Chapter 2
What is Behavior?

Behavior is what a person does, says or how a person acts throughout the day. You are behaving when...
✓ you are reading this book
✓ sitting alone
✓ refusing to go to the doctor
✓ teaching
✓ talking to a friend on the phone
✓ eating dinner
✓ sleeping, or
✓ doing anything else

Contrary to popular belief, behavior isn’t only what a person does that you don’t want the person to do. Think of how many times you’ve said to someone: “behave yourself!” Behavior is anything that a person is doing.

Behavior Can Be Obvious and Subtle

We know that a person is behaving by what we personally see or experience. Some behaviors are obvious, such as running, jumping, talking, laughing, or baking a cake. Other behaviors are more subtle. We may not directly see these behaviors, but may experience them through their results or the products of their efforts.

For example, how do you know that a person is thinking? If you know the person well, you may recognize that he is deep in thought because he is quiet, pacing the room, or not responding to others. We do not directly observe a person’s thinking, but we see the results of their thinking. The results might be a written letter or the answer given to a question.

Behavior Constantly Changes

Behavior is forever changing. It is dynamic! We are constantly on the move and reacting to many different things around and within us. As a result, our behavior constantly changes.

Example of changing behavior:
As you are reading this book you are probably shifting your position as different muscles in your body tire. You might stop reading the book to answer the phone or answer someone’s question. You may sneeze while reading the book. You may put down the book to look up a word that you do not understand, or shift to another section if you find this chapter boring. After reading the book for a while, you may lose concentration and shift to another activity. It may be dinnertime and you are hungry.

You are constantly behaving and responding to many different things around and within you, often at the same time. Hence, your behavior is constantly changing; sometimes in very obvious ways and sometimes in very subtle ways; and always in response to a wide range of factors.

What Causes Behavior?

Many different things influence or cause behavior. Some are very obvious. For example, we eat when we are hungry, sleep when we are tired, or follow road signs when we are driving. Other things are not so obvious, sometimes even to the person who is behaving. For example, my children claim that they can tell when I am about to get sick because I become cranky, even though I don’t feel a thing or notice any changes in my behavior. Achoo! There are probably thousands of different things that can influence our behavior at any given time. Here is a list of some of the most common causes:
General state

Are you happy or sad today? Did you get enough sleep? Are you hungry, or did you eat too much and can now barely move? Do you have a headache, or perhaps it has now gone away? Maybe you never felt better! How we are feeling at any time directly affects our behavior.

Age

We often forget what a difference age makes. There are obvious physical differences between a young child, a young adult, someone who is middle aged, and an elderly person. Brain development also varies dramatically by age.

Children

Children’s brains are still developing so the effects of injuries at a young age may not show up for months or years.

Elderly

“Older brains” may be in a state of decline and an elderly person may naturally notice difficulties with memory or other skills. These normal changes that occur with aging can be compounded by the effects of a brain injury.

Emotional abilities, base of knowledge, experiences, energy levels and a whole host of other age related factors will also affect behavior.

General situation

The general situation you find yourself in can vary daily just as much as your moods or abilities. Are things calm at home or chaotic? Is your boss in a good mood or a bad mood? Did bad weather make everybody late and on edge this morning, or is it the first beautiful day of spring? Are there new people trying to help you who don’t know what to do, or is someone being exceptionally helpful? All these things can affect how you react.

Cues in our daily environment (Antecedents)

Our behavior is often guided by cues or events that occur before it. We call these cues or antecedents. We sometimes look for antecedents to direct our behavior and at other times they occur without much thought.

Example of antecedents directing behavior:

Cues can be as simple as watching a traffic light to see when it is safe to drive through an intersection, or as complex as trying to read the facial expression and body posture of a person we are meeting for the first time. There are signs and cues around us all the time. Store ads try to tell us what to buy. A barking dog showing his teeth signals that it is not safe to walk up a driveway. Someone may extend a hand as a gesture of friendship, or put out an arm to stop you from coming closer.

Not all cues mean the same thing all the time. They may contradict each other. We may not notice them. Over time, we learn how to interpret some of these signals. They help us become more successful in our relationships and our daily lives. They directly affect our behavior. When a brain injury results in a person having difficulty being aware of and responding to these signs and signals, it will affect behavior.

