

# **Making It Easier To Change Your Behavior**

## **The Antecedent-Behavior-Consequences (ABC)**

### **Model of Behavior Change Reading 25**

#### [Decision Making & Personal Problem Solving Module](#)

Most Americans now realize the connection between their behavior and their health. In fact, most people probably realize that their behavior is the most important factor in determining whether they are healthy. So why aren't more Americans practicing healthy behaviors? Why are so many adults overweight and out of shape? The reason is simple: to change one's behavior is not easy. It can be difficult to start a healthy habit like regular exercise. It is usually even more challenging to stop unhealthy habits such as overeating, smoking, or inappropriately dealing with emotions. Developing positive habits and quitting negative behaviors takes more than willpower. Changing behavior takes skill power. The information outlined here will help you develop positive habits or quit negative behaviors.

First, let's review some basic concepts of human behavior and how habits are formed. Many of our habits are "controlled" by what is called the ABCs of Human Behavior. Many habits, such as getting up in the morning, eating, brushing and flossing our teeth, and exercising, are triggered by **Antecedents**, which act as a cue for **Behaviors**. When a person experiences a cue, it triggers the behavior or habit. The behavior is then followed by a **Consequence**, usually perceived as a benefit or a reward. When behaviors are rewarded in some way, people typically continue the behavior, and it becomes a habit. For example, the behavior of getting up in the morning may be triggered by an alarm (the **Antecedent**) followed by the benefit (the **Consequence**) of not being late. Look at the examples on the next page to see how the **Behaviors** of eating, brushing and flossing, and exercising are influenced by cues and triggers (the **Antecedents**) and the benefits/rewards (the **Consequences**).

## **A**ntecedent

## **B**ehavior

## **C**onsequence

Alarm

**Getting up in AM**

Not Being Late

Time of Day, Smell  
Seeing Food, Hunger  
Stress

**Eating**

Feeling Satisfied

Feel Less Stress

Before Bed Time

**Brush/Floss**

Teeth Feel Clean  
Fewer Cavities

Time of Day, Practice  
P.E., Exercise Class

**Exercise**

Feel Satisfied, Less  
Stress, More Energy

The ABCs of human behavior can be used to start positive behaviors and to stop harmful habits. To stop unhealthy behaviors, it is helpful to try to ignore or not put yourself in a situation where you will experience the antecedent that triggers the behavior. Rewarding yourself when you don't do the behavior you are trying to quit is also important.

To start a positive behavior such as exercise, you can make it easier for exercise to become a habit if you develop cues (the Antecedents) that trigger the Behavior of exercise. One way to do this is to do your exercise program on the same day of the week at the same time. Thus, the day of the week and the time of the day act as triggers that cue the behavior of exercise. You can also do things such as put your exercise clothes where you will see them on the days you plan to exercise. Seeing the exercise clothes will help trigger the behavior of exercise.

When starting a positive behavior, it is important to reward yourself (the Consequence) every time you stick to your plan. Anything that gives you pleasure and encourages you can be used as a reward. The easiest rewards are those behaviors you do most days or every day, such as taking a shower, snacking, calling a friend, listening to music, watching TV, using the computer, playing video games, etc. These rewards can be withheld until you do your target behavior, such as the exercises. That is, commit to avoid the reward behavior until you have done the daily exercise behavior on your plan. Another reward could be positive talk or praise (e.g., "Good job" or "Way to go")

## **Steps in Changing Our Behavior**

### **Developing Healthy Habits**

Much of our behavior is unconscious. We don't think about it. These unconscious behaviors are habits, some of which are healthy, and some of which are not. Many habits are "controlled" by the ABCs of Human Behavior. The steps in developing a habit include:

### **The Steps in Developing A Habit**

1. A signal (**A**ntecedent) is noticed by you.
2. You perform a **B**ehavior immediately after the signal.
3. The behavior is followed by a **C**onsequence (usually a reward).
4. This sequence continues, thus forming a habit.

If we want to start a new behavior or continue an old one and make it a habit, we can apply the ABCs of Human Behavior.

### **Steps in Developing a New Habit**

1. Select a signal (**A**ntecedent) to cue your new behavior.
2. Immediately perform the **B**ehavior after the signal.
3. Provide a positive **C**onsequence (reward) for doing the behavior.  
Make sure that the consequence is positive, something you enjoy.
4. Chart your progress.
5. Continue this sequence.

## **An Example of Starting An Exercise Program**

1. Select a signal. The signals (**A**ntecedent) that will cue the behavior will include:
  - Doing the exercises on the same day of the week
  - Doing the exercises at the same time of the day
  - Placing the monitoring chart in a place where it will be easily seen on the days you exercise.
  - Placing your exercise clothes where you will easily see them on the days you are to exercise.
2. Exercise on the same day at the same time (the **B**ehavior).
3. Provide a positive **C**onsequence (reward) for doing the behavior and ensure the consequence is positive. The rewards may include:
  - Self-praise (“Good Job”)
  - Taking a shower after exercise
  - Listening to music.
4. Chart your progress.
5. Continue this sequence every day you have decided to exercise.