

A Sex Offender's Thoughts about Learning and The Sexual Deviancy Treatment Program

Hi. I'm a sex offender. I'm assuming that we have at least that one thing in common. I've been in therapy for my sexual deviancy for over two years and I'm writing this to review what I've learned and to pass it on for whatever help it might be to those who are just entering treatment.

I remember very well how that feels. When I entered treatment I was angry, afraid, isolated, distrustful, and depressed. I was in a lot of pain and I felt very vulnerable. I also had a pretty low opinion of myself and I wondered if anyone could possibly love or respect me now that I'd been found out. Not surprisingly, I was defensive and full of denial. But at the same time I had a least one thing going for me from my very first day – I really wanted to change my life and put my offending behavior behind me.

I soon found out how very important that attitude is to success in treatment. Before I had finished a year in the program three of my group mates were terminated because they apparently didn't have the sincere desire to do the work and make the changes necessary to get well. I liked all three of them and it hurt to see them fail. Another new addition really never got off the ground with us because his denial and hostility were so extreme that he disrupted the group sessions.

Because I did care about getting well I was able to listen to what was going on around me in treatment until I could begin to get a handle on things for myself. Gradually, I lost my denial and resistance to change and I realized that I could trust my therapist and accept what was told to me. I also began to see that a lot of important things were being said in the group sessions. Because I listened and was willing, I was able to learn.

Probably the most important thing I learned – and learned early – was the tremendous amount of damage done by sexual offending. When I looked at what I had done and the harm I had caused I was shocked. My denial, rationalization, and intellectualization had kept the knowledge of the truth from me. To see and hear a victim tell of the horror and pain of her victimization is a very moving experience. This ugly reality, far different from my fantasies, has really deducted the attraction of offending behavior for me.

And there have been other things I've learned which have helped me a lot. I was assigned to read two very important books – Patrick Carnes' book, Out of the Shadows, and John Bradshaw's book, The Family. Carnes' book helped me to understand the nature of sexual addiction and the importance of the addiction cycle. Bradshaw's book helped me to identify and understand some family issues which helped to fuel my sexual addiction. I found out that because of some family issues and the life role I was assigned, I lived a great deal of my life in extreme pain. I stuffed my feelings to hide from the pain but I also, in the words of my therapist, "escaped pain to pleasure."

Escaping pain to pleasure is really what addictive behavior is all about. For me the escaping took the forms of alcohol abuse and sexual deviancy. The key in both cases was the attraction. I did what I did because it was highly attractive to me and because I was able to avoid the barriers which should have stopped me. I needed to use the rationalization, denial, and intellectualization that I spoke of earlier, and to engage in all sorts of wrong thinking, to convince myself that it was okay to do the offending that I did. I learned that my mind is capable of doing many things to distort my view of reality. To help me understand these things I was assigned to read the book, Vital Lies, Simple Truths, by Daniel Goleman – a good book and well worth reading.

How had I allowed myself to become a sex offender and how can I prevent reoffending in the future? These were the questions that caused me to want to find out something about the learning process. I began to look around for some books to read and my therapist guided me in the search.

I found out that nobody really knows what causes the initial attraction to sexually deviant behavior. Some believe that it's something passed on in genes from generation to generation but that theory has yet to be proved. I did find out some things about how learning is shaped, however, and that's what I'd like to talk about there.

Around the turn of the century a Russian by the name of Ivan Pavlov was able to show that we learn to connect one event with another if we see these events repeatedly happening together. We learn that the appearance of the first event, commonly called a trigger, signals the appearance of the second event. We also learn to feel excitement if the signaled event is something we like, or uneasiness if it's something we don't like. This all happens automatically once we get triggered. Let's look at an example which will explain this in real life terms.

Some years ago a lot of farm hands were called to meals by the sound of a bell. A newly hired hand quickly learned that when the bell sounded it signaled that food was being served. The food was usually good and there was plenty of it. Of course the ringing of the bell was the trigger and the serving of the meal was the signaled event. The meal was something that the hand really enjoyed so he became excited when he heard the bell. His mouth might even have watered. And none of this required any conscious effort on his part. He only needed to hear the bell.