Past experiences (Consequences)

Things that occur after our behavior may also influence what we do in the future. We naturally seek out situations that have been rewarding for us in the past. At the same time, we try to avoid things that have not been rewarding or even uncomfortable. Think of the people you like to talk to, the foods you like to eat, the places you like to go and the things you like to do. Now think of things that you try to stay away from or avoid. Just how fast do you go when you see a police car on the side of the road, especially the day after you get a traffic ticket? Do you keep going back to a store that gives you lousy service? Do you talk with your angry neighbor, unless you really have to?

We can often learn from consequences and this can direct our behavior in the future. While we often think about the effects that money and other tangible rewards have on our behavior, the truth is that attention and opportunities for social interaction are among the most powerful reinforcers of behavior.

Consequences are usually most effective when they immediately follow a given behavior. That way, the connection or association between the behavior and event are strongest. At the same time following brain injury some people lose the ability to learn from consequences or to learn as effectively as before due to changes in memory and other processes of learning.
Relying on consequences to change behavior in such situations often ends up being frustrating for everybody who is involved.

Over time, we develop histories of experiences that can also influence what we do. For example, if you watch a new television show and do not like it, you probably won’t watch it again. On the other hand, if you almost always like a television show, you will probably continue to watch it, even if tonight’s episode wasn’t very good.

**Significant events**

Very significant life events may also influence your actions. People who get sick from eating a food just once often avoid it for a long time even though they know it is probably safe. If we got badly hurt riding a bicycle, even though we have ridden one many times before, we may stop riding or be hesitant to ride again.

Dramatic events can sometimes influence what we do in the future, even if they did not occur to us. We may stop walking through a neighborhood if we know there was a violent crime there. We may gamble or play the lottery, even though we never won, because we heard about the guy in the next town who just won a million dollars.

Key events in our childhood or early development may also affect how we respond. For example, a child who lost a parent at an early age may react with greater insecurity in unfamiliar settings than a child who grew up with both parents and never suffered such an emotional loss. The second child is likely to have greater self-confidence in unfamiliar situations.

**Skills**

The skills that help us deal with a situation can also affect our outcome. It’s easier if we’ve already done something a thousand times, compared to trying something new for the first time. On the other hand, experience can be a problem when we are trying to break a bad habit.

**Emotions**

Events around us influence our behavior as well as our emotional reactions – whether we feel happy or sad, afraid or courageous, anxious or ready to take on the world. The type and strength of our emotions at any given time can color our outlook and influence how we respond.

Some people are steady in their emotions while others are highly reactive. Your emotions not only affect you, but others who are around you. Likewise, the emotions of others will also affect you.

**Medical condition**

How you feel physically directly affects how you act or respond. Most of us can recognize differences in how we behave when we have a cold, fever or are sick compared to when we feel well. Longer lasting medical conditions can also affect behavior.

**Example of medical conditions affecting behavior:**

A person with a heart condition may not be able to be as active, may tire more easily, or have less mental clarity. People with diabetes may experience changes in their moods, memory, energy, or ability to concentrate because of changes in their blood sugar. People with chronic pain may have difficulty concentrating or attending to much of anything because of their discomfort. People with seizure disorders may have different times when they feel attentive or spacey, or times when noises, lights or other things bother them.

**Medications**

Some medications can help people behave more successfully. There are medications that:

- help you sleep
- feel less anxious
- feel less depressed
- have more energy
- concentrate better, and so on.

Medications used to treat colds, headaches, blood pressure and other medical conditions can also have behavioral side-effects. We’ve all seen warnings on some pill bottles, “Caution: this medication may make you drowsy or dizzy.”
Understanding Everybody's Behavior After Brain Injury: Don’t “Don’t!”

Medications can have many different side effects including:
- confusion
- problems remembering
- dizziness
- drowsiness
- difficulty concentrating
- irritability, etc.

Sometimes a single medication may not have a direct effect on behavior. However, it may affect a person’s behavior when it is combined with other medications. This is why it’s important to review a person’s medications when problems or difficulties are reported or seen. Different combinations of medications can cause new medical or behavioral challenges. Not all side effects are predictable or easily understood.

