

Maladaptive behavior causes

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Identifying and Treating Maladaptive Behavior

What is maladaptive behavior?

Maladaptive behaviors are those that stop you from adapting to new or difficult circumstances. They can start after a major life change, illness, or traumatic event. It could also be a habit you picked up at an early age.

You can identify maladaptive behaviors and replace them with more productive ones. Otherwise, they can lead to emotional, social, and health problems. If things are spiraling out of control, there is treatment. A qualified therapist can help you find better ways to react to life's challenges.

Let's explore some types of maladaptive behavior and signs you should seek treatment.

Maladaptive psychology

Maybe you've gone out of your way to avoid something. Perhaps you've stormed out of a room or screamed into the void. We've all been there. When that's your only way of dealing with stressors, it can be a problem.

Maladaptive behavior affects people of all ages and backgrounds. The key is to recognize it and work to change it.

Adaptive and maladaptive behavior

Life rarely goes as expected. When faced with an obstacle, we can adapt or not. In the moment, it's not necessarily a conscious choice. It could be a temporary reaction until we have a chance to think about it.

Adaptive behavior is making the choice to solve a problem or minimize an unwanted outcome. You might do something you don't necessarily want to do or find a way to work around it. You're adjusting to circumstances.

For example, an avid reader who is losing their eyesight might adapt by learning Braille or buying audiobooks. They find a way to continue enjoying books.

Maladaptive behavior would be not acknowledging vision loss or the need for change. It feels out of control and painful to think about, so no action is taken. They end up missing out on something they enjoy.

Maladaptive behavior examples

Maladaptive behaviors like these can become a self-destructive pattern:

Avoidance

Avoiding a threat or disengaging from unpleasantness is often the best move, especially for temporary things over which you have no control. When you continually avoid something you shouldn't, it's maladaptive behavior.

Suppose you have social anxiety, but your job requires you to mix and mingle on a regular basis. If you make it a habit to feign illness or sneak out the back door after 5 minutes, you're not addressing the problem.

Adaptive behaviors would be to seek help for social anxiety, try exposure therapy, or find a more suitable job.

Other avoidance behaviors include:

- not making eye contact during conversation
- speaking too softly or not at all
- not asking questions when you need more information

Withdrawal

There's nothing wrong with you if you prefer alone time to social activities. There's also nothing wrong with bowing out of a party to avoid bumping into your ex.

When avoidance is your go-to strategy, you're effectively withdrawing from social interaction. Consider the college student who uses video games to avoid joining clubs or meeting new people. The games are a distraction and provide temporary relief from anxiety.

In the long run, avoidance does nothing to improve coping skills. Invitations stop coming, anxiety builds, and the result is isolation.

Passive-aggressiveness

Passive-aggressiveness is when you express negative feelings indirectly rather than head-on. You say one thing but really mean another. Your true feelings are woven into your actions.

For example, your partner feels like staying home and cancels your dinner reservation. You've been looking forward to it for weeks, so this upsets you. Instead of expressing disappointment, you smile and say it's fine.

Later, you're slamming doors and complaining about unrelated things. You're angry, but not closer to making your feelings understood.

Self-harm

Some people deal with stressful events by hurting themselves, such as:

- cutting, scratching, or burning skin
- picking at scabs or wounds
- pulling out hair, eyelashes, or eyebrows
- self-hitting or banging your head
- refusal to take needed medications

This may provide temporary relief, but only exacerbates problems and can potentially harm your health.

Anger

Anger is a normal emotion. Anger that spurs you to constructive action is useful.

It's not useful if you're often angry or have angry outbursts. Uncontrolled anger doesn't solve problems. It alienates others and hampers your ability to communicate effectively.

A child's temper tantrum would fall into this category. Most children eventually see that there are better ways to get to the desired result.

Substance use

Whether it's alcohol, prescribed drugs, or non-prescribed drugs, substance use can be a type of avoidance behavior. It's a problem when you use it to ease anxiety or to obliterate your feelings.

Any escape from reality is temporary at best. This behavior can lead to emotional and physical addiction, creating a whole new set of problems.

Maladaptive daydreaming

Daydreaming is generally a healthy pastime. It frees the mind and helps you work out problems. It's estimated that the average person has hundreds of daydreaming episodes per day.

Maladaptive daydreaming is when you engage in extensive fantasy in place of human interaction or participation in real life. These daydreams can last hours at a time and involve intricate plots and characters that keep you going back. They can then keep you from facing reality.

What is sexually maladaptive behavior?

Sexually maladaptive behavior refers to children, adolescents, or adults engaging in sexual behaviors that aren't age-appropriate or have potentially dangerous consequences. This can include:

- having unprotected sex in a situation that calls for it
- sexual aggression
- doing things you don't really want to do
- putting yourself in unsafe situations

There are many reasons you might form a maladaptive behavior pattern. It could be that you haven't had good examples of adaptive behavior or a chaotic life has kept you from developing good coping skills. Maybe a chronic illness has blindsided you. You may not be able to pinpoint the cause.

Trauma

Childhood sexual abuse is linked to self-harm, substance use, and unsafe sexual behavior. Maladaptive behaviors can also rise out of adult trauma.

Developmental disorders

A small study published in 2010 found a link between sleep disorders and maladaptive behavior among people with developmental delay.

Maladaptive behavior and anxiety

Research indicates that avoidance is a maladaptive behavioral response to fear and anxiety. The pattern of avoidance, while providing temporary relief, can increase anxiety.

Maladaptive behavior and autism

Maladaptive behaviors, including aggression, disobedience, and temper tantrums, are common in autism spectrum disorder. The reasons are not clear.

When to see a specialist

Signs that you should seek help include:

- you're self-injuring or thinking about it
- life is spiraling out of control
- you're dealing with after-effects of trauma
- you have a lot of stress or anxiety
- you have signs of depression
- your relationships are suffering

If you just need someone to help sort out your feelings, or you're uncertain, you can get a professional assessment. Those who can address maladaptive behavior include:

Treating maladaptive behavior

If you've fallen into a pattern of maladaptive behavior, you've taken the first step by recognizing it. Now you can make a conscious effort to change the way you react to things.

Consider alternate, more productive behaviors to replace maladaptive ones. It will take some practice, so it's important not to slide into avoidance.

Any conditions, such as addiction or anxiety need to be addressed with the appropriate professional. Depending on your circumstances, treatment may include:

- addiction counseling
- anger management
- cognitive behavioral therapy
- exposure therapy
- meditation
- relaxation and stress reducing techniques
- talk therapy

You can connect to a physician in your area using the Healthline FindCare tool.

Takeaway

Maladaptive behavior is behavior that prevents you from making adjustments that are in your own best interest. Avoidance, withdrawal, and passive aggression are examples of maladaptive behaviors.

Once you recognize this pattern in your life, you can work toward finding alternative behaviors and start putting them into practice. There are also a number of effective therapies to treat maladaptive behaviors and help you gain control and improve your quality of life.

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