

Chapter 2.2: Perverse Motivation

*God's error was forbidding the apple.
If He would have forbidden the serpent,
then Adam would have eaten the serpent.
—George Bernard Shaw*

People often end up doing exactly what they tell themselves not to do. The intention to suppress a response has the perverse effect of making that response more likely. Edgar Allan Poe labeled this phenomenon: the *Imp of the Perverse*.

Thought Experiment: Negative Suggestion.

Try not to scratch your nose. Continue reading, but be aware that even letting your nose itch would indicate personal weakness. So try not to even think about your nose, and see if you can read to the end of this chapter without once touching your face in the area around your nose.

Trying to prevent your nose from itching may, perversely, produce the very thing you are trying to prevent. The more seriously you try the greater is the effect. Two interpretations of this perverse phenomenon are as follows:

Negative Suggestion: Negative representations are defined in terms of positive representations (their opposite), but positive representations are defined directly. For example, the statement, “It is not raining,” requires one to conceptualize the meaning of the statement, “It is raining.” Likewise, the statement, “Chester is not a pedophile,” associates the conceptualization of Chester with child molesting. Chester would be foolish to make such an assertion during his political campaign. To understand the instruction, “Don’t let your nose itch!” the reader must access a representation of an itchy nose, which evokes that very sensation.

Ironic process: To determine if you are successful at having a nose that is not itching, you must compare the current sensations with what they would be if your nose was itching. According to this interpretation, it is checking to make sure you are successful at preventing your nose from itching that causes the nose to itch. Ironic, isn’t it?

Reactance

Humans hate restrictions—especially of those freedoms they already have. Reactance refers to the motivation to react or rebel against restriction. In one study, two-year-old boys accompanied their mothers into a room containing equally attractive toys. The toys were arranged so that one was easily available to the child while the other stood behind a transparent Plexiglas barrier, out of reach. Which toy do you think the little boys wanted? This is one among many examples of the rule of thumb: *Forbidding something increases its desirability.*

Attribution Theory: The Insult Is the Injury

Smoking cessation research shows that, on average, successful quitters failed seven times before they finally made it. Most smokers, however, interpret a failure to quit as an indication of their intrinsic weakness. The belief that the cause of the failure is within the self is called an internal attribution for failure. Explanations of one's failure, which appeal to motivation, intelligence, or character defect, are examples of *internal attribution* for failure. The belief that the same inadequacy that caused me to fail in the past will cause me to fail in the future is an example of a *stable attribution* for failure.

Internal, stable attributions for failure are associated with low self-efficacy. If you believe that you don't have what it takes to succeed at this challenge, and, moreover, that you are not going to change, then it is understandable that you would not invest much of your own effort and instead turn yourself over to a treatment provider or a higher power. However, good long-term outcome requires that you persevere through difficult challenges, and internal, stable attributions for your past failures are demoralizing and rob you of the energy and perseverance required for good long-term outcome. Efficacy-enhancing imagery, contemplation, and other *trance formative* exercises are included in the kit. These tools are especially useful during times of crisis when your self-efficacy may be threatened.

Paradoxically, the belief that, "I cannot succeed at this task," often results from an initial underestimate of the difficulty of this task. You might think, "It shouldn't be that hard to change my ways once I make up my mind, so my history of relapse means there must be something wrong with me." This demoralizing belief results from underestimating what it takes to end an addictive relationship.

Attribution and Self Image

Consider the following study, which demonstrates how internal attribution and counter-regulatory motivation can work together to influence one's appraisal of oneself: Teen-aged boys were told that a book was too sexually explicit to be read by those under 21. This restriction had the effect of dramatically increasing their desire to read the book. The experimenters knew that the attractiveness of the book was enhanced because the book was forbidden. However, ignorant of the principle of reactance, the boys attributed their motivation to read the book to a specific personal tendency to be attracted to lewd content. Forbidding the book had the perverse consequence of causing the subjects to believe that they were perverse.