

CHAPTER 8

Applying Your ABCs

After looking at the three main principles of learning—respondent conditioning, operant conditioning, and relational framing—we return to the foundation of our work: ABC analysis. How do the principles come into play in the various parts of the analysis? In many ways, it will become clear that operant learning (learning by consequences) is the foundation for an analysis. These three steps—analyzing A, B, and C—describe how consequences exert their influence: under specified conditions (A), a person does something (B), and certain consequences occur (C). These consequences increase or decrease the probability that the person in question, in similar circumstances, will behave in a similar fashion. Even if it is possible to untangle the separate principles of learning for purposes of illustration, in real life they are seldom separate but continually intertwine with each other.

We can see this complexity in a child's encounter with a dog. If little John is frightened by a dog, it is easy to understand, with the help of respondent conditioning, his fear of similar dogs. But if John refuses to visit Aunt Patty (where he's never seen a dog, much less been frightened by one) because someone said that her cat is like an old dog, then we need to use the principle of relational framing. This comment about the cat would not have provoked any anxiety if John hadn't been exposed to respondent conditioning in the first place. His declaration "I don't want to go to Aunt Patty's" is a result of his experience with an earlier consequence of expressing his wishes in this way, which affected the action of his parents in response to his wishes.

Let's return now to the clinical setting and to the cases of Mirza and Leonard. Here it will become more apparent how the principles of learning are interwoven.

ANALYZING MIRZA'S EXPERIENCES

Mirza has become accustomed to his new life in Sweden. Many of the practical issues that dominated his life when he arrived from Bosnia have been settled, but now other problems catch up with him.

Mirza says that lately his problems have been getting worse and he doesn't understand why. There were many problems when he lived in the refugee center, but he felt better then in spite of the problems. He was not sure he would be allowed to stay in Sweden and the struggle to achieve that goal (to be granted asylum) took all his time. Now he has been granted permission to stay. He even has his own apartment and has started studying at the university. Think of it! His own apartment after years of uncertainty!

If one of his fellow students says, "OK, let's go home," Mirza immediately feels a knot in his stomach. When he's alone in his apartment in the evening, it seems as if everything he does brings back memories of the war—not just TV programs about war or news from Bosnia. Looking out the window when it is dark makes him feel anxious. He often has the shades pulled down all day. He can't even boil water for tea without being reminded what it looked like in their kitchen in Bosnia. It's crazy! Now when he is free to live a new life, it's as if the old life crowds in around him, closer and closer. He prefers to eat in the school cafeteria instead of cooking for himself at home. In Bosnia, he used to like to help with the cooking. He tries to convince himself that everything is fine now, but he is not convinced. He has noticed that he feels good when he is busy with something that interests him, something that captures his attention for the moment—like when he went to the soccer game the other evening. But his anxiety caught up with him even there. Somebody mentioned his brother and that made Mirza think about his brother, Samir, and the last time he saw him. It's no use dwelling on him. He will never see his brother again. But he can't stop thinking about Samir, no matter how much he tries. And he can't always be on the run, away from his apartment. He should be able to be at home. Nowadays he has noticed that he avoids being at home whenever he has an excuse to be elsewhere.

What do we want to analyze? Where do we start? The above description contains respondent, operant, and relational framing responses. Mirza is most concerned with why his anxiety is getting worse. Readers will remember from earlier chapters that it is often advantageous to start the analysis with behavior (B)—what the person does. So, what are the central behaviors in Mirza's problems? Let's start there.

Looking More Closely at Behavior (B)

Since we know that avoidance plays a central role in maintaining and worsening anxiety, we look for actions that have this function. It is very easy to see that Mirza does several things that are functionally analogous:

- He avoids going home and avoids cooking.
- He pulls the shades down to avoid seeing that it is dark outside.

