

Psychotherapy Guidebook

CONDITIONED REFLEX THERAPY

Andrew Salter

Conditioned Reflex Therapy

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Conditioned Reflex Therapy

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DEFINITION

Conditioned Reflex Therapy is the application of the concepts of Ivan Pavlov and V. M. Bechterev to the practice of psychotherapy. Particularly important are the concepts of inhibition, excitation, and disinhibition.

HISTORY

Andrew Salter's book, *Conditioned Reflex Therapy*, appeared in 1949. In Joseph Wolpe's words, "Conditioned Reflex Therapy ... contains the first detailed account ever to be published of the application of the principles of conditioning to the treatment of human neuroses. The therapeutic methods it describes were originated by Salter

TECHNIQUE

Conditioned Reflex Therapy declares that fundamentally everybody has the same problem and the same cure.

Dr. A is a dentist, and is afraid of blood.

Mr. B has claustrophobia, and is afraid of elevators.

Miss C is an actress, and finds it difficult to face an audience.

Mrs. D is a writer who cannot concentrate on her work. Mr. E says that life isn't worth living.

Some of these people were brought up in the country, and some in the city. Some had kind fathers, some had stern ones. Some were indulged by their mothers, and some were frequently punished. Some were jealous of an older brother, and some were not. Some were only children, some were the youngest, and some were the oldest. In short, these people had entirely different histories and, presumably, entirely different problems.

After taking a phenobarbital pill or a stiff drink:

Dr. A, the dentist, does not mind blood at all.

Mr. B rides comfortably in the elevator.

Miss C finds it easy to appear before an audience.

Mrs. D sits down at the typewriter and works for two hours.

Mr. E decides that the world is a fairly interesting place after all.

To be sure, the problems return when the phenobarbital or alcohol wears off, but five different persons, with five different problems, stemming from five different pasts, have been temporarily “cured” by one and the same thing. What other conclusion seems possible, save that all five suffer from the same disturbance: excessive inhibition in social relations.

Although each person represents a different problem, the purpose of therapy with every individual is identical — to produce a free, outward-flowing personality in which true emotions are represented in speech and action.

The neurotic feelings and behavior of the patient were caused by earlier inhibitory social experiences. Therapy consists of teaching the patient how to overcome his excessive inhibition. With this in mind, the current social relations of the patient are discussed. The target of therapy is the excessively inhibitory behavior of the patient with wife (husband), girlfriend (boyfriend), friends, acquaintances, employer (or employees) and even with superficial social contacts.

The “expressive” behavior advocated by Salter in Conditioned Reflex Therapy was renamed “assertion” by Joseph Wolpe (1958), and the term assertion has stuck. “The word assertive,” wrote Wolpe, “has rather a wide meaning here. It refers not only to more or less aggressive behavior, but also

to the outward expression of friendly, affectionate, and other nonanxious feelings. It covers exactly the same ground as Salter's word expressive."

So-called assertive techniques play a very important role in Conditioned Reflex Therapy. Nevertheless, desensitization techniques, relaxation techniques, self-control techniques, and the constructive use of imagery are also used.

APPLICATIONS

Conditioned Reflex Therapy has been used successfully in the treatment of a wide spectrum of personality disturbances — anxiety, shyness, alcoholism, stuttering, psychosomatic disorders, work block problems of the creative, phobias, masochism and its manifestations, and sexual disorders.

In Alan Kazdin's words, in his authoritative History of Behavior Modification, "Fuller versions of techniques initiated by Salter are still being employed by contemporary practitioners of behavior modification."