For most people, the things they do – their behavior – are predictable. We can pretty much guess what someone is going to do in a similar situation in the future because of what he or she has done in the past. Behavior that is repeated forms a type of “cycle” – it repeats itself again and again, making a pattern. In a pattern, you can see how the parts fit together and predict how the design repeats. This is true for behavior as well, and many people repeat parts of their behavior over and over. When behavior repeats this way, we call it a cycle of behavior, or a behavioral cycle.

**Managing Behavior**

Although our feelings and our thoughts (as well as our attitudes and beliefs) can get us into trouble, it’s usually our behaviors that really get us into trouble. That’s because it’s our behaviors that really count. If we have good self-control, no matter what we feel, think, or believe, we’re able to manage our behaviors.

Of course, as you already know, feelings and thoughts lead to our behavior, so real behavioral control starts long before we actually act. But in the end, it’s our behavior that counts the most.

**What Affects Behavior?**

Behavior doesn’t just come from nowhere. Our behavior is the result of how we feel and what we think. It is usually our attempt to accomplish something we’ve thought about. Sometimes, behavior is aimed at getting rid of a bad feeling or a bad thought. For instance, when people drink or use drugs, bully or hurt someone else or hurt themselves, they are trying to make themselves numb to a negative feeling or forget about a hurtful thought.

On the other hand, behavior is sometimes intended to bring something we’ve thought about into reality, or to actually get us to do something we’ve only thought about until now. For example, sexual abuse is usually the result of someone thinking about what sex is like and making a decision to bring his or her ideas and thoughts into reality. Just as alcohol abuse is the wrong way to deal with feelings, sexually abusing someone is exactly the wrong way to bring a thought about sex into reality.

Most of the time, people’s behaviors (actions) are responses to their thoughts, but sometimes people act without thinking. In these cases, their behaviors are affected by their feelings (emotions), and their behaviors are usually impulsive. One way or another, if we aren’t careful – and we don’t take responsibility for what we do – our feelings and thoughts can explode on us and others when they...
Stages of Accomplishment Workbook  |  Stage 3: Understanding Dysfunctional Behavior

Turn into behaviors. In the case of sexual abuse, those behaviors explode on other people, harming them as well as us. However, even though our feelings can turn into impulsive behaviors that are harmful to ourselves or others, this doesn’t mean that we aren’t responsible for those behaviors or for better managing our feelings, or that we have no control over them.

Thinking Points

- How might people describe your behavior?
- Are you someone who behaves well, or does your behavior create problems for you?
- Is your behavior also a problem for others?
- If something causes behavioral problems in people, what sorts of things cause your behavior problems?

The Behavioral Cycle

A cycle is something that, once started, goes on and on and on. Like a wheel turning on a bicycle, once started there’s no beginning or end. It just spins round and round. Behaviors cycle as well. An event or situation leads to thoughts and feelings, which lead to a behavior, and the behavior leads to an outcome, and the outcome leads to a new situation, and the new situation triggers more thoughts and feelings, leading to another behavior, and on and on.

It’s a little more complicated than this, but not much more. You already know things that happen (events and situations) lead to feelings, and that feelings lead to thoughts and then to behaviors. You also know that behaviors have outcomes and consequences (the results of the behavior). These outcomes feed right back into new events and situations, and the cycle begins again. This kind of cycle is made up of six basic elements: Event-Trigger-Feeling-Thought-Behavior-Outcome-Event. And on and on, like a wheel that’s spinning – until you or someone else stops the cycle.
Event. The behavioral cycle starts with a situation or an event. In other words, something happens to start the cycle in motion. An event can be a bad phone call, an argument, wanting something you’d like but can’t have, or seeing someone who brings back bad memories.

Trigger. This event triggers or sets off a sequence of events (a series of things that follow one another in order, like 1-2-3-4, or A-B-C-D). In other words, one thing leads to another.

Feeling/Emotional Response. The event triggers an emotional response – that is, it leads to a feeling of some kind. This could be anger, frustration, sadness, rejection, fear, or a combination of feelings.

Thoughts and Ideas/Cognitive Response. Your emotional response leads to thoughts and ideas (a cognitive response) about what’s happened and how you feel about it. You start to think that no one understands you, that it’s not fair, that you ought to take what you want anyway, or that you should show them how you really feel.

Behavior. These thoughts lead to a behavior or action of some kind. Your behaviors are the things you do to either try to get rid of the feeling or thought, or to turn an idea or thought into reality. Some behaviors are very positive and pro-social, and others are negative and antisocial.

Outcomes. All behaviors have outcomes and lead to results of some sort. Like behaviors, some outcomes are positive and some are negative.

New Event. The results and outcomes of behaviors feed back into and help shape the next situation or event.

