

**Behavior Theory applied to Conrad in Ordinary People**

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## **Overview**

Behavior therapies are among the most widely used treatment interventions for psychological and behavioral problems today (Antony, as cited in Corey, 2017).

There is no singular consensus on the definition of behavior therapy because the field has grown and is known for its diversity of views. However, contemporary behavior therapy is noted for having much in common with cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) in that the pathway to change is considered both cognitive and behavioral (in that modifying thoughts and the environment are the agents of change) (Follette & Callaghan, as cited in Corey, 2017). Fundamentally, behavior therapy, like CBT, is based on the assumption that what people believe affects how they act and feel.

Behavior therapists are known to use a variety of evidence-based techniques in their practices, including cognitive therapy, social skills training, and relaxation (Corey, 2017).

## **Application**

A cornerstone of behavior therapy is to identify specific goals. Although it is the client who traditionally identifies what behavior they want to change, the therapist's role is to show how this behavior can best be modified. Throughout the course of therapy, the therapist assesses problem behaviors and the conditions that may be causing them. Assessments methods are used throughout to ensure effectiveness and implement modifications as needed (Corey, 2017).

Behavior therapy (BT) can have applicability to structured groups, including social skills training, psychoeducational seminars, and the like. Behavior therapy has been used to treat a wide range of psychological disorders, including anxiety disorders, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, eating and weight disorders, sexual problems, pain management, etc. (Wilson, as cited in Corey, 2017). Further, behavioral procedures have also been used in the field of developmental disabilities, such as mental illness, education, special education, sports psychology, etc. (Miltenberger and Wilson, as cited in Corey, 2017)

### **Techniques**

In designing a treatment plan, behavior therapists employ techniques and procedures from a wide variety of therapeutic systems and apply them to the individual needs of each client. Throughout the course of therapy, the therapist helps the client assesses problem behaviors and the conditions that are maintaining them.

Applying this therapy to Conrad in “Ordinary People”, I would first want to focus on what is underlying Conrad’s suicidal thoughts. For example, when Conrad says, “It (the accident) must be someone’s fault”, similar to Dr. Berger, I would ask him “Why is that?”, and “What did you do that was wrong...you know, don’t you?”, and Conrad realizes the answer is that he “held on”. When he consciously realizes that he has “survivor’s guilt”, he can start to understand it for what it is.

Once this fundamental maladaptive thinking is removed, I would then work with Conrad to identify what he wants to change, and what behaviors might be getting in the way. For example,

does he want to be more direct in his language with his mother? Similarly, does Conrad want to change his environment, such as being on the swim team?

Even if Conrad ended therapy, I would try to conduct intermittent follow-ups to see how he is doing and if any adjustments in his thinking or in his behavior needs to change.

As we evolved in our therapy sessions, I might introduce “third-generation” behavior therapies such as a mindfulness or meditation practice, as well as conduct role-playing for social skills training, if he is nervous to talk with the classmate he is interested in.

### **Benefits**

One of the benefits of engaging in BT is that there are a variety of “tried and true” techniques, ranging from EMDR to meditation. Quite a number of clients who appreciate having action plans are likely to be content with this structured approach because they can see that it offers them concrete methods for dealing with their problems in conducting their lives.

There are also strengths of the behavioral approach in working with diverse client populations due to its precision in targeting behaviors, specifying goals, and translating those goals into concrete plans of action.

## References

Redford, R. (1980), *Ordinary People*. Wildwood Enterprises Inc.

Corey G., (2017). *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy*, (10th ed.). Cengage Learning