

## Behavior Change – What Works and What Doesn't

### What doesn't work to create behavior change?

1. Scare tactics – Fear appeals for behavior change can be effective if:
  1. The threat is serious, causing *high fear*; low and moderate fear will not affect behavior
  2. The person believes that they are at risk for experiencing the threat (the threat seems personally relevant)
  3. The proposed response is perceived as effective
  4. The person feels able to perform the proposed response
  - a. These four factors need to come together in order to create behavior change, but even when they do come together, the degree of behavior change is generally very modest.
  - b. Using fear to create behavior change is tricky because the threat can often seem irrelevant (“That could never happen to me!”).
  - c. If the threat does seem relevant (“Yikes! That could SO happen to me!”), but the response is perceived as ineffective (“That won't work!”) or not performable by the person (“OK, I see how that could work, but I'll never be able to do that.”), the person will be motivated to control/eliminate their intense fear through:
    - o Denial (“That won't happen to me.”),
    - o Avoidance (“That's too scary; I'm simply not going to think about it.”), or
    - o Reactance (“They're just trying to manipulate me, so I'm going to ignore them.”)
2. Capitalizing on shame and/or guilt often creates a paradoxical response: If someone is shamed or guilted about something they already feel ashamed/guilty about, they are likely to do the behavior *more*.
3. Telling people how to behave:
  - a. Again, people may have a paradoxical response to sound advice: Telling people what to do has the potential to elicit *reactance*. *Reactance* can occur when someone is pressured to accept a certain view or attitude. *Reactance* can cause the person to adopt or strengthen an attitude or behavior that is the opposite of what

was intended, and also potentially increase a person's resistance to being persuaded.

- b. Telling people what to do *will* work for a modest portion of the population. This may be because the advice aligns with their values, or with their pre-existing intentions to change behavior or adopt a new behavior.
  - c. The great risk in telling people how to behave is that it puts them in the position of having to defend their current behavior. When people defend their behavior they are likely to become more committed to the behavior/attitude you were hoping they would change, because:
    - o ***People are more convinced by what they hear themselves say than what others tell them.***
4. Providing facts/information to promote behavior change is effective for only a very modest proportion of the target audience. Factors that affect the impact of stand-alone information on behavior change:
- a. Credibility of the source of the facts (a medical doctor vs. a friend)
  - b. The person has a high "need for cognition", which means a person is motivated to evaluate information closely and thoughtfully
  - c. The information is consistent with the person's pre-existing values
  - d. The person was already ready to make a change that would be consistent with the facts/information
5. Myth debunking
- a. Is effective on a small proportion of people
  - b. Is not effective on most people
  - c. Results in people misremembering the myth as *fact*
  - d. People misremember the information and then attribute the myth (as fact) to a credible source.

- e. If we're predisposed to believe the myth, then the myth debunking can actually strengthen the belief in the myth.

### **What does work to create behavior change?**

1. Social psychological processes:
  - a. Amplifying (and managing) cognitive dissonance
    - i. Cognitive dissonance is the uncomfortable feeling a person experiences when their beliefs/actions/thoughts are inconsistent with each other, i.e., the bad feeling we may get when we realize that we're being hypocritical. People are motivated to relieve this bad feeling by either changing their beliefs/thoughts or changing their behavior in order to achieve consistency.
    - ii. If the cognitive dissonance gap between the current behavior and the desired behavior doesn't seem possible to close, people can then become even more entrenched in their existing beliefs or behavior.
  - b. Directed self-perception—Self-perception theory proposes that people are more convinced by what they hear themselves say than by what other people tell them. In terms of supporting behavior change, the challenge is to create opportunities whereby people convince themselves that the behavior change is one they want to make.
  - c. Values awareness—Helping people be more aware of their values has the potential to change behavior because values:
    1. Are connected to goals that motivate actions
    2. Span across situations
    3. Are central to a person's self concept
    4. Guide behavior *when people are aware of them*. Awareness of values can lead to lasting behavior change if the change maintains or enhances a person's self-concept.
  - d. Enhancing self-efficacy—People are more likely to change if they have or develop the skills that are needed to make a change.
  - e. Exposing social norms— an exercise that helps students correct their misperceptions about peer behaviors and attitudes. Social norming has been used successfully as a means of reducing

problematic behaviors. Use of an appropriate salient reference group is key for efficacy. Use in large groups with varied sub populations with very different norms is not supported by research.