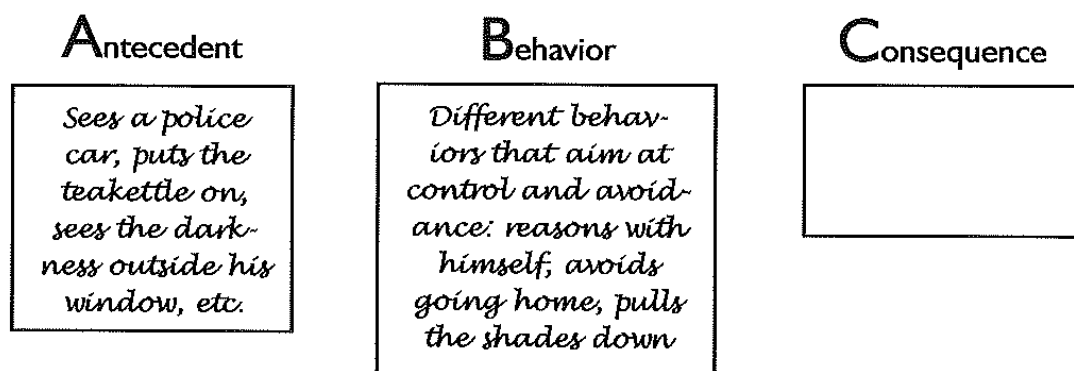
- He tries to reason with himself.
- He tries not to think about his brother.

What is common among these actions? Mirza is trying to avoid painful feelings, thoughts, and memories. This is a natural human reaction to disturbing private events, but it is also a source of problems.

It is important to look for more examples of actions that have this function of avoidance when the client describes his problems in the initial phases of the analysis since it helps us to locate patterns in his behavior. What may appear to be dissimilar actions at first glance (suppressing thoughts or pulling down a shade) can functionally be very similar. They belong to the same functional class. They are topographically different but functionally alike.

Starting our analysis with B is advantageous because B often has the greatest potential for change. When we change the way we behave, we increase our chances of coming in contact with other consequences and bringing the behavior under the control of other stimuli. However, it is often difficult to start our collaboration with the client by examining B for the simple reason that the client would rather talk about something else, which he sees as more important. Mirza, like many other clients with anxiety, focuses on his own experiences of anxiety: what might cause it and what can be done to remove it (see fig. 8.1). That's what he wants to talk about! This is another potential starting point for collaboration, since it means we can focus on A.

Figure 8.1 ABC Analysis: Mirza's Anxiety



Looking More Closely at Antecedents (A)

Under what conditions does Mirza behave as described above? The simplest way to answer this question is to ask him what bothers him, how his anxiety manifests itself, and on what occasions it is present. It quickly becomes apparent that Mirza's problems turn up in a number of situations:

- When he sees the news from Bosnia
- When someone asks if he has any brothers and sisters
- When he hears a loud, unexpected noise

But his anxiety also appears in many other situations that are not so easily understood, even when we know his history:

- When he sees a police car
- When he sits down to have tea
- When he sees the darkness from his window
- When he sees a family with the children playing happily together
- When someone talks about a serious illness
- When he sees apple trees in bloom

This is a long list but by no means exhaustive. There are seemingly endless numbers of situations that can lead his thoughts to other thoughts that are more or less painful.

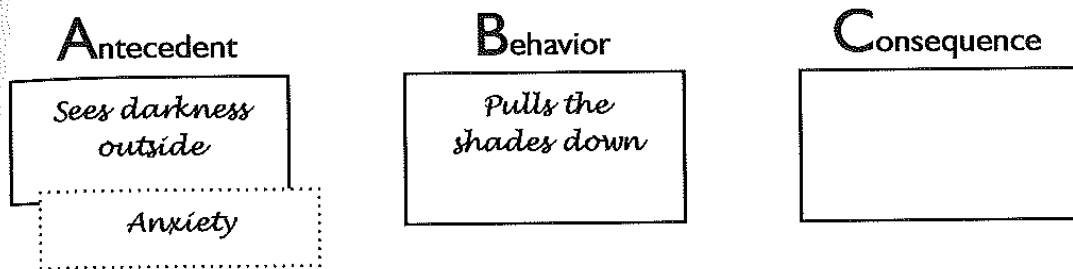
How should we analyze this collection of As? The list seems never-ending. It's important to realize that even when we examine A more closely, it is not necessary to minutely examine each condition in order to construct a clinically useful analysis of the problem. It is important, however, to identify the most central conditions, which turn up time after time. The external conditions that Mirza describes vary considerably. What keeps coming into the forefront is his focus on anxiety and the thoughts and memories associated with it. We could claim that the core of the problem is not the situations that generate anxiety. The analysis will show that an anxious reaction can be learned in response to any number of stimuli. The core of the problem is what Mirza does when anxiety is provoked. When Mirza experiences feelings, thoughts, and memories, he tries to avoid and/or control (B) this experience (A).

