditioned aversive stimulus...
- This is essentially the delivery of an aversive event contingent on behavior

Words associated with reinforcer loss

- What's weird is that DRO procedures (differential reinforcement of other behavior) are often run like this when dealing with an hour-long, day-long, or week-long DRO
- In a DRO the person is simply not supposed to get the reinforcer if the target behavior occurred during the pre-determined interval
- Theoretically, you don't "inform" the person of the violation of the contingency or give reasons. They just don't get the reinforcer...

Do you inform the
pigeon?



Words associated with reinforcer loss

- The problem is that what was meant to be a “positive” reinforcement-based procedure has now become more reminiscent of a classic punishment procedure!
- More than likely it won't function as a punisher, but it will function as a terrific **pisser-offer!**
- Sometimes these words are just a friendly reminder that an activity has to stop soon and even that can cause behavior problems!

Words associated with reinforcer loss

- Stop using these long DROs contingent on NON-behavior
- Instead choose the correct replacement repertoires and each time the student correctly handles a difficult moment he can earn points to be exchanged for prizes at the end of the week
- Constantly remind the child of the criteria that will satisfy the contingency, e.g., “You still need 2 more stars Jimmy, make a good choice ok?”

Aversive properties of positive reinforcement

- Failure to meet the contingency for reinforcement
- Certain schedules of reinforcement (high fixed-ratio) and adjunctive behavior
- The reinforcer is “all gone.” All good things must come to an end...
- You notice how if you hate your job, you really can't enjoy your vacation properly? Why not?

Private Aversives

- Pain, discomfort, hunger, thirst, sleepiness all the UCMOs!
- Private aversives are sneaky!
- They may affect our functional assessments
- More on these in Chapter 4

Response-produced

- Erroneous (incorrect): Behavior goes in...bad things come out (motorcycle mishap)
- Inefficient: A whole lotta behavior goes in, very little comes out...(increased response effort, very little reinforcement) If you were better at the task effort would be lower and reinforcement greater (learning to play the guitar)
- Ineffective: Behavior goes in...nothing comes out (like extinction, but the reinforcer isn't produced because the behavior is totally wrong, not because something is broken) (printer won't print)

Atypical Aversives

- Things that make you afraid may be aversive but it is a different reaction than things that piss you off! (Phobias)
- Things that cause you to get angry/agitated/anxious that totally don't bother other people (the furniture is turned slightly off angle) OCD-like behavior

Atypical Aversives

- Remember....it's not THAT you get angry (there's nothing wrong with getting angry)
- It's WHAT you get angry about!
- It's the LEVEL of your anger
- It's what you DO when you get angry!

Atypical Aversives

- Is it a problem if you punch people? Not necessarily
- If you you're a boxer...you're *supposed* to punch!
- If you're being attacked...you're *supposed* to punch!
- If you're a celebrity and the paparazzi are hounding you....you're *supposed* to punch!
- If your classmate's shoelaces are too long on one side you're NOT supposed to punch!

Something to think about...

- It's NOT our jobs to keep students from getting angry!
- It's our jobs to teach kids what they may and may not do WHEN they eventually DO become angry
- It's also our jobs to help kids to stay calm initially and to get calm again once upset

Non-aversives that SHOULD be aversive

- What???
- Some people continue to have behavior problems because what bothers us does NOT bother them at all
- In fact these things might function as reinforcers!
- BULLIES

Non-aversives that SHOULD be aversive

- Can reinforcers become aversive and vice-versa over one's lifetime?
- Yes, and this happens routinely for all of us
- People who find THE CORRECT THINGS aversive and know *how to respond to them* are going to be deemed very well adjusted!
- Of course “correct” is a judgment that we make

As with reinforcers, things we
fear/hate change over our
lifetimes

- Infants
- Small child
- Teenager
- Adult
- Senior Citizen

Non-aversives that SHOULD be aversive

- If certain things are NOT aversive to you, you may be deemed a sociopath...
- For many people, disabled or not, the suffering of others may be neutral to them
- This may factor greatly into many acts of aggression
- Remember you can escape from tasks without actually hurting anyone, we do it all the time...

