

Covert Conditioning: Mastering Change Through Mental Imagery

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Covert conditioning is an approach to mental health treatment that uses the principles of behavior modification, which emerged from the applied behavior analysis literature to assist people in making improvements in their behavior or inner experience. The method relies on the person's capacity to use imagery for purposes such as mental rehearsal. In some populations it has been found that an imaginary reward can be as effective as a real one (Cautela, 1986). Effective covert conditioning is said to rely upon careful application of behavioral treatment principles such as a thorough behavioral analysis.

Some clinicians include the mind's ability to spontaneously generate imagery that can provide intuitive solutions or even reprocessing that improves people's typical reactions to situations or inner material. However, this goes beyond the behavioristic principles on which covert conditioning is based (Cautela, 1986).

Therapies and self help methods have aspects of covert conditioning. This can be seen in focusing, some neuro-linguistic programming methods such as future pacing, and various visualization or imaginal processes used in behavior therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy.

Covert conditioning might be considered a fledgling approach because it has not yet developed a base of research or even popularity typical of major treatment methods (Cautela, 1993).

Therapeutic interventions

Covert sensitization" associates an aversive stimulus with a behavior the client wishes to reduce or eliminate. This is done by imagining the target behavior followed by imagining an aversive consequence. Covert extinction" attempts to reduce a behavior by imagining the target behavior while imagining that the reinforcer does not occur. Covert response cost" attempts to reduce a behavior by associating the loss of a reinforcer with the target behavior that is to be decreased.

Covert positive reinforcement" is intended to increase a behavior by imagining a reinforcing experience in connection with the behavior.

Covert negative reinforcement" attempts to increase a behavior by connecting the termination of an aversive stimulus with increased production of a target behavior.

Covert modeling" involves imagining someone engaging in the behavior and, optionally, reinforcers taking place.

Effectiveness

As part of a behavior modification package, covert conditioning has been shown to be effective with sex offenders. Clinical studies continue to find it effective with some generalization from office to natural environment with this population.