Respondent Aspects of Antecedents (A)

Mirza has been in a number of situations that have evoked strong fear and anxiety. His life has been threatened, he has been assaulted, and he lost his home and all his worldly possessions. All of these situations have elements of respondent conditioning. Sounds, smells, and sights have become conditioned stimuli (CS) that generate conditioned responses (CR) in the form of fear and strong negative emotions. A number of other stimuli are sufficiently similar to these CS to generate similar reactions through the process of generalization. A good example of this is the sight of police cars or uniforms. Mirza no longer believes that he has anything to fear from the police. But the sudden appearance of a police officer in uniform outside his window is sufficient to elicit

a fearful reaction through the principles of respondent conditioning. Other external stimuli can also lead to an automatic reaction beyond his volitional control. Another clear-cut example is darkness, which Mirza associates with painful memories (see fig. 8.2).

Figure 8.2 Antecedent: Respondent Function (CS–CR Relationship)



Relational Framing and Antecedents (A)

Some of the external signals that prompt Mirza to remember painful events are more difficult to explain by respondent processes. That the sight of a happy family in his new country of residence causes someone with Mirza's background to feel distress is not hard to understand from a commonsense perspective, but it is hard to explain how his reactions could be learned through respondent conditioning.

It's more likely that Mirza learned his reactions through another process by which even the most far-fetched reactions can be established with the speed of lightning. For a verbally competent person, relations among things are established not only because of some historical connection or mutual similarity. When learning language skills, the social context also establishes other kinds of relationships—for example, opposites. Happiness is in a relationship (relational frame) with unhappiness, black to white, life to death. New relations are continually established. Networks of relations emerge in a matter of seconds.

Consider the situation when a passing comment about someone's brother awakens traumatic memories for Mirza. When the trauma occurred, Mirza didn't know a word of Swedish. The sound of the Swedish word *bror* (brother) had no meaning for him. In all probability, he had never even heard the sound/word. But when the sound of *bror* entered into a relation with *brat* (brother, in Mirza's native language), which is in a relation with his brother, Samir, then the sound of *bror* is put into relationship with Mirza's long history of pain and suffering.

Mirza attends a multimedia course and has been assigned a group project about documenting a current social problem. His group is considering the topic of geriatric care. One of his classmates produces a picture from the newspaper showing an elderly

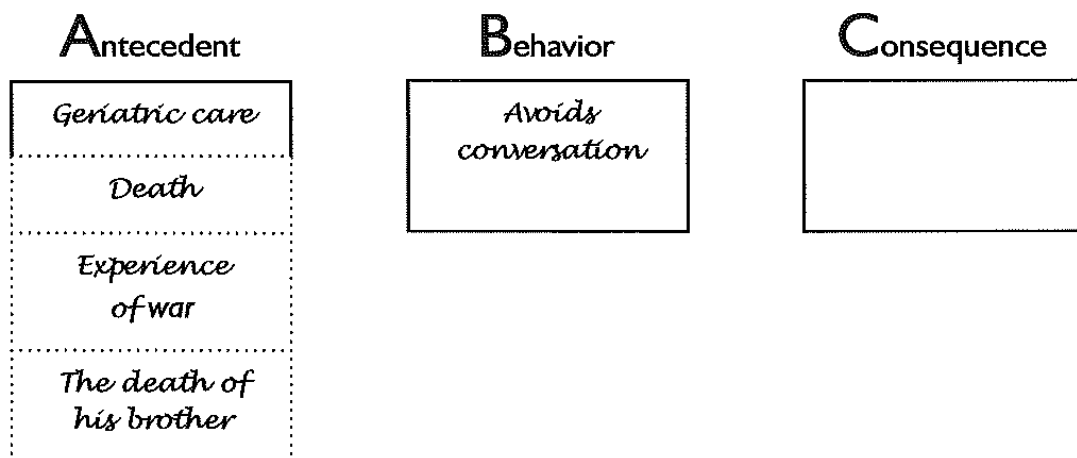
person lying in bed. Mirza immediately feels that he doesn't want to work on such a project and quickly suggests something else.

Mirza explains to his therapist that he felt anxious in that classroom situation. The therapist takes note of the behavior when Mirza quickly suggested another topic to his classmates (B) as another example of avoidance. Yet geriatric care has nothing to do with Mirza's traumatic background. He has no memories of the war with content similar to the proposed class project. The only memory he has that might resemble this topic is of his grandparents who died before the war broke out, and he has only pleasant memories of his grandparents. For a verbally competent person, though, old age, illness, and insufficient care can easily connect with death. And for Mirza, death is associated with his memories of the war.