Illegal drugs and alcohol
These have obvious effects on behavior. That is one reason why they are so heavily regulated. People who are intoxicated clearly do not respond to situations the same way as people who are sober. The effects of these substances, especially their misuse, can be seen on our streets, emergency departments and graveyards. Oftentimes the effects of illegal drugs and alcohol are magnified following a brain injury and specific effects will vary from person to person.

Cognitive factors
We’ll discuss these in more detail in Chapter 5, but many factors related to how we think and process information clearly affect our behavior. They include our ability to:
- attend to what is going on
- concentrate on a task
- understand what is being said
- analyze situations
- be aware of our behavior
- organize daily events
- problem solve, and
- remember.

Examples of cognitive issues affecting behavior:
Many children have problems in school when they are not able to attend to the teacher. They become bored, frustrated or begin to “act up.” Too often, the teacher reacts by focusing on these behaviors rather than identifying what is making it difficult for the student to attend to or understand the lesson. This often makes the problem worse as more and more attention is paid to the student’s “mis-behavior” and less to the lesson at hand and how to teach it effectively.

An adult with poor memory may forget what is supposed to be done next and not be able to complete a task. This may result in reprimands at work and even loss of a job.

Culture
Different cultures have different rules for behavior and what is considered acceptable or unacceptable. Rules and customs can differ by country as well as geographical regions, neighborhoods, religious groups, and even social institutions. For example, the culture of our workplace may be very different than our family culture, or that of our friends and acquaintances. Not understanding, accepting or supporting cultural diversity can have dramatic effects on behavior.

Resources
Having the right tools and resources for the job are very important. People run into problems when they don’t have the time, money, knowledge, or other critical resources to achieve success. Where we live can clearly influence services and programs that may be available. Resources also involve the people around us, or the lack of such people to support us in both times of joy and times of need. Their presence or absence can significantly affect our behavior. With the right tools, we can remain calm and easily solve a problem. When we don’t have these tools, a simple problem can turn into a crisis.

Roles and expectations
We each have different roles in different situations. These give us access to different types of resources and set expectations for our behavior. Changes in roles and expectations, especially when unwelcome or unexpected, can result in behavioral challenges.

Examples of how roles and expectations affect behavior:
A teacher has access to many different sources of knowledge and is expected to be expert enough to teach others. The student, on the other hand, does not have these skills at first, but is expected to learn the information.

Sometimes roles and expectations change and people are not able to change with the situation.
Consider the worker who is no longer able to do her job following a terrible injury. Her employer still expects the work to be done, but she can’t do it. Both her role and the employer’s expectations will have to change, or there will be a problem!

Consider the parent who used to work outside the home, but who now stays home and is responsible for childcare. He may not have the skills for this role and have a lot of difficulty caring for his children, who expect him to know what to do.

**Personality**

Each person is unique and may respond differently than others to the same situation. Some of this is due to our past experiences, but some of it is due to our genetic makeup, personal traits and characteristics. One person may always respond calmly regardless of what is happening, while another person angers easily. Our personalities clearly affect our behavior across situations. “Who we are” – our unique traits and characteristics are just as important as “what we are” – our past experiences.

**Belief, faith, spirituality**

Depending on the individual’s orientation, these may or may not be major influences on behavior. Sometimes belief, faith and spirituality are tied to a religion. Sometimes they are connected to other experiences. Strong beliefs, faith and spirituality may guide a person through a time of worry, or misguide a person, such as in the case of fanaticism.

**Etcetera (Etc.)**

This is not meant to be funny, but to recognize the many other different factors that also influence our behavior, some of that may not even be aware of. At any given time, on any given day, there are literally thousands of things that affect what we say, what we do and how we react to the events around us. We are usually aware of the most common or obvious factors, but there are often many other things going on that don’t get our attention. Just because we are not aware of these factors does not mean that they don’t influence our behavior.

In summary, behavior is “simply” how a person interacts with the immediate situation. The wide range of events and influences in this immediate situation vary greatly and interact with each other in a very complex manner. These are combined with our past experiences, histories and basic makeup; and ultimately results in behavior. While we may not always know what is influencing our behavior, there is always a reason why we behave as we do.