You can see that the steps we’ve just described are like a circle. The new event situation leads to a whole new cycle of event-trigger-feeling-thought-behavior-outcome-event. One thing leads to another and you end up just where you started, ready to start all over again (unless you do something to stop the cycle from repeating).
The Sequence of the Dysfunctional Behavioral Cycle

Not all event-feeling-thought-behavior cycles are negative – some can even involve happiness or satisfaction. But when the behavioral cycle leads to negative behaviors or to other problems, we call it the dysfunctional behavioral cycle – a cycle of behavior that goes round and round, causing the same problems over and over again.

Let’s see how a typical dysfunctional behavioral cycle works in a little more detail.

The Event. You want to go to the movies with your friends, but your mom says you can’t go because you got into trouble the last time you went.

The Trigger. Having to stay home when all your friends are going out really bothers you. It reminds you of other times when you couldn’t have things you wanted.

Your Feelings. You become full of emotions that are mixed up, but that include anger, disappointment, frustration, and sadness.

Your Thoughts. You start to think that no one understands you, it’s not fair, and you ought to go anyway even if your mom says you can’t. You think you ought to show her how angry you are and you also want to show her that she can’t tell you what to do.

Your Behavior. You start throwing things around your room. When your mom comes in you yell at her and tell her you’ll do what you like. You storm out of the house to go to the movies. Because your mom didn’t give you money, however, you try to sneak into the movies through an open exit door, but you get caught. Because you’ve been in trouble before at that mall, the police are called.

The Outcome. Your parents have to come to the police station to pick you up. You’re banned from the movie theater and the mall, and are punished by your parents and grounded for a month.

The Next Triggering Event. You feel misunderstood and angry, and are just waiting to explode again. You’re like a time bomb. Two days later, you get a bad report card from school... and the cycle begins again.
Here’s what this sequence looks like as a behavioral cycle. The only difference is that the “event” and the “trigger” get combined as the “The Triggering Event.”

This is an example of the Dysfunctional Behavioral Cycle, or a cycle of negative behavior that goes round and round, in which problem behaviors lead to, and cause, the same problem to occur over and over again.

Take a shot at applying this cycle to yourself. Think of a recent event that upset you and led to a problem behavior for you or someone else. This situation could be anything, from something that happened in treatment to something that happened in school, with your family, or with your friends.

1. What was the triggering event? What caused the problem to begin?
2. How did you feel immediately after the event occurred? What sorts of emotions did you feel? Were you angry, sad, confused, surprised? Did you feel happy, pleased, or excited? Maybe you felt rejected or abandoned? Perhaps you felt a mix of different emotions. Think about your emotional response to the triggering event and describe it.

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3. Right after you felt these emotions, what did you start thinking? Did you think angry thoughts about someone else or yourself, did you start thinking that no one understood or cared about you, or did you maybe think that things were unfair? Did you start thinking positive thoughts or negative ones? What thoughts started running through your head?

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4. What behavior did your thoughts lead you to do? How did your thoughts turn into action? What did you decide to do? Did you act in an angry manner? Did you hurt someone or yourself or cause damage, or did you threaten to cause harm? Did you stop talking to others, or isolate yourself in some way?

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5. How did the things you were feeling or thinking immediately before your behavior affect your actual behavior?
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6. Do you think you acted without thinking at all, or at least without fully thinking things through?
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7. What was the outcome of your behavior? In other words, what happened to you after you behaved in that way?
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8. How might the things that happened in this example lead to a whole new set of problems if you keep behaving in the same way? Do you think the way you handled this triggering event might cause problems again in the future if you don’t change?
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The Parts of the Dysfunctional Behavioral Cycle

Looking at the parts of the dysfunctional behavioral cycle can help you to see how one thing leads to the next.

1. **Triggering Event.** When something happens that affects you, it’s called a “trigger.” The trigger leads to a feeling inside of you, or an emotion.

   ![Diagram of Triggering Event](image1)

2. **Thoughts and Ideas.** The feeling, or emotional response, leads to a thought or an idea of some kind, as you react to the feeling or try to make sense of the emotion.

   ![Diagram of Thoughts and Ideas](image2)

3. **Behavior.** If you don’t take control of your thoughts and ideas, they can easily take control of you. In this case, your thoughts lead to problem behaviors.

   ![Diagram of Behavior](image3)
4. **Outcomes.** Your behaviors have consequences, or outcomes, that continue the cycle, as you can see.

![Diagram of the cycle of behaviors, outcomes, and emotions](image)

5. **New Event.** If you aren’t careful and don’t learn from your mistakes and their consequences, your behaviors and their outcomes can easily lead to a whole new trigger, and the negative, or dysfunctional, cycle starts all over again.

