

ACTIVITY 5.1

Using Psychological Perspectives to Change Habits

Rob McEntarffer, formerly of Lincoln Southeast High School, Lincoln, Nebraska

Introducing psychological perspectives can be a dry lecture and potentially confusing to students. It is usually done toward the beginning of the semester, and the students have little context and few examples to use to make sense of the perspectives. This activity gives them context by asking them to analyze a personal habit using psychological perspectives. The students may also keep a journal documenting their habit changing in which they analyze the effectiveness of their intervention and choice of perspective.

Concept

This activity demonstrates the relevance and applicability of psychological perspectives to students' lives.

Materials

- Lecture on psychological perspectives (or student knowledge of the perspectives). The perspectives that work best for this activity are behavioral, cognitive, biological, and social-cultural. The activity can be modified to include the psychoanalytic and humanist perspectives as well.
- Why the Heck Do I Do That? (Handout Master A)
- Habit Journal (Handout Master B)

Description

After communicating information about the perspectives to the students, hand out the *Why the Heck Do I Do That?* sheet. This can be completed in class or given as homework. Give the students some examples of habits that can be analyzed, and get some sample analysis from student volunteers. When the students are finished, ask them to pick the perspective that best explains their habit. Again, discuss some volunteered examples. After students choose their perspective, ask them to use their *Why the Heck Do I Do That?* sheet and design an intervention in order to change their habit. Discuss a personal example of your own (it's a good idea if you complete the sheet and design your own intervention before the lesson and do this activity along with your students).

Explain to the students that you would like for them to try to change their habit over the next 2 weeks. You should make this a voluntary assignment. Forcing the students to try to change a habit would encourage cheating on the journal and wouldn't be useful for the coerced student. Hand out the *Habit Journal* and explain how to keep the journal on their habit changing.

After the 2 weeks have passed, you can discuss with your students how the habit changing went. The class can discuss which perspectives and interventions were most effective for certain types of habits. You can also encourage your students to continue their habit changing for the rest of the semester if it was helpful to them.

Discussion

Students are sometimes very skeptical about psychological explanations for behavior. They see accused criminals pleading insanity and assume that psychology is an excuse to let people out of responsibility for their actions. This activity attempts to demonstrate the value of psychological explanations for behavior by getting the students to examine their own behavior using psychological terms and concepts. By applying the perspectives to themselves and seeing first-hand how intractable and resistant to change some behavior is, the students should gain a clearer understanding of some of the real causes of human behavior. The activity also helps students better understand psychological perspectives by applying them to a real-world example that has relevance to the student.

Writing Component

The students complete the *Why the Heck Do I Do That?* sheet, and then keep a 2-week journal about their habit changing. Writing the journal should show the students the process of changing behavior and its level of difficulty. It directly relates the perspectives to the students' own experiences, and it helps remind the students of their intervention and assignment.

HANDOUT MASTER A

Why the Heck Do I Do That?

Think of a habit you would like to change. It can be a bad habit you want to get rid of, or a good habit you want to acquire. Write here about the habit. What is it? Why do you want to get rid of it or acquire it? What causes the habit?

Now, take your habit and do some role-playing with it. Look back at your notes to understand what the following terms mean. How would a psychologist from each of these perspectives explain the cause of your habit? How would they treat your habit; help you stop the habit or acquire it?

Behavioral:

Cognitive:

Biological:

Social-Cultural:

HANDOUT MASTER B

Habit Journal

For the next 2 weeks, please try to change your habit. Use the perspective and intervention you designed in class. Please keep a journal about how your habit breaking is going. Write something every day; whether you managed to go without your habit, whether you forgot or gave into temptation, whether you managed to keep up your habit, etc. Basically, how is your intervention working? How does the psychological perspective you chose apply to your current situation with your habit?