

Triggers and Functions of Behaviour

Considering some basic triggers and functions of behaviour may help you to understand why people behave the way they do. The following points are relevant to people of all ages.

What triggered this behaviour?

Sensory Stimulation. These include the level of noise, light, touch, smell, taste, movement or other forms of stimulation that might be upsetting to the individual.



Lack of Structure. Were instructions clear about what to do? Were the visual reminders of what to do, or only verbal instructions? Without enough structure, people can become confused.

Internal or biological triggers. These might include hunger, pain, illness or tiredness that might contribute to a meltdown.

Demands. These include directions to do work, or social expectations to converse, play or interact with others.

Waiting. This involves situations in which individuals do not get what they want immediately, cannot get what they want at all, or have to stop doing something they like.



Threats to self-image. This involves situations that cause people to feel ashamed or embarrassed, such as losing a game, making mistakes, being criticized, or getting teased.

Unmet wishes for attention. These include moments when others refuse to talk, play or interact with them, when they are jealous of others, or when they fear being alone.

What function did the behaviour serve?

Consider whether the person's behaviour resulted in:

Avoiding the situation. Sometimes people stall, make excuses, or tantrum to avoid difficult work, a social demand, or seemingly fun situations that might be overly stimulating (e.g. refusing to go to a party/social events or amusement park)

Getting other's attention. Sometimes people demonstrate challenging behaviour to get others to laugh or help them with something. If the person initially looks happy and is smiling, this may be a clue that the behaviour is an attempt to attract attention rather than to avoid a frustrating task.

Getting some desired object. Individuals may ask repeatedly for food, toys, or a privilege and then tantrum or cause a disruption if they do not get what they want immediately.



Self-pleasure or soothing. These are often repetitive behaviours that do not seem to have an impact on others but serve to entertain, provide pleasure, or soothe the individual. Examples include self-talk, fidgeting, tapping, rocking and even masturbation. Although the behaviour may be upsetting to others, the person is using the behaviour to sooth or entertain himself.



Venting of frustration. Sometimes a person's behaviour has no clear benefit, in that it does not lead to avoiding an unpleasant task, or garner desired attention. Instead, the behaviour seems to be a way of venting frustration. For example, with a child, when she or he gets frustrated with a project and begins to destroy it, yet refuses to quit or accept help. Adults may also vent to release frustration and stress.