

Establishing a Desirable Behavior by Using Escape and Avoidance Conditioning

1

Escape conditioning:

- Negative reinforcement; there are certain stimuli whose removal immediately after the occurrence of a response will increase the likelihood of that response.
- In escape conditioning, the aversive stimulus must already be present for the learning to occur.

2

Escape conditioning: examples

- Giving in to tantrumming child to escape the screaming,
- Taking a Tylenol to escape the pain of a headache,
- Removing tight shoes to escape uncomfortable soreness of feet.

3

Avoidance conditioning

- a behavior will increase in frequency if it prevents an aversive stimulus from occurring.

4

Avoidance conditioning

- Avoidance conditioning often involves a *warning stimulus / conditioning aversive stimulus / conditioned punishers* which signals the coming occurrence of an aversive stimulus.
- Avoidance conditioning which involves a warning signal that enables the learner to discriminate a forthcoming punisher is called *discriminated avoidance conditioning*.

5

Avoidance conditioning : examples

- Sitting at the other end of a restaurant to avoid someone you don't want to talk to.
- A child sees a dog and avoids it due to being bitten in the past.
- A husband stays at work late to avoid his wife because he knows from his experience with her in the morning that she is in a bad mood.

6

Avoidance responding is a theoretical conundrum in behavioral psychology since positively reinforced responses, escape responses and punished responses are all explained by their immediate consequences. In successful avoidance conditioning, the immediate consequence is that *there are no immediate consequences*.

- Possible theoretical explanations:
- The avoidance response in discriminated avoidance conditioning may be strengthened because it terminates the warning stimulus
- The warning stimulus may cause anxiety. Immediately following the avoidance response, the anxiety is relieved.
- Perhaps thoughts of experiencing the aversive stimulus are aversive enough, such that the avoidance causes those aversive thoughts to cease.
- Rule governed behavior may be involved.

7

Pitfalls & Cautions of Escape and Avoidance:

- Undesirable behaviors can be strengthened by unknowingly applying escape and avoidance principles, e.g. Parents not following through on threats or giving in to their child's pleas after the fact. Lying is often reinforced since it allows one to avoid punishment.
- Conditioned aversive stimuli are often established. E.g. students may do what the teacher tells them to do to avoid or escape her yelling at them constantly, but they develop a dislike for her and avoid her, and may even develop a distaste for the subject matter she teaches, etc.

8

Summary: Guidelines for Effective Application of Escape and Avoidance Conditioning

- Choose avoidance over escape when possible. In escape conditioning, the back-up punisher must already be present prior to the target behavior; in avoidance conditioning, the back-up punisher only occurs when the target behavior occurs.
- The target behavior should be established by escape conditioning before it is put on an avoidance procedure. You can learn avoidance easier if you learn escape first.

9

Summary: Guidelines for Effective Application of Escape and Avoidance Conditioning

- Use a warning signal during avoidance conditioning.
- Use escape and avoidance cautiously because of the potentially aversive side effects such as aggression, fearfulness, and the establishment of conditioned punishers.

10

Summary: Guidelines for Effective Application of Escape and Avoidance Conditioning

- Concurrently reinforce the target behavior.
- Tell the person the contingencies of their behavior whenever possible.

11
