

Module-10

Dimensions of subjective adjustment- Avoidance, Withdrawal and Compromise

Remember that we are banking on the theories of learning while referring to these dimensions of subjective adjustment, and therefore before we go into some details let us quickly summarize the major theories of learning. **Conditioning theories** suggest that we get conditioned to respond in a certain way either involuntarily or voluntarily. The other theory is more thought oriented. We have our own experiences and the capability to metacognize these things. Hence, the behavioural outcomes that we show are more dependent on how we fabricate our knowledge based on the past experiences. This is called cognitive learning.

Broadly you can classify avoidance and withdrawal behaviour as conditioned or cognitive learning based behaviour. Conditioned learning can be involuntary or voluntary. Involuntarily conditioned learning is an outcome of classical conditioning. In the process of classical conditioning, you involuntarily do something and although you have not willingly participated in doing it after certain number of trials when the same situation is repeated you respond in the conditioned manner.

In the case of instrumental conditioning you voluntarily participate in the process and with each step of desired behaviour you get certain degree of reinforcement. These reinforcements may be positive or negative. Positive reinforcement will boost your achievement whereas negative reinforcement act as deterrent. So, for the acts that you perform and get reinforcements become strengthened and therefore in given types of situation you respond in exactly the same way. Such forms of behaviour are instrumentally conditioned. Let us revert back to the school days. In most of the schools you would see that the moment the teacher enters

the class all the kids stand up and greet the teacher. In the first class you did not know what to do at that time; you were unaware of the protocol and hence did not exhibit such behaviour. Later, you and everybody else repeat it and the teacher gives you a broad smile as a positive reinforcement; you keep on repeating it. This is how you get instrumentally conditioned. In classical conditioning you involuntarily do certain things, say, you have pickle for the first time and had watering of the mouth. Later, whenever you see a pickle you experience watering of the mouth.

The second aspect of learning called cognitive learning is based on the fact that you already have certain set of experiences. This S-R (stimulus-response) bond has been formed as you have the idea of appropriate response for a given type of situation. With chronological growth and other social conditions we are faced with multiple kinds of situations in life which help us accumulate good amount of experience. Now given the life experiences that you have and overall behaviour that you have learned to manifest in different kinds of situations, if you face a new situation you would not bank on the earlier experiences, rather you can built upon the earlier ones to come forward with an appropriate one. Although you are facing a novel situation, you can still anticipate best strategy based on earlier experiences and outcomes and think of possible behavioural outcomes. Say, you have a photo frame and you want to hang it on the wall.

You will not fix nails at different places and hang it at everywhere to see which location suits best; you will just look at the room and decide which place would suit the most. Based on your earlier experiences, you can visualize the outcomes and choose the ones you want to bank upon.

Avoidance, withdrawal and compromises are behavioural manifestations which are closely associated with these human learning processes. For a detailed exposure to learning theories and the process of learning please refer to the NPTEL course 'Basic Psychological Processes'.

We all learn to avoid dangerous situations and this is an essential concept of life as the more you distance yourself from dangerous situations the more comfort you derive. This is from an adjustment viewpoint. From an evolutionary viewpoint, you are helping yourself survive and therefore avoidance of injurious situations is recommended. Anticipation and avoidance also serves the purpose of coping. Because you can anticipate the ultimate negative outcomes, you decide to avoid the situation. Your anticipatory thoughts tell you that the situation might yield dangerous or injurious outcomes. Avoidance of and withdrawal from hazardous situations may result into direct overt avoidance or escape response. Covert behaviour is not visible. For example, when you think or plan a strategy it is not visible to others. Such behaviours are covert. But if what you are doing is glaringly visible to others then it is considered as overt behaviour. The moment you perceive threat you might exhibit the tendency to overtly avoid it. It might lead to withdrawal from dangerous situations. **There is a bomb blast and you run away from the spot.** **This is overt withdrawal.** There was anger exchange between you and somebody else and the person concerned is giving you a call, you deliberately avoid it. There are many such situations that we see in and around us. The techniques mentioned here are not actually coping techniques but they do serve similar function. Some other subtle means of coping might include some symptoms such as amnesia or other neurotic or psychotic symptoms. You show certain degree of forgetfulness towards the situation. Or if the situation is really dangerous, you could be amnesiac for quite a long duration. You could indulge in regression or fantasies. The core element here is withdrawal and avoidance. This is a clear reflection that you are worried or tense about the given situation and you anyhow want to get rid of it.

Fear or anger inducing stimuli tend to illicit movement towards or away from them. Moving away in such circumstances might be guided by simple overt withdrawal or avoidance.

