

# **DON'T “DON'T!”™ Understanding Almost Everybody’s Behavior Following Brain Injury**

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## **Chapter Two: Behavior**

### **What is Behavior?**

Behavior can simply be defined as: *the interaction of a person with their environment, or daily situation*. This means that behavior is what a person does, says, or how he or she otherwise acts throughout the day. You are behaving when you are reading this book, talking to a friend on the phone, sitting alone, eating dinner, refusing to go to the doctor, sleeping, or doing anything else. Contrary to popular belief, *behavior* isn't only what a person does that you don't want them to do; e.g., “behave yourself!” but anything that a person is doing. In fact, some people have gone so far as to say that behavior is anything that a dead person doesn't do! Despite the shock of this statement, they are probably right!

We know that a person is behaving by what we personally see or experience. Some behaviors are obvious, such as running, jumping, talking, laughing, or baking a cake. Other behaviors are more subtle. We may not directly see these behaviors, but experience them through their results, or the products of their efforts. For example, how do you know that a person is thinking? In some cases, if you know the person well enough, you might see them “deep in thought” by their quietness, pacing, and not responding to other people. In most cases we do not directly observe a person's thinking, but the results of their thinking, such as the letter they subsequently write or the answer they give to a question.

Finally, behavior is forever changing. It is dynamic! We are constantly on the move and reacting to many different things around and within us. As a result, our behavior constantly changes. For example, as you are reading this book you are probably shifting your position as different muscles in your body tire. You might stop reading the book to answer the phone or answer a question from someone in your family. You may sneeze while reading the book. You may put down the book to look up a word that you do not understand, or shift to another section of the book if you find this chapter boring. After reading the book for a while you may lose concentration and shift to another activity. It may be dinnertime and you are hungry. You may need to go to the bathroom. It may be time to go to work. The fact is that you are constantly behaving and responding to many different things around and within you, often at the same time. Hence, your behavior is constantly changing; sometimes in very obvious ways and sometimes in very subtle ways and always in response to a wide range of factors.

## What Causes Behavior?

There are many different things that influence or cause behavior. Some are very obvious. For example, we eat when we are hungry, sleep when we are tired, or follow road signs when we are driving. Other things are not always so obvious, sometimes even to the person who is *behaving*. For example, my children claim that they can tell that I am about to get sick because I become cranky, even though I don't feel a thing or notice any changes in my behavior. *Achoo!* As a matter of fact, there are probably thousands of different things that can influence our behavior at any given time. Here is a list of some of the most common causes:

- **General State** – Are you happy or sad today? Did you get enough sleep? Are you hungry, or did you eat too much and can now can barely move. Do you have a headache, or perhaps it has now gone away? Maybe you never felt better! How we are feeling at the time directly affects our behavior.
- **Age** – We often forget the significant differences that can occur based on a person's age. There are obvious physical differences between a young child, a young adult, someone who is middle aged, and someone who is considered elderly. Brain development also varies dramatically by age. Children's brains are still developing and the effects of injuries that occur at a younger age may not show up until later. "Older brains" may be in a state of decline and a person may have natural difficulties with memory or other skills that are compounded by injury effects. Emotional abilities, base of knowledge, experiences, energy levels and a whole host of other age related factors will also affect behavior.
- **General Situation** – The general situation that you find yourself in can vary daily just as much as your own moods or abilities. Are things calm at home or chaotic? Is your boss in a good mood or a bad mood? Did bad weather make everybody late and on edge this morning, or is it the first beautiful day of spring? Are there new people trying to help you who don't know what to do, or is someone being exceptionally helpful? All of these things can affect how you react.
- **Cues or Signs in our Daily Environment (Antecedents)** – We often look for signs and signals to direct our behavior. These signals can be as simple as watching a traffic light to see when it is safe to drive through an intersection, or as complex as trying to read the facial expression and body posture of a person we are meeting for the first time. There are signs and cues around us all the time. Store ads try to tell us what to buy. A barking dog showing his teeth signals that it is not safe to walk up a driveway. Someone may extend a hand as a gesture of friendship, or put out their arm to stop you from coming closer. Not all cues or signs may mean the same thing all of the time; they may contradict each other, or we may not notice them. Over time we learn how to interpret some of these signals. They help us become more successful in our relationships and our daily lives -- our behavior. This can sometimes be a problem when a person has problems attending to or being aware of such signs and signals.