The same kind of connections can be made between other contexts and stimuli. If Mirza's anxiety only arose through respondent conditioning, then he would be able to get away from it in other contexts. But where can you go to escape the pain that comes to you through the vehicle of your own languaging?

When you analyze the behavior of nonhuman animals, years of research document the fact that A is always either something that the organism has actually been in contact with or the circumstances are similar enough to acquire their function through generalization. This is not the case for a languaging human being. The ability to frame relationally means that stimuli can acquire the function of A through a verbal connection. We each have our own personal history of relational framing. We can observe this when different individuals have different interpretations of the same event; each circumstance has a particular meaning for any given person. This is of great relevance when we attempt to analyze the specific circumstances (A) that precede what Mirza does (B). See figure 8.3.

Figure 8.3 Antecedent: Verbal Function (Established by Relational Framing)



Looking More Closely at Consequences (C)

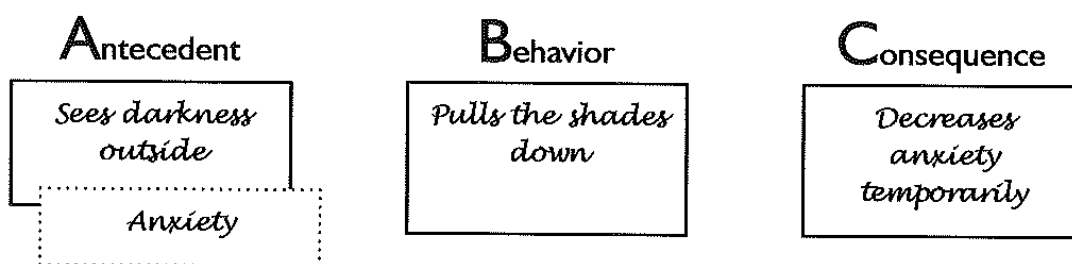
Which consequences control Mirza's behavior? How do the various principles of learning illuminate this process? When we attempt to survey the consequences that occur when Mirza avoids returning to his apartment or when he pulls the shades down when it is dark outside, we start by simply asking, "Then what happens?" What is the next event? What happens when he changes the subject in a conversation when he feels anxious? What follows his attempts to push aside any thoughts of his brother? Mirza's immediate reply is "it [my anxiety] just gets worse." How can we understand this chain of events? The consequences of Mirza's actions are aversive for him and he realizes it, yet he still persists with the same behavior. Mirza finds this bewildering.

I am not helping things by what I do. I get that. Things are only getting worse. It's as if I want to torment myself. It's crazy. Sometimes I think I don't deserve anything better.

Mirza's way of thinking is hardly unique. In fact, some psychological theories claim that humans actually want to hurt themselves. We prefer a different explanation and return now to what we find to be a more fruitful basis: the discussion of short- and long-term consequences.

When we say that Mirza's actions only make things worse in the long run, we are talking about long-term consequences. What are the short-term consequences of his behavior? When it is dark outside and Mirza feels his anxiety rising, he pulls down the shade. What happens to his anxiety? It subsides momentarily, and for a while he feels calmer. When a topic of conversation makes him feel anxious and Mirza successfully changes the subject, what happens to his anxiety? It decreases temporarily. When thoughts of his brother come up and Mirza can divert his attention by going out jogging, what happens to his anxiety? It becomes less intense for the moment. Jogging doesn't always work, but often it works well enough to give it a controlling function. Mirza's actions are governed by their consequences—or negative reinforcement, to be more precise. His behavior has reduced negative affect on a number of occasions, and as negative affect is distressing, its momentary decrease strengthens the behavior: the pushing away of thoughts, changing topics in a conversation, or pulling down the shade when it is dark outside.

Figure 8.4 Negative Reinforcement of Avoidance: Mirza



One explanation why Mirza's behaviors persist, despite the fact that they lead to aversive consequences, is the well-documented fact that was discussed earlier: short-term consequences have the upper hand. However, this is not an entirely satisfactory explanation, especially when looking at events over the course of time. Then the aversive consequences become more obvious. Many actions that once relieved anxiety lose their effect. The aversive consequences become more tangible. These consequences of increased anxiety are no longer long-term but are becoming short-term. It doesn't help to change the topic of conversation. Anxiety doesn't disappear when he pulls down the shade. Thoughts of his brother turn up even when he is out jogging. Yet these consequences do not terminate Mirza's avoidance. His actions remain firmly entrenched in his repertoire. In order to understand this process, we need to reconsider our abilities for relational framing.