Emotions are also classified based on certain parameters such as valence or directionality. For instance, based on directionality emotions can be classified as approach or avoidance emotions. Certain situations make you approach the stimuli whereas certain others force you to avoid it. In terms of valence, emotions are classified as positive or negative emotions. For example, happiness is a positive emotion whereas sadness is a negative emotion. Let us now look at it a little differently. Sadness and anger both have negative valences but the moment you look at it from the approach-avoidance dimension you realize that in case of sadness you tend to withdraw but in case of anger you tend to approach. Sadness makes you quiet and withdrawn but anger does not. You will approach and show your anger to the source that has triggered it. The stimuli that elicits fear or anger can be looked in terms of directionality. It can push you towards the situation or stimuli or can pull you back. If you are afraid of something you will try to pull out of the situation and if you are angry you will rush towards it.

Very interestingly, in the real life situation you will observe that in the **same situation some people show approach whereas some others show avoidance reaction.** After the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated during a political rally and the probes began the footage of various cameras were examined. What were recorded on camera were gruesome killing, smoke, sound, blood and body parts. But what was also caught on camera was a top police official running away in his government vehicle. Although he shared the responsibility of security of the Prime Minister but seconds after the blast he sat in his ambassador car and quickly fled away. Interestingly there were few other policemen who rushed towards the site after the blast. So, if you look at the human reactions removing the designations, one human being tried to run away while others tried to approach. Situation wise it was the same, reaction wise we see two different people and two different set of reactions.

Many heroes, in that sense, have laid down their lives processing information such that the situation did not trigger fear in them rather it triggered anger. When anger becomes subsidiary to fear, you show extreme fear and then you show your anger. Many of those who were not directly affected by 26/11 Mumbai attack sat in the TV studios, analyzed the situation and showed how angry they were with whatever happened. These are comfortable expressions of anger. However, many of us will not initially go there because of the fear of getting killed. But once you know your fear can be replaced with anger because now the free expression of anger does not have any price to pay, your fear gets replaced by anger. When an individual's dominant pattern of behaviour is anger against the threat then they are considered to be an aggressive human being. This is not something which you infrequently exhibit. This is a dominant pattern and the threat makes you boil and you tend to approach the threatful situation.

Now the person whose movements are predominantly away from the threat is likely to be considered a withdrawn individual. As you dominantly withdraw yourself therefore you are a timid and withdrawn type of an individual or you are the aggressive human being who suddenly boils and approaches the situation. It is expected that you should have the ability to tame and withhold your anger and to give the desired expression to your aggressive emotional outburst. It should not be an impulsive outburst as they are not considered to be good. What you have to keep in mind is that all people who are very quiet and retiring in nature are not always withdrawn individuals. If you do not boil very quickly or you do not boil quite often this does not mean that your ability to remain quite, calm and composed is a demonstration of your withdrawal nature. You might not be defensively withdrawn and still you might be able to remain quite, calm and composed. And if this happens the chances of social success increases because you have the ability to balance your emotional expressions. Some of the major psychotic symptoms are

dominantly withdrawn behaviour patterns therefore non-aggressive and introvert people are sometimes misclassified as maladjusted, but this is not true.

Withdrawal is often used as a defense mechanism. It has been observed that whenever you anticipate threat of punishment and the punishment that you imagine is extreme in order, then it has been observed that people usually tend to escape or they also tend to withdraw. This tendency helps the individual reduce the tension generated out of the anticipatory punishment. Simple overt avoidance is the most obvious and available means of handling threats and problems. Many people who have survived communal riots would tell you how scared they were and in such situations of anticipatory occurrences they feared being the target of threat. As a reaction, they did withdraw and confine themselves to either a house or a locality. Many cities of this country witnessed walled colonies after the 1984 anti-Sikh riot. From whatever little information is available about the primary victims of Gujarat riots, many of the elderly victims have confined themselves to their houses. They have completely withdrawn from engaging themselves in social activities. What is glaringly visible in these cases is that you decide to confine yourself and you consider that withdrawal is the best mechanism to adopt because you are uncertain about the future.

When India was celebrating 50 years of independence, a very interesting study was conducted in the three neighboring countries, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The target population for this research was people who were forced by the then geopolitical circumstances to deport from one country to another during partition. The primary finding of the study was 'Partition Psychosis', a set of behaviour that was dominated by certain degree of withdrawal. This was seen irrespective of the country they have finally shifted to. They had all lost trust in the system and also in human beings.

So, when you have a negative life experience that includes punishment or anticipatory punishment, withdrawal can go to this extent. Here withdrawal may be an appropriate response to realistically appraised danger. But if you over generalize it then it reflects your inadequacy. When we will be discussing posttraumatic stress, we will talk about behavioural anomalies which are accepted if manifested till a certain time period. Beyond that it becomes a clinical concern. Overall, such cases are considered problem cases where defensive withdrawal is used in excess. Then you are no longer a normal individual who is showing withdrawal as an adjustment module, rather you are a maladjusted individual who is over generalizing the usage of withdrawal.