- **Past Experiences (Consequences)** – Things that occur after our behavior can also influence what we do in the future. We naturally seek out situations that have been rewarding for us in the past and try to avoid things that have not been rewarding or even uncomfortable. Think of the people you like to talk to, the foods you like to eat, the places you like to go and the things you like to do. Now think of things that you try to stay away from or avoid. Just how fast do you go when you see a police car on the side of the road, especially the day after you get a traffic ticket? Do you keep going back to a store that gives you lousy service? Do you talk with your angry neighbor, unless you really have to? We oftentimes learn from our consequences, which can direct our behavior in the future. While we often think of the effects that money and other tangible rewards have on our behavior, the truth is that attention and opportunities for social interaction are among the most powerful reinforcers.

Immediate consequences following our behavior can powerfully influence what we do in the future. Over time we also develop histories of experiences that can also influence what we do. For example, if you watch a new television show and do not like it, you probably won't watch it again. On the other hand, if you almost always like a television show, you will probably continue to watch it, even if tonight's episode wasn't very good.

- **Significant Events** – Very significant life events can also direct our actions. People who get sick from eating a food just once often avoid it for a long time afterwards even though they know it is probably safe. If we got badly hurt riding a bicycle, even though we have ridden one many times before, we may stop riding, or at least be hesitant to ride again. Sometimes dramatic events can influence what we do in the future, even if they did not occur to us. We may stop walking through a neighborhood if someone else we know there was a victim of violent crime. Or, we may gamble or play the lottery, even though we never won, because we heard about the guy in the next town who just won a million dollars. Key events in our childhood or early development can also affect how we respond. A child who lost a parent at an early age may react with greater insecurity in unfamiliar settings than a child who grew up with both parents and never suffered such an emotional loss. The second child is generally likely to also have greater self-confidence in unfamiliar situations.
- **Skills** – The skills that are available to us to deal with a situation can also affect our outcome. It's easier if we've already done something a thousand times, as compared to trying something new for the first time. On the other hand, experience can be a problem when we are trying to break a bad habit.
- **Emotions** – Events around us not only influence our behavior, but our emotional reactions – whether we feel happy or sad, afraid or courageous, anxious or ready to take on the world. The type and strength of our emotions at any given time can color our outlook and influence how we respond. Think

about the time that you were so angry that you couldn't think straight. Or the time that you felt so comfortable and secure that the details really didn't matter space (even if later you found out that they really did). Sales people often try to make you feel this way when they sell you something. Some people are steady in their emotions while others are highly reactive. Your emotions not only affect you, but others who are around you. In a similar manner the emotions of others will also affect you.

- **Medical Condition** – How you physically feel directly affects how you act or respond. Most of us can recognize differences in how we behave when we have a cold, fever or are otherwise sick as compared to when we feel well. Longer lasting medical conditions can also affect behavior. For example, a person with a heart condition may not be able to be as active as they once were, may tire more easily, or find they may not have the mental clarity they once had. People with diabetes may experience changes in their moods, memory, energy, or ability to concentrate because of changes in their blood sugars. People with chronic pain may have difficulty concentrating or attending to too much of anything because of their discomfort. People with seizure disorders may have different times when they feel attentive or spacey, or times when noises, lights or other things in the environment may affect them.
- **Medications** – Some medications can help people behave more effectively, such as medications that help you sleep, feel less anxious, feel less depressed, have more energy, concentrate better and so on. Medications used for other purposes can also have behavioral effects, such as the side effect warnings seen on some pill bottles: “Caution: this medication may make you drowsy or dizzy.” Other medications can cause confusion, problems remembering, or problems concentrating. Sometimes a single medication may not have a direct behavioral effect, but can combine with other medications to affect behavior. It is not unusual to review a person's medications when they are having problems since different combinations of medications can cause their own medical or behavioral challenges.
- **Illegal Drugs and Alcohol** – These have obvious effects on behavior, which is one reason why they are so heavily regulated. People who are intoxicated clearly do not respond to situations the same way as people who are sober. The effects of these substances, especially their misuse, can be seen on our streets, emergency rooms and graveyards throughout our country. Oftentimes their effects are magnified following a brain injury.
- **Cognitive Factors** – We'll discuss these more in more detail in Chapter 5, but our ability to attend to what is going on, concentrate on a task, understand what is occurring or being said, analyze situations, be aware of our own behavior, problem solve, remember and many other factors clearly affect our behavior. For example, many times children have problems in school when they are not able to attend to the teacher. They then get bored, frustrated or begin to “act

