

Explanations of Eating Disorders: Learning Theory



This activity will help you to:

- Understand the learning theory of eating disorders
- Try out and evaluate different techniques for learning psychological material

The learning theory of eating disorders suggests that people develop EDs as a result of the environment they grow up in. Learning theory has two aspects:

- **Operant conditioning (direct learning)**
- **Social learning (learning through observation)**

Step 1 – Read and take notes...

Read through the following description of the two parts of learning theory. As you read through, make short notes on the content of the theory.

Rules for note taking:

1. Read the whole text before you put pen to paper
2. Never copy out whole sentences.
3. Identify key words and phrases – only these should be in your notes
4. Use headings and indentation to identify different sections of your notes, and to link ideas together.
5. Underlining and colour can be useful in highlighting important terms etc.
6. Re-read your notes to make sure you understand them – if there is a bit you don't get, then go back to the text and add in some more information.

Operant conditioning is a process of learning through reward (called reinforcement in this theory) and punishment. People produce behaviour (i.e. they do things) all the time. Some of these things result in reinforcement (i.e. they bring a reward). If a behaviour gets a reinforcement, the person is likely to repeat it. Other behaviour gets punished (i.e. it brings an undesirable result) if this happens it is unlikely to be repeated. We can use operant conditioning to try to explain anorexia and bulimia. Starting with anorexia, suppose a girl wanted to lose some weight. She might try dieting (a behaviour). As a result of dieting, she loses weight. This is something she wanted, so when it happens it is reinforcing. She might get other reinforcements as well. For example, people might compliment her on her weight loss, which would be rewarding. These reinforcements would serve to strengthen the dieting behaviour that led to them. Thus, the more weight she loses, and the more compliments she receives, the more she is likely to diet. This could lead to a cycle of 'dieting out of control', where the more weight she loses, the more she wants to diet. If this goes far enough, the result would be anorexia.

Social learning is a process of learning by observing other people. The people we observe in order to learn from them are called models. We can learn behaviour just by looking at it, but whether we imitate it or not depends on what we observe happening to the person we learned it from. Suppose we observe a person do something and get punished for it. We are unlikely to imitate them, in case we get punished too. On the other hand, if we observe someone getting reinforcement for doing something then we are likely to imitate them, provided the reinforcement they got was something we also want. In our society we are surrounded by images of the 'ideal' body – and, as far as women are concerned, it's very thin. Images of the female body in magazines, on TV and in films all emphasise a slim body shape. Female celebrities and stars tend to be thin as well. These images and people act as models for the women in our society. They are seen to receive lots of reinforcement for being thin – fame, admiration, success, money and so on. Young girls start being exposed to this from an early age, and very quickly they learn that being thin brings reinforcement, so they want to be thin too. They also observe that putting on weight brings punishment – just look at how the newspapers criticise famous women who put on weight! It is learning of this sort that might lead to a strong desire to lose weight that, in turn, might lead to anorexia or other eating disorders.

Step 2 – Check your learning so far...

When you have finished your notes, read over them a couple of times. Then put them away, and try to write down the main points again. After you have finished this, compare the new notes with the original ones. Ask yourself:

- What did I get **right**?
- What did I get **wrong**?
- What did I miss **out**?

Step 3 – Put the information in a different form...

This is the step that many students miss out on, because they get confused between **memorising** and **learning**. Memorising is what you do when you store information in your memory in the **exact** form that you encountered it. It's useful for little facts, like definitions of things. It's not that useful for larger amounts of information that you might need to use flexibly (as you would with psychological theories in an exam). What you need to do with psychological material is **learn** it – which means you have to understand what it means.

For this, you need to use a technique that transforms the information in some way. Two possible ways are:

- Pictures & cartoons
- Mind maps

These are very effective techniques for learning psychological material, but very few students actually use them.

What you need to do:

- Two handouts are available, one on using pictures for learning, and one on using mind maps. Choose one of them, and get the handout.
- Follow the instructions on the handout – you will need the notes you originally took on learning theory and eating disorders for this.
- You will need to complete either a mind map or a set of pictures/diagrams to help you understand and learn the material