Can Behavioral Therapy Help People With ADHD?

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Behavioral Therapy for ADHD

When attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) enters your life because you have the condition yourself, or because a loved one has been diagnosed, you want to do everything you can to treat the symptoms and improve your quality of life. In many situations, professional services are necessary to accomplish desired goals.

There are so many available treatment options for ADHD, though, that telling the difference between them and making the best treatment choice can be overwhelming. If you or someone you love has been diagnosed, you should consider behavioral therapy for ADHD.

What Is Behavioral Therapy?

In the world of mental health, the word “therapy” is an incredibly broad term used to describe an array of treatment options. Almost anything that helps relieve symptoms could be called therapy.

When most people are thinking about psychotherapy, they think about a person sitting on a couch talking to a professional therapist about their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The therapist listens, offers verbal feedback, and leaves it to the client to make the changes necessary to improve their status.

In this form of talk therapy, the therapist provides direction, but the real change is completed by the client’s choices and decision making.

Behavioral therapy shares many similarities with talk therapy, but it uses different methods to create change. This form of therapy utilizes a series of rewards for desired behaviors, and unwanted consequences for undesirable behaviors.

With this being the case, the client is similar to a lab mouse in a cage. The therapist creates an experiment aimed at changing their behavior.

The client does not need to talk about their feelings or thoughts. The only focus of behavioral therapy is on the problematic behaviors and how to change them.

ADHD and Behavioral Therapy

Mental health professionals employ behavioral therapy for a number of conditions, with ADHD being well-suited for this therapy style. ADHD is a condition capable of producing a drastic impact on a person’s behaviors.

People with ADHD will have issues with:

- Sitting still

- Staying in one place for an extended period
- Maintaining focus on one activity, especially if it is boring or unpleasant
- Interrupting others and having appropriate conversations
- Finishing what they start
- Losing things and misplacing important items

All of these issues take a toll on the behaviors of the person while their mood and anxiety levels are typically normal. ADHD is a behavioral disorder, so behavioral therapy can appropriately target the problems.

Behavioral Principles in Real Life

Behavioral therapy is built on the idea of conditioning. In conditioning, a person (or animal) will be more likely to engage in a reinforced behavior, and less likely to participate in a punished behavior. Life is full of conditioning with examples like:

- A person being more likely to work for pay and less likely to work without pay
- A dog being more likely urinate outside when given a treat
- A child completing their chores because they receive money

Most of the behaviors people do are rewarded in some way. The most significant rewards are:

- Food
- Water
- Housing
- Love, sex, affection
- Money
- Attention

Rewards involve giving something good or taking away some bad, like reducing a child's chores if they get good grades. Punishments involve giving something bad (more chores) or taking away something good, like their video games.

Like rewards, punishments surround us. Punishments should be used sparingly, though, because:

- Using punishments do not teach the person the desired actions
- Punishments create tension between the person giving and the person receiving the punishments

Example of a Behavioral Therapy Strategy

Behavioral therapies always begin by working to understand the target behaviors and what reinforcements and punishments are already in place. The behavioral therapist then works to change the behavioral triggers and consequences by managing rewards and punishments.

If the target behavior is to spend more time doing homework at night, the therapist will set tangible and realistic time goals and begin rewarding the person for short periods of homework and then working up to the target through a process called shaping.

Through verbal praise, money, or tokens that are exchanged for prizes, or reducing chores, the therapist reinforces the target behavior. In time, the reinforcement is reduced or stopped, and the target behavior will continue.

The Importance of Family and Friends in Behavioral Therapy

In behavioral therapy, the commitment of family and friends is essential. The therapy appointment may only last for an hour each week, so it is up to the family to support and continue the work established during the session.

In most situations, it will actually be the family members providing the reinforcement or punishments to the child, since the therapist will not be in the home. Family and friends need to attend the therapy sessions to ensure they understand the process and their part in the success.

Behavioral therapy is not for every mental health condition, but for ADHD, it is a great way to improve symptoms and overall well-being.