At times of social unrest withdrawal, compromises and avoidance are used at the maximum. By and large it has been observed that magnitude of such behaviour increases when social situations are volatile and society is unstable. Communities, when at peace, are more productive and creative compared to communities in conflict. I am not talking about industrial production during the time of war. During Second World War even untrained people work in the industries so that round the clock production could take place. Right from boots, hats, and soap to guns and ammunition, everything was over produced at that time. I am not talking about this mass production. These are the outcomes that are need of the time but do not make mark in human history the way literary outcome, performing art forms or visual art forms make. You will realize that these are the things that live long. The artist concerned might have died but these pieces of creative output survive for long. Later, society takes pride in these things. All such creative outcomes are seen only when the society is at peace.

Causes of withdrawal

There are some prominent causes that could lead to withdrawal behaviour in normal human beings. Prolonged illness is one of them as it would force you to remain isolated from people with whom you were connected and because of the gap in time, you experience difficulty in re-initiating the relationship. You have lived for long in confinement and somewhere the gulf between you and the old circle of people widens. In grave situations the reactions might be far stronger. For example, you meet an accident and the doctor amputates one of your limb. You have been physically handicapped. Say, somebody has been diagnosed HIV positive. This has strong social stigma attached to it. You go to the doctor and after a treatment of three years or so you are declared perfectly okay and asked to return back to normal life. Even after three years, it will be very difficult for you to return to the same community where you lived. Even looking at it from a non-psychological point of view, we know how difficult it is for dislocated people to return back to their communities and to live an integrated kind of a lifestyle.

People, who are made to live in isolation for long, usually develop some withdrawal symptoms which remain with them for years. Many Korean women till date are fighting for their right as they were used as comfort women for the Japanese forces during the Second World War. Human history is full of such weird instances that caused extreme adverse experience to some putting them into forced isolation. Imagine you being one such individual. It is quite possible that you never feel facing others. Social rejection has been attached very strongly to such cases.

There could also be situation where you have not faced such extreme forms of suffering but somewhere, in a very subtle way, you are made to realize that you are not what we are. Say, you realize that others are the bright students whereas you are not so or others are socially

sophisticated and you are the raw one, a villager. Simple fact that I cannot groom myself like you and cannot wear clothes like you, twist my lip and tongue to pronounce things as you do, I do not have taste for the food and drinks that you enjoy, I do not participate in the smoking session, might make me realize that I am not like you. If you realize that majority is one type and you are isolated and different, once again you might realize that you have no other choice but to show withdrawal tendencies. And this is very frequently seen right from the beginning of the social years to later phases in life. You are not told that you are unsophisticated and unpolished but you are made to realize in a very subtle way.

Very interestingly, and fortunately for human race, all of us can very easily understand these subtle distinctions. Most of the human beings are very good at reading between the lines. If such type of life experiences comes before you, though not too severe like previous examples, still you could demonstrate a great degree of withdrawal. The difference is that if it is of less intensity you might show compromise. Else, seclusive adjustment could emerge as the most satisfactory behaviour pattern.

It has been observed that in many cases human beings also show their intelligence in terms of fabricating what to compromise with, how much to compromise with and when to compromise with. Remember, cunningness is the word that people might use for such individuals but if you are able to calculate where and how much to compromise then you are actually exhibiting your intellectual ability. You are intelligent enough to evaluate the situation, formulate a strategy and implement it. The most severe defensive withdrawal patterns are usually emotionally induced and they serve an anxiety reducing function. So, unless the experience had higher degree of negative emotional valence attached to it, people will not use withdrawal. For

moderate experiences withdrawal is not used as a module, rather compromise or avoidance may be used.

There could be other experiences also which could induce certain degree of withdrawal or avoidance tendency in you. Most of them are very generously used in most of the cultures. Abusive discipline for example; when your teacher asks you to stand on the chair you feel insulted or you are asked to stand outside the class or even more humiliating you are asked to become a cock in front of your classmates. Many kids get punishment at the slightest of the mistake they commit. Although otherwise banned, generous punishment is still reported now and then. Repeatedly parents ask you to shut up and do not allow you to speak and they do not hear you. You consider this kind of behaviour abusive. Few such incidents and you refuse to participate in social interactions. It begins with familial interactions but then spread to bigger social interactions. Acting out might take place in such cases. Say, when you are relatively free you speak so much that others get fed up.