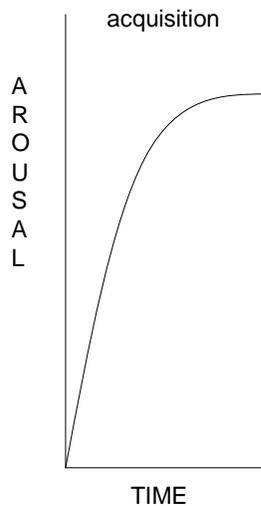
This learning process that we've just seen is called acquisition, but Pavlov also showed us that our farm hands would lose interest in the sound of the bell if they didn't get fed when it rang. The process of losing interest is called extinction.

Others showed us how we learn, by trial and error, to do certain things to get something we want or to avoid something we don't want. They showed us that if we're rewarded after we do something in response to a trigger we'll probably do the same thing again. But if we're punished for what we do we'll probably not do that same thing again. We learn to do what brings pleasure and avoids the unpleasant. We learn by trial and error,

making voluntary responses, until we learn which response will get us what we want. Again, this process is called acquisition.

The strength of the reward – called reinforcement – is very important to the learning process. So is when it happens. To be effective, the reinforcement should be strong and should happen immediately after we've responded to the trigger.

So what does all this have to do with sexually deviant behavior? How does it apply to us now that we're in treatment? Well, simply put, learned behavior is learned behavior. It doesn't matter whether the behavior involves going to a meal after hearing a bell, riding a bicycle, or doing something sexually deviant. The learning process is the same. Let's look at a few graphs and examples and I think we'll be able to make some sense of it all.

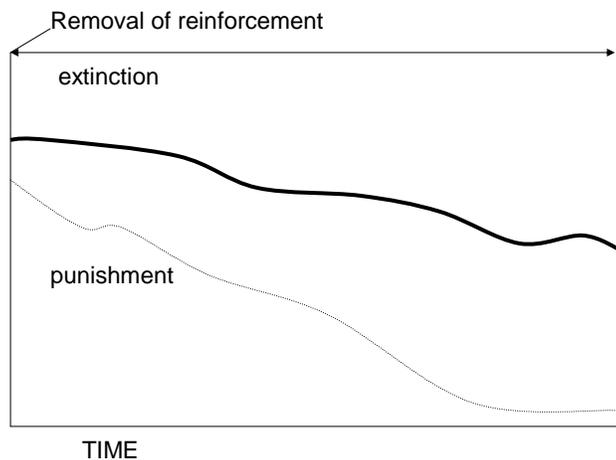


The first graph shows what happens during the acquisition phase of learning sexually deviant behavior. The black line that goes upward and then levels off shows that deviant arousal can increase a lot in a relatively short period of time. By the time the line begins to level off a strong habit has been formed. The connection between trigger and deviant event has been firmly fixed in our minds. As long as we continue to get that “high octane” sexual pleasure (the reinforcement) from our deviant acts our arousal to the triggers will remain high and we'll continue to be strongly tempted to re-offend.

Let's look at a sexually deviant behavior -- peeping. Let's assume that I like the idea of looking at naked women but I've never peeped before. One evening I happen by a lighted bedroom window with the shade up and my attention is drawn to a pretty woman who walks by unbuttoning her blouse. I put aside my inhibitions and I sneak up to the window and watch her undress. I get a strong sexual thrill from the sight of her pretty naked body. I leave without getting caught.

Now let's review what just happened. I saw a pretty woman unbuttoning her blouse in the lighted window (the trigger) and I acted upon it (the response) by going up to the window and peeping on her. I received a strong and immediate pleasurable feeling – a sexual rush or high (the reinforcement). Because I got so much pleasure from peeping on this woman I'll probably return to try to get a second helping. Let's say that I return several more times late in the evening when I think she might be undressing. I wait around and I'm rewarded by being able to see her naked at least once, perhaps several more times. The strength of my arousal and my interest in peeping quickly grow with each offense and the intoxicating pleasure I receive. I'm moving up the heavy black line shown on our graph. Because of the intense pleasure (reinforcement) I get from my peeping it doesn't take very long before I've formed a strong habit that is difficult to change.

