

Classical conditioning associated with phobias



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Classical Conditioning in plain terms is a method by which an organism determines why and the cause of a condition, while also what brought it about, and whereas, 'operant conditioning is a method of learning that occurs through rewards and punishments for behaviour' (psychology.about.com). Classical Conditioning can be used to create phobias. 'A phobia can be defined as an intense and irrational fear. There are three types of phobias: specific phobia, social phobia and agoraphobia. Each type of phobia has its own unique diagnostic criteria' (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Phobias can then be discarded by a process known as systematic desensitisation.

Science demonstrates a learning process known as Classical Conditioning, by which an organism begins to associate two stimuli (e. g., freshly baked bread and a pleasant smell), such that the stimulus (fresh bread) produces a response (stomach growl) that initially was produced by the other stimulus (the pleasant smell). Classical Conditioning involves involuntary learning based on associations 'that predict that a significant event will occur' (Martin, Carlson and Buskist, 2010, pg. 258). In this, the stimuli that are associated with become conditioned responses.

Within the Classical Conditioning Theory, there are certain aspects which determine its success. These determinants of strong conditioning include: 1. The temporal contiguity between the NS and the CS (Blackboard) and 2. 'The number of pairings of the NS and the CS' (Traplond and Spence, 1960). 3. 'Intensity of CS & UCS affects intensity of CR' 4. 'Salience of CS' 5. 'Reliability of CS as predictor of UCS' 6. 'Redundancy of CS' and 7. 'CS-US Belongingness' (Blackboard).

Also, there are several learning principles behind classical conditioning including the following:

Acquisition: ' The pairing of the NS and UCS leading to the NS becoming the CS and eliciting the CR' (Traplod and Spence, 1960).

Extinction: ' A period following the acquisition period during which the CS no longer predicts the UCS' (Pavlov, 1927).

Spontaneous Recovery: ' During a period of extinction the CR becomes weak. However, if there is a long enough pause before the start of the next extinction process then the CR may be strong again at the beginning of this next process' (Pavlov, 1927).

Stimulus Generalisation: ' No two stimuli are exactly alike. Once a response has been conditioned to a CS, similar stimuli will also elicit that response. The more closely the other stimuli resemble the CS, the more likely they will elicit the CR.' (Martin, Carlson and Buskist, 2010, pg. 261).

Discrimination: ' An organism can be taught to distinguish between similar but different stimuli. Discrimination training is accomplished by using two different CS's during training. One CS is always followed by the UCS; the other CS is never followed by the UCS.' (Martin, Carlson and Buskist, 2010, pg. 261).

There are many stimuli both unconditioned and conditioned which can cause phobias or other problems. Such stimuli include ' Classical Conditioning.

Phobias are unreasonable fears of specific objects or situations, such as'

Arachnophobia '(spiders) and cars' (Martin, Carlson and Buskist, 2010, pg.

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262). At a certain time in early life, the organism ' was exposed to the now-feared in conjunction with a stimulus that elicited' (Martin, Carlson and Buskist, 2010, pg. 262) either fear or pain.

An example of such includes the ' Flinching Response'. In summary, this involves an inflated balloon getting larger and larger until it bursts. In response, one feels pain or fear. Following this if a needle is brought towards an inflated balloon, one will flinch again showing the conditioned response. This is a typical method of stimulating a phobia. The needle ' now trigger(s) the defensive flinching response by itself (Martin, Carlson and Buskist, 2010, pg. 262)'.

' Classical Conditioning can occur even without direct experience with the conditional and unconditional stimuli. (Martin, Carlson and Buskist, 2010, pg. 262)'. This is known as an observational learning experience. ' For example, growing up with parents who fear spiders could lead to a fear of spiders in some children.'

' A specific phobia is an extreme fear of a specific object or situation that is out of proportion to the actual danger or threat. In addition, an individual with a specific phobia is distressed about having the fear, or experiences significant interference in his or her day-to-day life because of the fear. Many people have a fear of a particular object or situation, but most of the time these would not be considered phobias. (American Psychiatric Association, 1994)'

' The DSM-IV-TR defines five types of specific phobias:

Animal Type: These include fears of animals such as dogs, cats, spiders, bugs, mice, rats, birds, fish, and snakes.

Natural Environment Type: These include fears of heights, storms, and being near water.

Blood-Injection-Injury Type: These include fears of seeing blood, receiving a blood test or injection, watching medical procedures on television, and for some individuals, even just talking about medical procedures.

Situational Type: These include fears of situations such as driving, flying, elevators, and enclosed places.

Other Type: These include other specific fears, including fears of choking or vomiting after eating certain foods, fears of balloons breaking or other loud sounds, or fears of clowns. (American Psychiatric Association, 2000)'

The causes of specific phobias are complex, including Classical Conditioning. For instance, using Classical conditioning one can create arachnophobia. Consider, one reveals a spider ' in front of a young boy, who has never seen one before. The boys eyes will turn towards (Martin, Carlson and Buskist, 2010, pg. 259)' the spider. However, whilst revealing the spider, one will conduct a loud noise. ' The loud noise will cause a defensive startle reaction' (Martin, Carlson and Buskist, 2010, pg. 259). On repeat of this, it causes an unlearned defensive reaction.

' Specific phobias are the only anxiety disorder for which psychological treatments are almost always considered to be the best approach to treatment. However, there are many ways to alleviate different types of

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phobias such as systematic desensitisation. (American Psychiatric Association, 2000)'

' This technique, also called in vivo exposure, is the treatment of choice for specific phobias. Essentially, it involves confronting a feared situation repeatedly, until the situation no longer triggers fear. (American Psychiatric Association, 2000)'

' For example, someone with a fear of spiders might begin treatment by looking at pictures of spiders, or by standing 30 feet away from a spider in a sealed jar and gradually moving closer and closer to the spider (eventually touching it). Exposure works best when it occurs frequently (e. g., several times per week), and lasts long enough for the fear to decrease (up to two hours). Exposure-based treatments for some specific phobias (e. g., animals, blood) have been shown to work in as little as one session. (American Psychiatric Association, 2000)'

Classical Conditioning is a particular type of learning which can be used to develop specific phobias. However, phobias can be established in other ways including informational learning and direct learning experiences. As well as this, there are many ways to assuage phobias by ways of muscle tension or cognitive therapy. Classical Conditioning not only develops phobias but is used worldwide in marketing.

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