![Diagram of the cycle of behaviors, outcomes, and emotions](image)

Do you keep doing the same old things over and over again? ______________________________________
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Do you think you get caught up in dysfunctional behavioral cycles? ____________________________
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Thinking Points

• Does it make sense to you to think about or picture behavior problems going round and round, like cycles?
• Besides thinking of problem behaviors as “cycles of behavior,” can you think of other ways to describe why problem behaviors seem to repeat over and over?

Dysfunctional Behavioral Cycles as High Risk

The dysfunctional behavioral cycle is sometimes called a high-risk cycle because it creates problems for you and other people, and can lead to dangerous behavior. You already know it’s called a cycle because it goes on and on and on.

For some people, behavioral cycles can lead to the possibility of destructive or dangerous behaviors, including harm to themselves or others. If you have sexually abused others, this cycle can mean that you might return to sexually abusive behaviors over and over – unless you learn how to interrupt the cycle, like putting the brakes on a bicycle wheel.

Interrupting the Cycle

Thinking of your behaviors this way and seeing the parts of the cycle can also help you to realize that you can break out of the cycle at any time, if you recognize that you’re in a dysfunctional cycle. This is called interrupting or escaping the cycle. Escaping the cycle allows you to end problems before they begin or, at least, before they lead to deeper and more serious problems. You can break (interrupt) the cycle at any point, and you can do that as soon as you realize you’re getting caught in a dysfunctional behavioral cycle.
Think again of the example of a recent problem cycle that you completed when we first discussed the dysfunctional behavioral cycle on pages 10 and 11. Now think about how you could have interrupted that behavioral problem, even as it was developing.

As you answer each question, look at the diagram above that shows how you can interrupt a behavioral cycle. Use it to think about how you might apply some of these ideas to the situation you previously described.

1. When the triggering event first happened, what could you have done to stop it from becoming a problem?

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2. As the event triggered (or set off) negative feelings, what could you have done at that point to prevent the feelings from leading to negative thoughts or problem behaviors?

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3. If the problem developed far enough for you to be having negative thoughts, at that point how could you have stopped the problem from developing into negative behaviors?

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4. If you weren’t able to interrupt the problem before you started to behave inappropriately, what could you have done even as you were starting to behave poorly? Could you have stopped the behavior before it began, or while it was happening?

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5. Even if you let things go and acted out with problem behaviors, as the outcome of your behavior became clear (for instance, if you or someone else was hurt, if you got into trouble, or if some property was damaged), was there something you could do at that point to stop the same or a similar problem from happening again? Could you interrupt a *future* cycle, even at that point?

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**Thinking Points**

- Can you imagine behavioral cycles that contribute to positive behaviors and experiences – where one good thing leads to another?

- Should behavioral patterns that lead to good things be called functional behavioral cycles?

- Can you imagine a functional behavioral cycle in your life?
Key Concepts

**Dysfunctional Behaviors.** Actions that don’t accomplish anything positive, prevent people from improving their lives, contribute towards difficulties and problems, and are often self-defeating or harmful to other people.

**Dysfunctional Behavioral Cycle.** A series of feelings, thoughts, and behaviors that lead from one problem to another, and lead to the same problems and behaviors being repeated over and over again.

**Interrupting the Cycle.** The ability to recognize a dysfunctional behavioral cycle, and stop the cycle from developing further or getting worse.

**Sequence.** One thing follows another in a predictable order.

**Trigger.** Event or circumstance that sets a dysfunctional behavioral cycle into motion.

What Have You Learned?

Review Questions and Learning Exercises

Chapter 1. High-Risk and Dysfunctional Behavioral Cycles

1. What is a cycle?

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2. Starting with the event, what are the six basic elements of a behavioral cycle?

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3. Why do we call some behavioral cycles *dysfunctional*?

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4. What does dysfunctional mean?

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5. Not all behavioral cycles are necessarily harmful. Even though some people repeat the same behavior over and over, the behavior causes no harm to anyone. Why are some behavioral cycles high risk, but others are not? That is, what features make some behavioral cycles high risk?

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6. What affects and influences behavior?

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7. What do we mean by the “outcome” of a behavioral cycle?

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8. What have you learned about yourself and your behavior through completing this chapter?

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Staff Review

Chapter 1. High-Risk and Dysfunctional Behavioral Cycles

Your therapist and perhaps other treatment staff will review your work and will check off the chapter as approved or not approved. Staff may ask you to go over the chapter, or parts of the chapter, again. Because you may be working with more than just one therapist, spaces are provided for multiple staff signatures.

Treatment Staff Name: ________________________________________________________________

Chapter Approved: ___Yes ___No      Date: _____________________________________________

Comments or Suggestions: _______________________________________________________________________
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