**What Causes Behavior to Change?**

Our behavior changes any time any of the events or factors we previously discussed change. If you become tired, you may fall asleep or stop concentrating on what you are doing. You may act more anxious if you run out of a medication that you take to help you stay calm. Your attention may be suddenly redirected towards someone who makes noise. You probably act differently when you walk into a local church as compared to walking into a local bar. Your reaction is probably different when someone accuses you of doing something wrong, compared to when you are complimented. You are probably less likely to correctly assemble your child’s new toy if you don’t have the instructions, just like you are more likely to get lost when you are in a new city and don’t have a map. These examples can go on and on.

The important fact is that behavior changes when events around or within you change.

☞ Our behavior is a reaction to our situation and condition.

This is the same whether we are acting successfully, such as doing a good job or having a pleasant conversation with someone, or when we are acting unsuccessfully, such as getting angry because someone doesn’t understand us, or when we are frustrated.

☞ There is always a reason for our behavior.

This does not take away our responsibility for our actions, but helps us understand why and how each of us behaves.

If you accept this view of behavior, then you may begin to see behavior as a barometer or gauge of how a person is doing. We know that changes in the pressure recorded by a barometer often signify impending changes in weather. Changes in a person’s body temperature signify whether a person is sick or healthy. In a similar manner, the way a person acts can be a good measure of what is going on within or around him. A happy or successful person usually indicates that things are in balance. Problems indicate that something is out of balance.
Examples of changes in behavior and questions to consider:

**Is the person angry or aggressive?**
Is there someone around that the person doesn’t like or understand?
Is the person trying to do something and having trouble with it?
Is the person in pain?
Is the person hungry, confused, or being threatened?
Was the person ignored when politely trying to get somebody’s attention and now is resorting to other means?

**Is the person not paying attention?**
Is it because the person is bored?
Is something else capturing the person’s attention?
Has the person’s physical or cognitive stamina been overtaxed and the person just can’t concentrate any more?
Did the person take sleeping medication rather than her ADHD medication this morning by mistake?
Is the person sick?
Does the person have problems understanding language?

**Is the person refusing to do what he has been asked?**
Does the person understand the request or directions?
Does the person know how to do what has been asked?
Is the person doing something else?
Does the person not like doing what has been asked?
Is the person too tired?
Does the person have trouble getting started on tasks?

When you view behavior as a barometer you can start to ask questions about what is affecting it. More importantly, you can start to problem solve and ask questions about what can be changed in order to change the behavior. If you change the events around or within an individual, the person’s behavior will almost always change.

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**Why Behavior May Be Dysfunctional, but Never Disordered**

This may seem like an abstract issue, but it is very important in how we relate to and regard other people.

**Disordered behavior**

People too often say that a person’s behavior is disordered when that person is displaying a problem behavior. In many cases, this implies that there is something basically or inherently wrong with the individual, e.g., “He comes from the bad side of that family,” or “She’s just really messed up.” When we do this, we are passing judgment on that person, shaming the person and sentencing them to their own misery.

☞ The label behavior disorder may imply that there is no rational reason for the problem behavior to occur. This may lead people to give up hope on trying to resolve a challenging issue.

However, as we previously discussed, there are many different factors that affect our behavior.

☞ Without a doubt there is always a reason that any behavior occurs.

In other words, behavior is not magical, although it can sometimes be a mystery. There is always a reason for behavior to occur, even when we cannot identify the specific cause or event. A better way to look at behavior is to consider whether it is functional or dysfunctional. This helps us maintain a personal regard for the individual while at the same time focusing on specific issues that may be going well or poorly for the person.

**Functional behavior**

Behavior is functional when it is having a desired effect or outcome. It is functional when we are having success in what we do. For example, functional social skills mean that we interact well with others. Functional work skills note our success on the job. It may be begging the point to say that a good marriage is the result of functional skills in sharing, intimacy, communication and caring, among other things, but not by much.

☞ Functional simply implies that there is a balance between what a person is trying to do or is expected to do, and the person’s ability to do so.
Dysfunctional behavior

Sometimes a behavior is considered dysfunctional because a person fails in a task, or tries but is unable to complete the entire task. Other times a behavior is considered dysfunctional because of how a person reacts to a situation, such as with anger, tears or frustration.

Dysfunctional behavior indicates that there is little or no balance between what a person is trying to do or is expected to do and the person’s ability to do it.