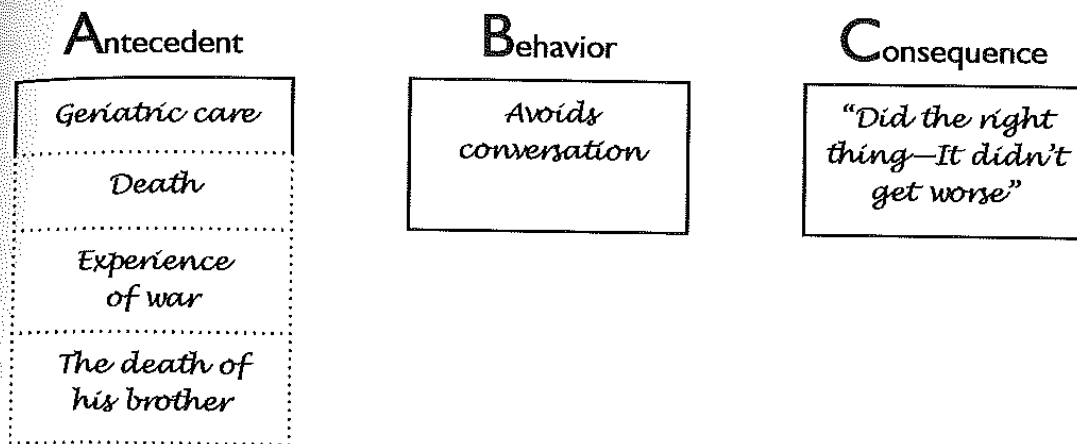
Relational Framing and Consequences (C)

Earlier we described the principle from a lab experiment where two groups were given the task of pushing a button when a lamp was lit in a certain way. Their responses to a change in contingencies differed based on whether they had received instructions on pushing the button or no instructions. This illustrates how verbal constructions change the functions of consequences. Our ability to construct verbal rules and to follow these rules lessens the impact of the actual consequences. Remember the example of the chocolate cake and plans for the summer swimsuit season! That also illustrates how verbally established consequences block out the effect of direct contingencies.

This type of learning is very relevant in our analysis of Mirza's actions. He has a history of experiencing the direct consequences of avoidance as a means of avoiding anxiety (negative reinforcement) while at the same time acquiring a history of the consequences of rule-governed or verbal behavior. His actions in relation to anxiety are steered not only by the actual consequences he experiences but also by the rules that were established in the course of his social history. As previously described, antecedents (A) can be established through verbal learning, but this also applies to consequences (C). Our perception may be that avoiding anxiety is "what you have to do" or that it is "the only way to survive." This means that when Mirza exerts himself not to think about his brother or changes topics in a conversation, the consequences are not only a decrease in anxiety (negative reinforcement) but also a feeling of doing the "right" thing (positive reinforcement). He has acted in accordance with a verbally established rule: "I did what I had to do to survive" and/or "My anxiety didn't get any worse because of what I did" (see fig. 8.5).

These rules can supersede the actual consequences; in other words, rules replace them with other functions through relational framing. The actual consequences in a given situation are perhaps unchanged or may even result in increased anxiety. But the verbal construction dominates through "this is better than what would have happened if I hadn't acted at all." This consequence is a positive reinforcer, since "doing the right thing" is a powerful generalized reinforcer for humans.

Figure 8.5 Verbally Established Reinforcing Consequences: Mirza



Observing Establishing Operations

One day Mirza notices that being in the apartment leads to more anxiety than usual. Nothing distressing has occurred, at least not anything that has to do with his painful memories. The observant reader will remember that other factors may exert an influence and modulate the behavior in focus for our analysis. These factors can often be everyday events or variations in basic functions. A poor night's sleep or worrying about a coming exam can be enough to cause changes. It is as if anxiety is more easily aroused, despite the fact that it has nothing to do with Mirza's specific problems. In the same way that going without food changes the function of a hamburger for a given individual, so can lack of sleep facilitate certain emotional reactions.

ANALYZING LEONARD'S EXPERIENCES

Leonard's depressive state dominates his life more and more. He gives up activities that used to be rewarding to him, his sleeping problems increase, and he spends an increasing amount of time alone and ruminating.