And there is something else of importance in our peeping example. Remember that we saw that I couldn't count on seeing my victim naked every time? Maybe I went back five times and I only saw her undress twice. Under these circumstances I'd be receiving something called partial reinforcement because I'd only get the reinforcing sexual pleasure part of the time. This means that it might take me a little bit longer to get hooked, but it will also make it harder to lower my deviant arousal and to change my behavior. If my victim quits undressing in that room, or closes the blinds when she undresses, I'll probably keep coming back a number of times, possibly spending hours waiting, before I finally give up. My deviant behavior, because it was partially reinforced during the acquisition phase, will be hard to change. It will be resistant to extinction. And speaking of extinction, let's look at our second graph and talk about some possibilities.



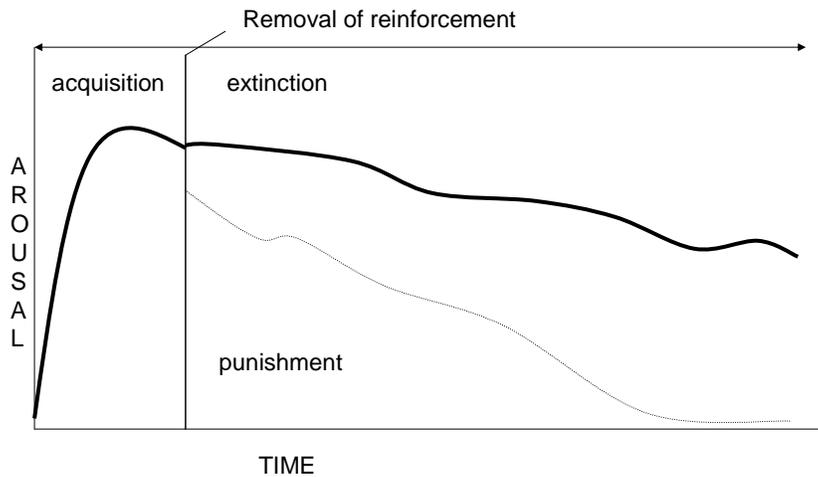
This graph begins to the right of where the first one ended. We can see that extinction begins when the reinforcement is removed. The lowering of deviant arousal during extinction is shown on the graph by the heavy black line. Let's assume that my victim does quit undressing in that bedroom or does close the blinds. In either case my reinforcement has been removed because I can no longer get that intense sexual excitement that I experienced when I saw my victim naked. Because the reinforcement has been removed I will slowly lose the attraction for peeping on her. I'll start moving down the heavy black line. Notice how much longer it takes to lower deviant arousal than to raise it.

Now let's look at the dotted line labeled "punishment." To travel down this line two things need to happen: 1) I need to have the reinforcement removed, and 2) I need punishment – like something bad happening to me when I try to peep on my victim. So let's assume that the next time I go back to peep in the bedroom window I find that the blinds have been closed. My reinforcement has been removed but I'm not ready to give up. I sneak up to the window to try to peep around the blinds and I am suddenly attacked by the furiously barking family dog, seemingly bent on tearing my leg off. I run away faster than I would have thought possible, desperately trying not fall down or run into anything.

I have just experienced the loss of my reinforcement plus the addition of punishment. This combination will change my behavior much faster than just removing the reinforcement. Remember that my behavior was partially reinforced during the acquisition phase so I'll probably be back a few more times hoping to see the blinds open and the dog gone. But if the blinds stay closed and the dog continues to threaten me I'll give up – and much sooner than I would have with just the loss of my reinforcement.

