Explanations of impulse control disorders

Lesson 3.3.2 | Clinical psychology

Core ideas

Behavioural explanations suggest relief, pleasure or reduced tension can reinforce the impulsive act and make it more likely to happen again.

The required biological explanation focuses on dopamine and reward processes. A rewarding experience can increase the incentive to repeat an act; this does not mean dopamine levels alone explain every case.

Positive reinforcement strengthens behaviour when an act produces pleasure or another valued outcome. Distinguish it from negative reinforcement, where removing tension or distress strengthens the behaviour.

Miller's feeling-state theory proposes that an intense positive feeling becomes associated with a particular behaviour, creating a feeling-behaviour link that later triggers urges to repeat it. Evaluate whether this explanation accounts for individual differences and harmful persistence.

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Key terms

Inhibition: The ability to stop or delay a response.

Reward pathway: Brain systems involved in pleasure, motivation and reinforcement.

Dopamine: A neurotransmitter involved in reward and motivation.

Negative reinforcement: A behaviour becoming more likely because it removes an unpleasant feeling.

Positive reinforcement: A behaviour becoming more likely because it produces pleasure or reward.

Cognitive distortion: A biased or inaccurate way of thinking about a situation.

Trigger: A cue or situation that increases the urge to act.

Feeling-state theory: Miller's account in which an intense positive feeling becomes linked with a behaviour and motivates its repetition.

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Further detail and evidence

Dopamine is involved in reward prediction and incentive motivation. Cues previously associated with rewarding acts can gain motivational value. A biological account can explain compelling urges without showing that every person has the same neurotransmitter abnormality.

Reinforcement account: obtaining excitement, pleasure or a desired object is positive reinforcement. Relief from tension is negative reinforcement because an unpleasant state is removed. Either consequence can strengthen repetition even when later consequences are harmful.

Feeling-state account: an intense positive emotional state becomes linked with a behaviour and aspects of the self, such as feeling powerful or successful. Later cues reactivate the link, encouraging repetition to recreate that state. This differs from simply overestimating the odds of winning.

Applying the ideas

A gambling win may provide excitement (positive reinforcement), while gambling to escape worry can be maintained by temporary relief (negative reinforcement). Miller's account highlights the persistent positive feeling-behaviour association. Long-term debt does not prevent short-term reinforcement from maintaining the cycle.

Evaluation and connections

Reward explanations offer testable predictions, but inferring dopamine from visible behaviour is indirect. Learning explains environmental triggers and suggests behavioural change; it may understate biological differences. Feeling-state reports provide personal meaning but can be difficult to test independently. Distinguish a theory of onset from maintenance.