- f. Social comparison— Humans have a drive to evaluate themselves by examining their opinions and abilities in comparison to others, which can result in behavior change designed to match or differentiate one's own opinions/abilities/behaviors.
- g. Compelling narrative—Well-crafted stories and authentic testimonials have the ability to quickly and enduringly alter attitudes and behaviors. *See research on Transportation Theory.*

## 2. Motivational Interviewing techniques:

- a. Express empathy: Try to understand a person's perspective without criticizing, judging, or blaming. Understanding is not the same thing as agreeing.
- b. Develop Discrepancy: Explore the difference between the current self/behavior and the ideal self/behavior.
- c. Avoid Argumentation: Arguing evokes resistance and hardening of the person's position.
- d. Roll with Resistance: Accept reluctance to change as normal, rather than pathological.
- e. Support Self-Efficacy: Embrace a person's autonomy and focus on skill development.

## Application to CU's Approach to Bystander Intervention Training

1. Enhance a “helper” identity:
  - a. It is much easier to develop a helper identity than a more specific social identity (i.e. social justice, anti-violence) because for the majority of students, being helpful is already core to their self-concept.
  - b. People have to feel that the subject is relevant to them in order to make lasting change (Elaboration Likelihood Model of attitude change). Being helpful is relevant to the majority of our students, whereas particular social issues only resonate with smaller subgroups of students.
2. Establish social norms – we use data we have collected previously and data we collect during the presentation (with a show of hands) to norm the beliefs and intentions people have in regard to helping; we also talk about norms directly in terms of creating cultural rules. Also, by asking for a show of hands for “having a friend’s back” (nearly unanimous response) and for “stepping up when they see a bad situation happening” (at least 75% of the audience in a typical session), we’re able to norm that most of the students in the room see themselves as helpful.
3. Social comparison—by revealing (with a show of hands) that 75% of the students in the room would “step up” if they see a bad situation happening, we create the opportunity for social comparison for those students who don’t raise their hands. For the non-hand-raisers who, nevertheless, do see “stepping up” as a positive behavior, there is the potential for moving their behavior in the direction of being more ready to engage in helping.
4. Values awareness and cognitive dissonance—In addition to providing a social norming opportunity, asking students to self-identify as people who “have a friend’s back” and who “step up when they see a bad situation happening” sets the stage for creating dissonance. Committing to be helpful makes it more difficult for people to ignore future opportunities to help because of the risk of hypocrisy. Discussing situations where bystanders could step in and thinking through the challenges, along with the reasons to intervene, provides the opportunity for bringing their values to awareness and revealing

dissonance between their current behavior and behavior that might align more closely with their values.

5. **Motivational Interviewing**—Traditionally, MI is used in 1:1 clinical settings to help people change self-destructive behaviors. We've adapted this model for promoting behavior change at the population level. We use components of MI to facilitate an intentional, structured group discussion where students explore barriers to helping, motivations for helping, and effective strategies for intervening. This approach is effective with groups of any size.

### **Core components for building bystander efficacy**

1. Expose barriers to helping and build capacity for overriding them
2. Broaden recognition of the types of situations where help might be needed
3. Enhance skills for noticing precursors to harmful situations
4. Build resilience for dealing with rejection and model ways to persist
5. Demonstrate and practice effective interventions strategies that reduce barriers and increase potential for a positive outcome

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