But the attraction for my peeping activity won't completely go away – ever. That's just the way learned behavior works. Some time later I might be tempted to go back to see if I could resume peeping on the woman. Or I might be walking on another street and, seeing the light on in another uncovered bedroom window, feel a jolt of sexual excitement. Because of my previous learning, the sight of a lighted and uncovered bedroom window would be a trigger for peeping.

Since we've now studied both the acquisition and extinction phases of the shaping of deviant sexual behavior, let's look at our third graph which ties the whole thing together.



I think that this graph really shows us just how quickly we can acquire strong deviant arousal and how long it takes to reduce it very much. This is something that none of us can afford to forget.

There is a natural tendency to expand deviant activities into other areas (as explained in Carnes' book, Out of the Shadows), but the learning principles remain the same. I'm sure you can think of many examples like the one about peeping, possibly from your own experiences. We can easily see that learning might cause us to feel a sexual impulse, or jolt, when we see the cover of a pornographic video or magazine, or a restroom if we've previously exposed from a restroom, or a child's bedroom if we've been sexual with children. We also learn how to manipulate, or groom, our victims to set them up for our sexual offending, or our wives or girlfriends to cause them to enable us.

And there are lots of other examples of learning that don't involve sexual deviancy. Let's look at two of them and see if we can recognize the learning principles we've discussed.

Our first example concerns a young quarterback in the National Football League. He has a good arm and a good offensive line in front of him. His receivers are very talented and they rarely drop a ball. Time after time our quarterback throws long passes which go for touchdowns and bring him fame and fortune. When he steps to the line and looks at the linebackers and opposing secondary he almost drools with anticipation. He knows that they won't be able to stop his passes with the time his offensive line is giving him. He hates it when running plays are sent in from the sideline. He thinks they are a waste of time. His way is to pass – pass – pass!

But suddenly a rash of injuries breaks up the effectiveness of the offensive line. Blitzing linebackers and stunting defensive linemen now break through on almost every play. The

quarterback is smashed to the turf time and time again. His body screams with pain as he drags himself to his feet. He is rarely able to complete a pass and his team begins to lose game after game. Somehow the blame for losing falls on him. Now when he steps to the line for a pass play he feels real fear when he looks into the eyes of the defensive players. He no longer wants to throw passes.

Now let's look at a golf pro on the P.G.A. circuit. Suppose this pro plays very aggressively and takes a lot of chances with shots that many other pros wouldn't take. Not all of those risky shots work for him but enough do so that his boldness is rewarded with some tournament wins. He is very pleased with his new fame and wealth. It doesn't take very long before he thinks of no other way to play the game. He is hooked.

But now he suddenly loses his touch. A whole year on the tour ends with no wins because not enough of his risky shots paid off for him. Many of the shots that used to leave the gallery gasping with admiration now frequently find their way into woods, bunkers, water hazards, and other nightmarish places. Will he lose his attraction for risky shots and work to change his style of play? Probably, but he's received partial reinforcement because his style didn't win for him all the time – just enough to pay off. This means it will be harder for him to change. He'll keep looking for his touch to return.

We can use our last graph with both of our examples to help us see what happened. In place of "arousal" put "tendency to throw passes" for the quarterback or "tendency to hit risky shots" for the golf pro.

During the acquisition phase our quarterback received full reinforcement (wins, fame, and fortune) because his passing game always succeeded. We can see him move up the heavy black line as his success grows. By then the reinforcement is removed and punishment is added (the physical beating from the defense). We can then see him moving down the dotted line as his tendency to pass decreases.

Our golf pro received partial reinforcement because he didn't win all the time – just enough of the time. And when the reinforcement is removed there might not be any real punishment added unless he suffers a lot of damage in his personal life. So he's probably going to have some trouble changing his style of play. I think we can picture him heading pretty slowly down the heavy black line.

By now I think we've seen enough to have a pretty good basic understanding of how learning works. In the case of our sexual deviancy it's important to recognize that habits have been formed which are deeply rooted, difficult to change, and impossible to completely extinguish. In many cases our deviant actions have been partially reinforced. Our shaped deviant arousal has become the automatic way we respond to the triggers. To avoid reoffending we need to learn to be alert and to consciously override this deviant response. And we need to do all we possibly can to decrease deviant arousal.