Leonard wakes up early. The first thing that pops into his head is how his children looked when they waved good-bye to him from the window of the train. Last night he drove them to the station and now they are back with their mother. He feels a pain in his stomach. A whole month until the next time he'll see them. How could things have turned out like this? He returns in his memory to one of the many arguments he had with Tina—when he came home late, when he didn't manage to do what he'd promised. If only he'd realized in time

that his work was his consuming interest and that she was getting tired of it all. How can one be tired of it all? Hadn't they promised one another "for better, for worse"? He remembered all too well that day when she came into the kitchen and said she was moving out and taking the children with her. That she wanted a divorce. How life became empty. Pointless—as it still is pointless. What could he have done? He can imagine himself having acted differently: Coming home in the evening and doing his share of the chores. Helping the children with their homework. Sitting in Alexander's room. If only he had it to do over again! He could have done it! If only ... After a while, Leonard looks at the clock. He's been awake for over an hour. The pain in his stomach is worse. He feels nauseated. How can he go to work? What's the point? It won't change anything. It will never bring back what he's lost. And all this brooding. What's the use of it? Yet he can't help himself. He's been awake half the night again ...

Rumination is something many of us have experienced at one point or another. For Leonard, it is part of what we usually call depression and it consumes most of his days. How do we perform an ABC analysis if we want to understand his behavior?

Looking More Closely at Behavior (B)

Rumination is a type of behavior that is only evident to the person performing it. It normally occurs inside the individual, although this is not always the case. One can ruminate out loud, such as when conversing with another person. Sometimes rumination is not noticeable for others, but the person doing it can behave in other ways that will indicate that he is ruminating. If Leonard paces back and forth across the floor and wrings his hands or sits silently without answering direct questions, these actions may indicate that he is engaged in ruminating. However, in this case described here, only Leonard really knows what's going on.

Examining the content of Leonard's rumination, we see that it is remarkably similar to what we call problem solving. He recalls images of things that have happened and tries to understand the reasons for what happened. He imagines alternative scenes, alternative actions in the past, and he tries to imagine what might happen in the future. He visualizes himself at work and staying at home. Leonard is able to imagine things the way they would have looked if he had been there in reality. He can see his son sitting at his desk, leaning over a book. It's very much like what he saw when he was actually sitting on his son's bed, watching him do his homework.

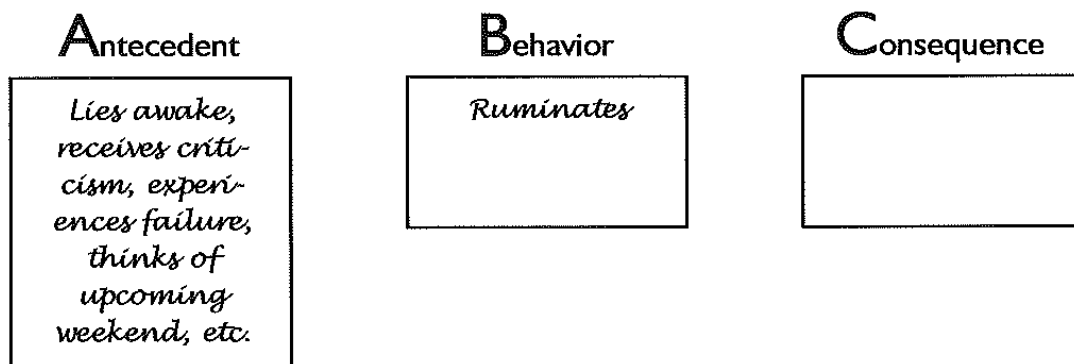
The ability to perform this operation is an extraordinary asset for us as humans. We can perform an operation internally in relation to external circumstances without actually being in the physical situation. We call this "planning ahead" or "thinking things through." For Leonard, however, this is problematic because it doesn't lead to what he wants and it only increases his feelings of hopelessness. Why does he do it? Under which circumstances does he do it and what does it lead to?

Looking More Closely at Antecedents (A)

The way Leonard spontaneously experiences rumination is not something he chooses to do. It is not an activity that is preceded by plans about how to do it. When his therapist asks him about it, he reports that it is something that occurs in a number of situations but is especially common when he wakes up early and can't go back to sleep. It can start when he remembers something in particular—in this case, the image of his children's departure on the previous evening. He wakes up and feels an immediate sinking feeling in his stomach, and he begins to ruminate: "How did things turn out like this? Why? What if ...? There are times, however, when he wakes up without any particular thoughts. Once he is awake, then he starts thinking the thoughts he has thought a thousand times in bed, and he finds he can't go back to sleep. The memories come back, as does the sinking feeling that things will always be like this.

