

Contingency Management: Shaping Success Through Rewards

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Contingency management is a type of treatment used in the mental health or substance abuse fields. Patients are rewarded (or, less often, punished) for their behavior; generally, adherence to or failure to adhere to program rules and regulations or their treatment plan. For children with conduct disorder, token systems are highly successful but do not help the children achieve normal functioning unless combined with a cost response program reinforcing negative punishment. As an approach to treatment, contingency management emerged from the behavior therapy and applied behavior analysis traditions in mental health. By most evaluations, contingency management procedures produce one of the largest effect sizes out of all mental health and educational interventions.

Token economies

One form of contingency management is the token economy system. Token systems can be used in an individual or group format. Token systems have been shown to be successful with a diverse array of populations including those suffering from addiction, those with retardation, and delinquents. However, recent research questions the use of token systems with very young children. The exception to the last would be the treatment of stuttering. The goal of such systems is to gradually thin out and to help the person begin to access the natural community of reinforcement (the reinforcement typically received in the world for performing the behavior).

Walker (1990) presents an excellent overview of token systems and combining such procedures with other interventions in the classroom. He relates the comprehensiveness of token systems to the child's level of difficulty.

Voucher programs and related applications in addiction treatment

Another form of contingency management is voucher programs. In voucher-based contingency management patients earn vouchers exchangeable for retail items contingent upon objectively verified abstinence from recent drug use or compliance with other behavior-change targets. This particular form of contingency management was introduced in the early 1990s as a treatment for cocaine dependence. The approach is the most reliably effective method for producing cocaine abstinence in controlled clinical trials.

Medication take-home privileges is another form of contingency management frequently used in methadone maintenance treatment. Patients are permitted to "earn" take-home doses of their methadone in exchange for increasing, decreasing, or ceasing certain behaviors. For example, a patient may be given one take-home dose per week after submitting negative drug screens (generally via urine testing) for three months. (It is worth noting that take home-doses (or "bottles") are seen as desirable rewards because they allow patients to come to the clinic less often to obtain their medication).

In behavior therapy, behavior modification, and applied behavior analysis, contingency management includes techniques such as shaping, time-out, making contracts between therapist and patient, and token economy.

Level systems

Level systems are often employed as a form of contingency management system. Level systems are designed such that once one level is achieved, then the person earns all the privileges for that level and the levels lower than it.

Often in a behavior modification facility, it is common to use point or level systems to maintain order.

Effectiveness in addiction programs

A recent meta-analysis of contingency management in drug programs showed that it has a large effect. These contingencies are delivered based on abstinence and attendance goals and can take the form of vouchers, the opportunity to win prizes, or privileges. They have been used with single problem addictions as well as dual diagnoses and homeless. Overall contingency management has been found to be an effective and cost efficient addition to drug treatment.

Organizations

Contingency management is a behavior therapy technique. Many organizations exist for behavior therapists around the world. The World Association for Behavior Analysis offers a certification in behavior therapy . This certification allows for the demonstration of knowledge regarding contingency management.