So how does the treatment program help us to do that? What can we do to change our old behavior? Well, I believe that recognizing the tremendous harm that offending

behavior causes is one of the most important things that we need to do. Why? Because it really reduces the attractiveness of deviant behavior. At least it did for me. I gave myself permission to do deviant things because I was able to convince myself that I wasn't hurting anyone – or that what I did was enjoyable to those that I now recognize as victims. When this fantasy thinking was stripped away I was left with a very ugly picture and a whole lot less attraction for deviant behavior. This attraction was further reduced by some work with Guided Imagery. My therapist helped me create a mental picture involving some deviant behavior which had some pretty scary results.

And it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that if we're going to change our behavior we have to avoid the triggers that lead to our deviant arousal and offending behavior. That's why we're introduced to new rules for living which keep us away from pornography, children's bedrooms, and other temptations. And we can't permit deviant thoughts and fantasies to remain with us once they pop into our minds or they'll reinforce our deviant arousal. This could set in motion a chain of deviant thoughts, fantasies, and events which could lead to reoffending and the creation of new victims. To prevent this we learn to use a punishment technique called Thought Stopping.

Thought Stopping is a six step process as follows: 1) Attention Getter – Greet the arrival of a deviant thought with a snap of a rubber band on the wrist, a pinch to your earlobe, or a slap; 2) Self Talk – Say to yourself, “no!”; 3) Punishment – Take a whiff of ammonia or other nasty smell and imagine a very unpleasant scene resulting from your deviant thought – something like your arrest, loss of wife, job, etc.; 4) Leave – physically, or look away from what caused your thought; 5) Tell someone and write about it in your journal; and 6) Give yourself an Attaboy – Reward (and reinforce) yourself for doing the right thing.

It's important to understand that giving in to deviant thoughts and fantasies will quickly raise the strength of our arousal, possibly to a high level. It's like learning to ride a bicycle. At the very beginning a lot of conscious thought is needed to ride without falling. Once the learning process is completed, however everything pretty much becomes automatic. We don't have to learn how to ride all over again each time we get back on a bike. Even if we don't ride for a period of years we never forget how. Once we get back on one we're soon riding as though we'd never stopped. It's the same with deviant sexual behavior and it just isn't worth throwing away a lot of hard work and time for a few moments of deviant pleasure.

The Minimal Arousal Technique is an aid to reducing deviant arousal. We first write a step by step description of some deviant behavior that has been a problem for us. Then we read it step by step and take a whiff of ammonia at the first sign of any arousal. We repeat that step and use ammonia until no arousal is felt. Then we continue the step by step reading until arousal is again felt. When that happens we use the ammonia again. We continue until the whole story can be read without feeling arousal. This is an excellent example of how punishment (the ammonia) can be used in treatment to lower deviant arousal.

The Deviant Satiation Technique is very useful in both raising appropriate arousal and lowering deviant arousal. First we masturbate to climax to an appropriate fantasy. Then while our sex urge is satisfied we masturbate to a deviant fantasy that has been a problem for us. We do this for a long enough period of time for the exercise to become very boring and unpleasant. I think this is a great technique but very hard work. It demands that we focus absolutely on the deviant fantasy during that part of the exercise. We can't allow our minds to wander away to less boring things or the benefit will be lost. And I should point out that the Guided Imagery, Deviant Satiation, and Minimal Arousal techniques are not to be used without the approval and guidance of the therapist.

These techniques will really help to decrease deviant arousal if approached with a strong desire to change and the willingness to work hard. The raising of appropriate arousal is important in treatment because it gives us an acceptable outlet for our sexual energy. The goal of treatment in this area is to create a clear and strong preference for appropriate arousal over deviant arousal. This, of course, makes deviant behavior much less attractive and reduces the possibility that we'll re-offend. What makes up appropriate arousal is an individual thing and is determined by the therapist.