In addition to lying awake in bed, Leonard describes a number of situations that are likely to be associated with this way of thinking, for example: if someone criticizes him for something or if he himself thinks he has failed at some task; when the weekend is coming up and others start to talk about what they plan to do together with their families; when he reads in the paper how children are mistreated (see fig. 8.6). His therapist tries to find many examples to establish a reoccurring pattern. The common factor for Leonard's rumination seems to be situations that trigger painful memories or painful situations themselves. When these things occur, there is a strong possibility that he deliberately keeps these pictures and thoughts in his mind and tries to change them in various ways. In other words, he ruminates!

Figure 8.6 ABC Analysis: Leonard



Looking More Closely at Consequences (C)

Leonard is painfully aware of the fact that his brooding won't solve his problems. Even though he knows that, it's still hard to stop doing it.

"What's done is done. However much I wish that things hadn't happened or words hadn't been said, it's too late to change things now. Digging around in the past won't bring my family back. But it's as if my brain can't process that."

This is a fairly typical statement that indicates that Leonard recognizes the futility of depressive rumination. Yet rumination is a behavior in which most of us are inclined to engage in moments of sorrow or grief. What are the maintaining consequences that steer this kind of behavior? One way to approach the answer to this question is to ask another question, as we observe Leonard's therapist doing in the following exchange:

Therapist: When you are lying awake in the middle of the night with these kinds of thoughts and memories going through your mind, what do you think would happen if you simply let them be? Let them turn up, bringing with them pain and agony, and do nothing about them.

Leonard: What do you mean? Let them be is exactly what I can't do. How can you do that? It seems impossible.

Therapist: Well, there are two parts of what's happening. First, things turn up. This is not something you choose to happen. It's almost like a reflex. You remember what happened yesterday: you noticed that you woke up earlier than usual, you felt a pain in your stomach. Isn't there more to this sequence when you deliberately let your thoughts wander? Think about what you should have done? Try to remember some of the hazy details, decide what to say to Tina next time you talk with her?

Leonard: Yes, that's what happens. I have never thought about how it happens, but when you describe it in those words, I can see that's what happens. Some thoughts appear automatically; others I get involved with and try to think them through.

Therapist: What would happen if some of these automatic thoughts turned up and you didn't try to think them through?

Leonard: *(after some time of silence)* That would be like giving up somehow. How can I get on with things if I haven't figured out what to do?

Therapist: Okay, let's describe what happens: Something turns up on the inside, something difficult or distressing, and the next step is that you try to figure out what to do about it. You remember something hard that has to do with Tina and the children. So you try to keep thinking about what happened, what you could do, how you could solve the problem. Is that what you do?

Leonard: Yes, but it's not only that. I also try and figure out how it could have turned out so badly. I try to understand.

Therapist: So that's something else you try to do when thoughts pop up, you try to understand what caused the problems with your family. Have I got that right?

Leonard: That's exactly what happens. The whole time I keep thinking in circles around the question "Why?"

What consequences is this behavior under the control of? Leonard describes what happens when certain recurrent painful thoughts turn up (A). He tries to think things through, over and over again (B). He doesn't achieve what he is striving for: to come to some reasonable conclusion. He has also noticed that, after a while, he feels worse than before he started. But he still keeps going over the questions, again and again. How is this possible? What are the consequences (C) that steer his actions?

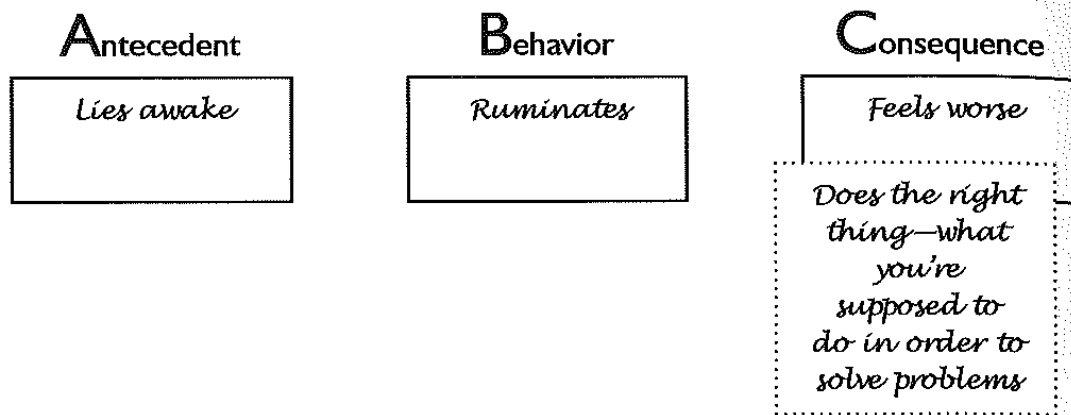
In the dialogue with his therapist above, we can see that Leonard's rumination has an indirect function for him. While he is ruminating, he is avoiding something that, to his way of thinking, is worse—the feeling of giving up. If he didn't keep thinking it through, he would get stuck in something that scares him. By going over these questions, time and time again, he lessens the unpleasant feeling of giving up. Once again we have an example of negative reinforcement. Ruminative behavior reduces certain aversive consequences.