For example, it is not unusual to be all thumbs when trying a new skill for the first time. A person may previously have been able to complete particular work but can no longer do it since the brain injury. The person may try strategies that are not effective, and be unable to identify alternative or more effective approaches. The person may become highly emotional in the situation and focus more on expressing emotions than addressing the problem, and so on. In each of these cases, there is a disconnect or something missing between the demands and expectations of the situation and a person’s ability to address the issue.

The key fits the lock

Consider functional behavior as being similar to the way that a key fits a lock. Each point or groove on the key fits specific tumblers and ridges in the lock. In this case, there is a good fit between the skills, abilities, and general state of the person in relation to the situation and demands being faced.

Consider dysfunctional behavior to be a situation in which the key does not fit into the lock. In these situations, our job is to create a match. This may involve changing the key, or in this case balancing the person’s skills, abilities, and general state to fit the lock. Or it may involve adapting the lock – in this case modifying the demands and expectations of the situation to fit the key. Oftentimes we do both - changing both the key and the lock, or the person and the situation, to assure a successful fit.

What is a Behavior Problem?

With the perspective that we have taken in this chapter, it is easy to understand that…

A behavior problem is an episode of dysfunctional behavior.

Some behavior problems may be more important or more relevant than others and therefore more or less of a problem. It depends on:

• the specific behavior
• the situation or setting in which it occurs
• the risk or success it entails for the person or others
• the resources that are available, and
• who is judging or evaluating the behavior.

Take my singing for example. Actually, you want to stay as far away as possible. I’m terrible! It might only be a mild problem when I am singing in the shower where no one else can hear it, except the dogs – fortunately, they don’t have much say in the matter. It is exceptionally aggravating to my children when I am singing to the songs they are trying to listen to on the radio. I would clearly be booed off the stage if I tried to sing at Carnegie Hall. In each case, there is a different audience or group of people who are evaluating my behavior and passing different judgments.

Or, consider a person who is “sort of a good mechanic.” The person may have enough skills to work on a personal car as a hobby, but not enough to get a job in a garage. In this case, there is no dysfunctional behavior as long as the person sticks to his car. The person has the skills to do the job. The behavior becomes dysfunctional and a problem when the person tries to earn a living by working on other people’s cars and lacks the experience or skills to do the job right.

In effect, a problem behavior is a behavior that someone (the person or others) find to be a problem!
Summary

Behavior represents everything that we act, say and do. Behavior is a product or result of complex interactions of many things around and within us. This includes:

- the environment or situations we find ourselves in
- our present medical, physical, emotional, and general internal status
- skills and abilities
- past experiences
- personality
- roles and expectations
- other involved parties and
- many other factors.

Any time that any of these factors or the relationship between these factors changes, our behavior will change. We’ll discuss some of these issues in more detail in the next section.

☞ Consider behavior as a barometer or measure of all these different factors and events.

Dysfunctional behaviors generally indicate a problem or poor match between our abilities and the demands of the immediate situation. This may come across as:

- failing or being unskilled in a task
- refusing to do something
- acting angry or frustrated, or
- acting in other ways that may be considered behavior problems.

Solving the problem usually means trying to create a balance between a person’s abilities and expectations.

☞ Remember! “The problem, not the behavior, is the problem!”

What this means is that the presenting behavior indicates that there is a problem. By addressing this problem, the behavior will change.

It is very important to separate the overall person from the behavior in question when addressing behavioral challenges. This is why it is important to emphasize behavior dysfunction over behavior disorder.

☞ Behavior dysfunction indicates a problem that a person may be experiencing between ability and expectation.

Too often, behavior disorder can infer an unsolvable problem or imply that there is something inherently wrong with the person. This does little to solve the problem or create positive and enduring relationships between people.

Workbook Exercise

Please turn to Section 2 of the Workbook. For this assignment, you will fill out basic information about the cause of the injury and the course of treatment and services received over time. This will help you begin to identify some of the factors that presently influence behavior. Involve others in this process as each person usually has unique insights or information. Be sure to use any notes or records you have saved from hospitals, therapists, insurance companies and other sources. Sometimes this information can be complex, contradictory, or confusing. Then, it is best to seek the help of others, including brain injury professionals to help to put this information into proper perspective. Take your time on this exercise and don’t worry if you forgot some information or don’t have all of the answers. You can always come back and add information later.