And along with learning ways to decrease deviant arousal we learn how to manage a maintenance, or relapse prevention program. Basically, this means that we learn to follow new rules for living and to avoid trouble situations, or to escape from them if for some reason they can't be avoided. If we're to avoid potential trouble we must learn to recognize situations where it exists.

I like the story about a man who had a gambling problem. He was asked why he'd gambled again when he knows that to do so meant certain disaster for him. He answered that he was on a car trip through Northern California and suddenly found himself in Downtown Reno, Nevada. Well, of course, he didn't just find himself in Downtown Reno. He had to make a series of decisions and act on them before he got there. He failed at each of these steps to recognize that he was heading for trouble and to escape from his relapse path. We don't want to repeat his mistakes. Our job is to learn the situations that could place us in danger and to see them coming. Then they can be avoided. There is no substitute for thinking ahead and planning when it comes to this.

In the treatment program we do something called avoidance learning to help us avoid ending up in Downtown Reno. We start this process when we're introduced to our treatment rules. One of these rules is that we can't be around children unless we're chaperoned and I'm going to use it to help me explain avoidance learning. Obviously, the rules of the treatment program have to be strictly enforced. To break a rule is to run the risk of being terminated and placed in prison. Therefore, we learn to link our unchaperoned presence around children with possible termination and prison. This causes us to feel uncomfortable when we find ourselves approaching children when we aren't chaperoned. We learn to avoid these uncomfortable feelings and possible severe punishment by doing whatever we need to do to stay clear of the children. This behavior soon becomes automatic for us and we learn to anticipate situations and places where

children are likely to be. This way we can either avoid them or make sure we're chaperoned.

We also find out that faulty thinking processes have added to our problems. A lot of what goes on in the treatment program has to do with helping us correct our faulty thinking. Some of us have been able to convince ourselves that our victims liked what we did to them. I was one of these. Others see themselves as the victims instead of the offenders. It's really critical that we change this faulty way of thinking. What goes on in our heads has a huge effect on our attraction for deviant behavior and our ability to avoid the barriers which would normally stop us from offending.

Watch out for the subtle mind tricks that are described in Vital Lies, Simple Truths. Realize that secrets can be very deadly. If something won't stand up to public examination there is something wrong with it. And it's important to have a support base of people that we can talk to and discuss our plans and motives. We need to be suspicious of our first thoughts and motives when we decide to go somewhere or do something.

Remember the danger of reinforcing deviant arousal. Learn to think of recovery as a walk through a mine field. If we stay alert and follow the map (a good recovery and maintenance program) we'll be okay. If we lose our concentration or our motivation the chances are that we won't travel very far before everything blows up in our faces. If we feel ourselves starting to stray we should ask for help from our therapist and group immediately. They can't help if they don't know we need it.

Unless we work hard to decrease the attraction for deviant sexual behavior it will always be there calling to us – that persistent itch that feels so good (and hurts so much) when we scratch it. The temptation could easily be there to try to slide through this program with the attraction intact. For some of us our deviant behavior was the most exciting and pleasurable thing in our lives. But to paraphrase an old Alcoholics Anonymous expression, we must let go of our old ways absolutely if we're to turn our lives around and begin a successful recovery. There is no promise of a rose garden. The sexual deviancy treatment program is not something magical that is done to us. We have to be willing to participate with a lot of hard work and courage. It won't be easy, but decreasing deviant attraction is a very reachable goal. We can succeed and control our deviant behavior through therapy.

I think I've talked long enough. I hope some or all of this will be of use to you. Remember it's important to follow the rules to the letter and to be very careful not to reinforce deviant arousal. Thought stop with a vengeance! And please give a damn. Try as hard as you can, both for yourself and for those who are touched by your life. I don't think anything is more important to your success than motivation unless maybe it's staying alert for possible trouble. Anyway, here's wishing you success in the program. It's up to you to take full advantage of the opportunity you now have. The measure of success for all of us is in never creating any more victims.