Therapist: So the question "Why?" pops up and you try to find an answer to it. What do you think would happen if you simply noticed the question and tried not to answer?

Leonard: That would be weird, like giving up. That would make things worse. At least I am trying to do something. It sounds so strange when you say that. If I didn't try to answer all those questions, then it feels as if everything is over.

What we see here is another example of how behavior that is rule-governed or verbal can become a problem. Leonard, like all of us, has a long history of trying to think things through, of examining problems and threats and looking for different courses of action. This behavior has been reinforced, over and over again, for most of his life. We can also assume that Leonard has successfully used this strategy for solving problems in the world outside. This means that the behavior we are trying to analyze is an example of "doing what you do to solve problems." This feels like the right course of action. Thus the verbally constructed consequence functions as positive reinforcement and changes the effects of the actual consequences of his behavior (feeling worse, not solving the problem) and keeps them from controlling his behavior (see fig. 8.7).

**Figure 8.7 Dominance of a Verbally Established Reinforcer:
Leonard**



Back to Behavior (B)

Describing inner behavior is often difficult. We have never been able to observe other people's inner behavior in the same way we can often see their external behavior. We can watch people walking every day and can reliably observe how they do it. Based on our common experiences, we can also discuss what we have seen. But how often have we seen what other people do when they think? As a result, we have not learned much about how to talk about this behavior with others or even with ourselves. Thus we can never describe with any degree of detail how other people think or even how we ourselves think when engaging in this kind of private behavior. In order for us to help Leonard express something of what happens internally, it is helpful to discriminate between A and C. The momentary thoughts and memories that turn up prior to his rumination are painful. By walking him through what might happen if he didn't ruminate, it is possible to delineate what he does in fact do. When B is vague, as is often the case with inner behavior, it is often helpful to obtain a description of A and C in order to arrive at a useful description of B.

An inner behavior such as ruminating leads to questions of how it persists. We have seen that it can be reinforced, which increases the probability of it occurring in the future. This in turn influences the total behavioral repertoire. In clinical work, it is common to find that worrying and ruminating compete with more constructive responses for influencing the course of events. Ruminating in and of itself tends to interfere with falling asleep and more functional problem-solving skills. Ruminating for longer periods of time is also a tiresome activity that can lead to fatigue and increased negative emotion.

Observing Establishing Operations

As we saw with Mirza, Leonard's behavior was influenced by establishing operations that had no direct connection to the presenting problem. Nonetheless these conditions influence his actions and indirectly his problem, which we can define as depression. For example, when Leonard has things to do at work that are hanging over his head and which take some time to do, he then becomes frustrated and feels inadequate. When this happens, not only does he wake up early in the morning but he is also more likely to move through the whole rumination sequence, despite the fact that his difficult thoughts are not work related. In the same way, fatigue increases the probability that he will succumb to moodiness and that he will be more devastated by it, which in turn makes him persevere in his search for "solutions."

ABCS IN SUMMARY

In both of these examples, we can see how antecedents are established when an individual goes through something that is painful. The problem is not, however, that the individual has a history but rather that this history establishes stimulus functions which continually remind the person of the pain within that history. In and of itself, this is an adaptive feature. We should learn from experience. It would seem wise for us to remember where painful experiences may be lurking and to be on the lookout for this danger, based on history.

We can see how both Mirza and Leonard act to reduce the presence of this pain. Mirza avoids a number of situations; Leonard has a different strategy—he ruminates. It may seem far-fetched to see rumination as avoidance since Leonard is anything but avoidant of his problems in his thoughts. As we learned in the dialogue, though, this activity can serve the function of not having to come in contact with something worse. Ruminating functions as an attempt to keep these more unpleasant experiences at bay. Thus it belongs in the functional class of avoidance.

Now the time has come to turn our attention to more specific clinical attempts to assist clients in changing what they want to change. Thus we move into part 3, Changing Behavior.

PART 3

Changing Behavior