

Why Do We Do What We Do?

The Four Functions of Behaviour

Anything that we do or say is considered behaviour. All behaviour happens for a reason. The function is also known as the “why” a person is doing what they are doing. The science of behaviour (Applied Behaviour Analysis) outlines four functions of behaviour which occur when we want to either a) gain access to something or b) avoid or get out of something.

The Four Functions of Behaviour: S.E.A.T.



Sensory

Behaviour occurs because it provides positive sensory experiences. It may increase or decrease certain sensory input. It “feels good.”



Escape

Behaviour occurs so that a person can get out of or avoid an unwanted situation or demand altogether



Attention

Behaviour occurs so that a person can gain attention from someone else. Attention may be positive (praise) or negative (reprimands).



Tangible

Behaviour that results in a person gaining access to something they want (i.e. an item or activity).

Why Worry About the Function?

When we know why behaviour occurs, we are better able to understand the context of that behaviour. Keep in mind that not all behaviour needs to be addressed or is problematic. If a behaviour is problematic, knowing the function is key in order to come up with strategies that address the behaviour and its specific function.

Knowing the function can...

tell us why the behaviour keeps happening →

we can change the environment or our own behaviour to reward desired behaviour

provide insight into replacement behaviour →

we can teach a behaviour that is easier, more effective, and more efficient, and serves the same function (gets the person what they want in prosocial ways)

result in lasting change →

we can use strategies that ensure the person can get what they want or need over time and in different settings

Disclaimer: this material is intended for informational purposes only and should not be considered a recommendation nor considered a replacement for assessment or consultation delivered by a trained professional in behaviour analysis.*For more information on this topic, see the Kerry's Place resource titled, “The ABC's of Behaviour.” For more information on Applied Behaviour Analysis, see the resource titled, “Applied Behaviour Analysis.”

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