up.” Too often the teacher then focuses on the resulting behavior rather than the conditions that initially caused the problems of attention, comprehension, etc. it resulted in the frustration in subsequent acting out. Or, a person with a poor memory may forget what they are supposed to do and not be able to complete a task.

- **Culture** – Different cultures have different rules for behavior and what is considered acceptable or unacceptable. Cultures may involve the rules and customs of a different country or other geographical regions -- even neighborhoods, religious orientation, or even differences in our own social institutions. For example, the culture of where we work may be very different than our family culture, or that of our friends and acquaintances. Not understanding, accepting or supporting cultural differences can have dramatic effects on behavior.
- **Resources** – Having the right tools and resources for the job are very important. People run into problems when they don’t have the time, money, knowledge, or other critical resources to achieve success. Where we live can clearly influence services and programs that may be available. Resources also involve the people around us, or the lack of such people to support us in both times of joy and times of need. Their presence or absence can significantly affect our behavior. With the right tools, we can remain calm and easily solve a problem. When we don’t have these tools, a simple problem can turn into a crisis.
- **Roles and Expectations** – We each have different roles in different situations. These give us access to different types of resources and set expectations for our behavior. For example, a teacher has access to many different sources of knowledge and is expected to be expert enough to teach others. The student, on the other hand, does not have these skills at first, but is expected to learn the information. Sometimes roles and expectations change and people are not able to change with the situation. Consider the “worker” who is no longer able to do her job following a terrible injury. Her employer still expects the work to be done, but she can’t do it. Both her role and the employer’s expectations will have to change, or there will be a problem! Or, consider the parent who used to working outside the home, but who now stays home and is responsible for childcare. He may not have the skills for this role and have a lot of difficulty caring for his children, who expect him to take care of them. Changes in roles and expectations, especially when unwelcome or unexpected, can result in behavioral challenges.
- **Personality** – Each of us are unique and we respond differently than others to the same situation. Some of this is due to our past experiences, but some of it is due to our own personal traits and characteristics. One person may always respond calmly regardless of what is happening while another person may be known to easily anger. Our personalities clearly affect our behavior across

situations. “Who we are” – our unique traits and characteristics are just as important as “what we are” – our past experiences.

- **Belief, Faith, Spirituality** – Depending on one’s orientation, these can be considerable factors in influencing behavior. Sometimes belief, faith and spirituality are tied to a religion and sometimes to other experiences. Strong beliefs, faith and spirituality may guide a person through a time of worry, or misguide a person, such as in the case of fanaticism.
- **Etcetera (Etc.)** – This is not meant to be funny, but to recognize the many other and different factors that also influence our behavior, some that we may not even be aware of. At any given time, on any given day, there are literally thousands of things that affect what we say, what we do and how we react to the events around us. We are usually aware of the most common or obvious factors, but there are often many other things going on that don’t get our attention. Just because we are not aware of these factors does not mean that they don’t influence our behavior.