Handling problems with Aversives: The 6 “ates”

- Procrastinate
- Eliminate
- Terminate
- Compensate
- Acclimate
- Tolerate



Suki
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Procrastinate



Procrastinate

- This is a good strategy for things that eventually need to happen, but you want to give the person the ability to delay it.
- We all have things that we know we eventually **HAVE** to face. Still, when given the ability to put things off we value it.
- You cannot evit the invevitable...but you can delay it.....
- You will have to set limits on how many times someone can delay or for how long, but given the choice of being able to delay or have to do something now, it's a nice choice to have

Eliminate



Eliminate

- Easily the most overused, but this is good for situations that are simply intolerable for anyone or for gaining quick control over a bad situation until a comprehensive treatment plan can be put into place
- This is not so much “treatment” as it is “support”

Terminate



Terminate

- This is when we teach the person how to stop the aversive in an appropriate manner (replacement behavior)
- It is reasonable to allow people the means to stop things they don't like under certain circumstances
- Terminate may not always be possible but there are other strategies that can be used when it isn't
- Once the terminating behavior is "solid" one can start thinking about other strategies

Compensate



Compensate

- Nothing makes a bad thing suck less like MO' MONEY!
- We will tend to “put up with” things we don't like if there is another reinforcer concurrently available
- Listening to music while running
- Having the TV on while working
- Posting to facebook on your iPhone while Merrill is droning on and on and something about his pet cat...

Compensate

- Sometimes just raising the general level of reinforcement can reduce the aversive nature of some events
- For sibling rivalry types of problems you can make powerful reinforcers freely available **ONLY** when the siblings are together

Acclimate



PICTURE UNRELATED

Acclimate

- This is essentially habituation
- This particular strategy, like compensate does not require the person to learn new skills but it does require the aversive to be repeatedly presented
- This must be done in a manner in which the aversive is presented purposely, carefully and systematically (brief reinforcer removal)
- It's best to have something that can be somewhat varied in duration or intensity (fire alarm recording)

Tolerate



Tolerate

- What behaviors are involved?
- Tolerating means engaging in behaviors that lessen the motivation to escape/attack
- These may actually reduce physiological arousal or simply be incompatible with behaviors that may have been punished in the past (biting your lip and looking away during a confrontation)
- Unlike acclimate (habituate) your physiology is NOT returning to normal or staying low, it remains quite high.

Tolerate

- This is easily the toughest of the bunch, but one of the most valuable
- This is different from acclimate because with acclimate you simply get “used to it” and it doesn’t bother you very much anymore
- Tolerating is where the event still bothers you very much but you “keep your \$%*! together”

Tolerate

- You might want to think of tolerating as a commodity that gets “used up” that is, you only have so much of it.
- You’re on my last nerve
- That was the straw that broke the camel’s back
- It is something that you can get better at.
- Many of the other “Ates” can work together to make tolerating easier

Tolerate

- We DO want to be careful, however, that we are not attempting to teach people to “tolerate the intolerable.” We wouldn’t do it, why should people with disabilities.

Other skills....

- In addition to these strategies, there are a couple of general skills that can help with almost any kind of situation in which we must be exposed to aversives
- Learning to stay relaxed when already calm
- Learning to GET relaxed when already upset (much harder)

Learning to stay relaxed

- Steve Ward and Terry Grimes: Calm Counts
- Wholechildconsulting.com



Learning to get relaxed when upset

- This is quite a bit harder, and like learning to stay relaxed it requires using a hierarchy of upsetting events and a strong repertoire of self-calming behaviors (breathing deep, covering one's ears, engaging in soothing types of self-stim, progressive muscle relaxation, etc...)
- I wouldn't attempt this until the individual can tolerate the presentation of an aversive when already calm...

Thank-you!

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