If we talk about verbal mistreatment, most of the time you hear slangs and you consider this to be very insulting. On the other hand, say you experience inconsistency in treatment; today you are celebrated, tomorrow you are abused and the third day you invite physical punishment and for the same act. You no longer know what to do. Parents are majorly responsible for such inconsistent treatment. The same father will scold you for watching TV one day, second day, he will allow you to do so and the third day, he will monitor the channels you are watching and you do not know what is right and what is wrong. The worst is when you have inconsistency between the mother and the father. Father does not allow you to carry pocket money to school and mother secretly gives you money. You do not know whether carrying money is wrong or telling your father is wrong. And such multiple experiences do not allow your super ego to consolidated

normative behaviour. Parents will largely not accept that but they are the ones responsible for those kids who later on in their life repeatedly test the limits of the disciplinary code of conduct.

If you had undergone continued physical punishment you might get desensitized to such modes of treatment. The most effective one is when you withhold or withdraw affection. I am the mother or father who has extreme degree of affection for you, you commit an act that I do not approve of and hence withdraw my affection. All I do is that I ignore you. This could be extremely painful to a child. Remember that out of the four scenarios that we have discussed this is the most disturbing experience. When somebody who is very close to you, your family members, friends, boyfriends or girlfriends, your teachers or anyone in whom you have invested your love and confidence, if they withdraw their affection the pain you feel is of the highest order. Those with such experiences in life might show certain degree of avoidance and withdrawal tendencies.

For example, you fall in love with somebody to reach a point when you consider that you have been rejected in the relationship. You undergo breaking heart experience for some time and then regain your equilibrium. Say, after sometime you once again have similar experience wherein the relationship terminates. Failure in maintaining relationship somewhere might also make you realize that you have failed as an individual. Allow me to borrow an example from the world of advertisement. You must have seen advertisement (Ad) of toothpaste where the child develops cavity which is detected during the medical check-up in the school. While walking back to home the mother is asked whether her child failed the test and she says that my child has not failed the toothpaste has failed.

Ad apart, it reflects a philosophical interpretation where you do not hold yourself responsible for the failure; you do not deem yourself unsuccessful; rather you consider situational factors or others associated being instrumental for the failure. Usually, the same is not seen in the cases of relationship failure. The stronger possibility is that you blame the other person for the failure of relationship. Each party blames the other for the failure. This is common phenomena seen in human being. The fault is always supposed to lie in the other person. Attributing failure to circumstances or the other partner is only one part of the story. The part involves emotional reaction associated with it. Repetition of such occurrences in life might compel you to revisit the situation and dedicated the failure to fate or destination. At the emotional front, you feel deserted, worthlessness, and other negativities; something that is extremely detrimental. One or more such similar occurrences can make you withdrawn. One can go to the extent of not initiating any relationship or refrain from participating if the other person initiates the relationship. So, this is how withdrawal or withholding of affection in a relation can sway interpersonal relationship and strongly influence withdrawal tendency.

Change in the customary level of treatment is also a strong determinant of withdrawal behaviour. Contiguity, contrast and similarity between the manifested behaviour and the type and level of treatment help us anticipate response to a set of behaviour. Human beings have the intellect to calculate the outcome of a situation and before they enter into an adventure they would calculate the prospective outcomes. Having said this, what happens if there is no consistency in the treatment that you receive? If you have consistency in the treatment that you receive from the external world, you are likely to have higher degree of predictability. In case where the predictability lowers down because of the inherent inconsistency, the fear of failure increases, thus making you avoid the situation. Psychologically speaking, predictable

punishment can be tolerated more. They induce less anxiety. On the other hand, random and unpredictable punishment is more anxiety-arousing and has the potential of inducing withdrawal tendency.

Withdrawal as abnormal reaction

Earlier we discussed defense mechanisms and regression happened to be one of them. Studies confirm that overindulged and over-protected children are more likely to find later stages of their life as demanding and/ or threatening. They may be inclined to revert back to their golden period by adopting regression. In regression one adopts the behaviour of an earlier enjoyable and less demanding phase of life. By doing so one derives a less demanding self-definition. This, in turn, helps them find excuses for their behaviour. Immaturities of younger members are socially acceptable excuses and this is what they exploit. Normally, the individuals adopting this behaviour are unaware of what they are doing. In the contemporary time a large number children even return back to their parents as they show difficulty in meeting hardship of life. Such children are known as are known as boomerang kids.

Similar to immaturity, helplessness is also socially acceptable excuse. Learnt helplessness can be used for not assuming responsibility. The combination of immaturity and helplessness provides a shield against failure to achieve. One can exhibit them to seek special attention and sympathy. One does not distort reality if using regression as a defense withdrawal. This is more pronounced in fantasy. Fantasy as a defense is normal but there could also be a possibility of partial or complete withdrawal where reality is substituted by an imaginary scenario. Another example of abnormal withdrawal is adjustment by ailment. Psychopathology is full of

psychosomatic disorders where the cause is psychological but the symptom is visible on the body. Withdrawal is also shown as neurotic reaction patterns as well as some psychotic symptoms.