In summary, behavior itself is “simply” how a person interacts with their immediate situation. The wide range of events and influences in this immediate situation vary greatly and interact with each other in a very complex manner. This is combined with our past experiences, histories and basic makeup and ultimately results in behavior. While we may not always know what is influencing our behavior, there is always a reason why we behave.

### **What Causes Behavior to Change?**

Our behavior changes anytime any of the events or factors we previously discussed change. If you become tired, you may fall asleep or stop concentrating on what you are doing. You may act more anxious if you run out of a medication that you take to help you stay calm. Your attention may be suddenly redirected towards someone who makes noise. You probably act differently when you walk into a local church as compared to walking into a local bar. Your reaction is probably different when someone accuses you of doing something wrong, as compared to being complimented. You are probably less likely to correctly assemble your child’s new toy if you don’t have the instructions, just like to you are more likely to get lost when you are in a new city and don’t have a map. These examples can go on and on.

The important fact to consider is that behavior changes when events around or within you change. Our behavior is a reaction to our situation and condition. This is the same whether we are acting successfully, such as doing a good job or having a nice conversation with someone, or when we are acting unsuccessfully, such as getting angry because someone doesn’t understand us, or when we are frustrated. In fact, there is always a reason for our behavior. This does not take away our responsibility for our actions, but helps us understand why and how each of us “behaves.”

If you accept this view of behavior, then you may begin to see behavior as a barometer or gauge of how a person is doing. We know that changes in the pressure recorded by a barometer often signify impending changes in weather. Changes in a person's body temperature may signify whether a person is sick or healthy. In a similar manner, the way a person acts can be a good measure of what is going on within or around him. A happy or successful person indicates that things are in balance. Problems indicate that something is out of balance. For example:

- *Is the person angry or aggressive?* Is there someone around them that they don't like or understand? Are they trying to do something that they are having trouble with? Are they in pain? Are they hungry? Are they confused? Are they being threatened? Were they ignored when they try to cooperatively get somebody's attention and are now resorting to other means?
- *Is the person not paying attention?* Is it because they are bored? Is something else capturing their attention? Has their physical or cognitive stamina been overtaxed and they just can't concentrate any more? Did they take their sleeping medication rather than their ADHD medication this morning by mistake? Are they sick? Do they have problems understanding language?
- *Is the person refusing to do what they have been asked?* Do they understand what they have been asked to do? Do they know how to do what they have been asked? Are they doing something else? Do they not like doing what has been asked? Are they too tired? Do they have trouble getting started on tasks?

When you view behavior as a barometer you can start to ask questions about what is going wrong. More importantly, you can start to problem solve and ask questions about what can be changed in order to change the behavior. If you change the events around or within an individual their behavior will almost always change.

### **Why Behavior May Be Dysfunctional, but Never Disordered**

This may seem like an abstract issue, but it is very important in how we relate to and regard other people.

People too often say that a person's behavior is disordered when he or she is displaying a problem behavior. In many cases this implies that there is something basically or inherently wrong with the individual; e.g., *He comes from the bad side of that family*, or *she's just really messed up*. When we do this, we are passing judgment on that person and *sentencing* them to their own misery. The label of "behavior disorder" may also imply that there is no rational reason for the problem behavior to occur. This may lead people to give up hope on trying to resolve a challenging issue.

However, as we previously discussed, there are many-many different factors that affect our behavior and without a doubt there is *always* a reason that any behavior occurs. In other words, behavior is not magical, although it can sometimes be a mystery. There is always a reason for behavior to occur, even when we cannot identify the specific cause or event.

A better way to look at behavior is to consider whether it is functional or dysfunctional. This helps to maintain a personal regard for the individual while at the same time focusing on specific issues that may be going well or poorly for the person.

Behavior is *functional* when it is having a desired effect or outcome; when we are experiencing success in what we do. For example, functional social skills mean that we interact well with others and functional work skills note our success on the job. It may be begging the point to say that a good marriage is the result of functional skills in sharing, intimacy, communication and caring, among other things, but not by much. Functional simply implies that there is a balance between what a person is trying to do or is expected to do, and their ability to do so.

*Dysfunctional* behavior occurs when a person is not successful in their actions or their actions place them in a worse situation. Sometimes a behavior is considered dysfunctional because a person fails in a task, or tries but is unable to complete the entire task. Other times a behavior is considered dysfunctional because of how a person reacts to a situation, such as through anger, tears or frustration.

Dysfunctional behavior indicates that there is little or no balance between what a person is trying to do or is expected to do and their ability to do so. For example, when trying a new skill for the first time it is not unusual to be “all thumbs.” A person may previously have been able to do particular work but can no longer do it since their brain injury. They may try strategies that are not effective, but not know alternative or more effective approaches. They may become highly emotional in the situation and focus more on expressing their emotions than addressing the problem; and so on. In each of these cases there is a disconnect or something missing between the demands and expectations of the situation and a person’s ability to address the issue.

Consider functional behavior as being similar to the way that a key fits a lock. In this case there is a good fit between the skills, abilities, and the general state of the person in relation to the situation and demands that they are facing. Each point or groove on the key fits the tumblers and ridges in the lock. Consider dysfunctional behavior to be a situation in which the key does not fit into the lock. Our goal then becomes deciding how to adapt the key – in this case the person’s skills, abilities, and general state to fit the lock; how to adapt the lock – in this case the demands and expectations of the situation to fit the key; or how to make changes in both to assure a proper fit.

### **What is a Behavior Problem?**

With the perspective that we have taken in this chapter, it is easy to understand that a behavior problem is an episode of dysfunctional behavior. Some behavior problems may be more important or more relevant than others and therefore more or less of a problem. It depends on the behavior that is occurring, the situation or setting in which it occurs, the risk it entails for the person or others, the resources that are available, and who is judging or evaluating the behavior.

Take my singing for example. Actually, you want to stay as far away as possible. I'm terrible! It might only be a mild problem when I am singing in the shower where no one else can hear it, except the dogs – fortunately, they don't have much say in the matter. It is exceptionally aggravating to my daughters when I am singing to the songs they are trying to listen to on the radio and I would be clearly booed off the stage if I tried to sing at Carnegie Hall. In each of these cases, there is a different audience or group of people who are evaluating my behavior and yielding different judgments.

Or, consider a person who is “sort of a good mechanic.” He or she may have enough skills to take care of their car as a hobby, but not enough to get a job in a garage. In this case there is actually no dysfunctional behavior as long as the person sticks to his or her own car. They have the skills to do the job and they are judging their own work. Their behavior becomes dysfunctional and a problem when they try to earn a living by working on other people's cars for which they do not have the experience or skills.

In effect, a problem behavior is a behavior that someone (the person or others) finds to be a problem!

### **Summary**

In summary, behavior represents everything that we act, say and do. Behavior is a product or result of complex interactions of many things around and within us. This includes the environment or situations we find ourselves in; our present medical, physical emotional and general internal status; skills and abilities; past experiences; personality; roles and expectations; other involved parties; among many other factors. Any time that any of these factors or the relationship between these factors changes, our behavior will change. We'll discuss some of these issues in more detail in the next section of the book.

Consider behavior as a barometer or measure of all of these different factors and events. We are generally reacting to these situations. Dysfunctional behaviors generally indicate a problem or poor match between our abilities and the demands of the immediate situation. This comes across as failing or being unskilled in a task, refusing to do something, acting angry or frustrated, or in other ways that may be considered behavior problems. Solving the problem usually means trying to create a balance between a person's abilities and expectations. Remember! "The problem, not the behavior, is a problem!" What this means is that the presenting behavior indicates that there is a problem and by addressing this problem and behavioral change.

It is very important to separate the overall person from the behavior in question when addressing behavioral challenges. This is why it is important to emphasize behavior dysfunction over behavior disorder. Behavior dysfunction indicates a problem that a person may be experiencing between ability and expectation. Too often behavior disorder can infer an unsolvable problem or imply that there is something inherently wrong with the person. This does little to solve the problem or create positive and enduring relationships between people.

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