

HEALTH PSYCHOLOGY

Behaviour and health (unit 2)

UG VI semester

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Understanding health behaviours is not merely about identifying "good" or "bad" choices; it is about analysing the psychological architecture that governs our daily actions and their cumulative impact on human longevity.

1. Foundations: Defining Health Behavior

To navigate the field of health psychology, we must first establish a formal definition of the actions that dictate our physical status.

Definition

Health Behavior refers to any activity performed by an individual with the explicit purpose of maintaining their current health or enhancing their future well-being. These behaviours can be categorized as **Good (Uttam)**, which promote wellness, or **Poor (Ghatiya)**, which pose a threat to health.

Psychologists focus intently on poor behaviors because they possess a high risk of crystallizing into **Poor Health Habits**. This progression moves from an intentional choice to an ingrained, subconscious pattern:

- **Initial Action:** A behavior is performed consciously (e.g., choosing to smoke or exercise).
- **Reinforcement:** The behavior is repeated due to internal or external rewards.
- **Habit Formation:** The behavior becomes firmly established and occurs automatically, often without conscious thought or effort.

Learning Narrative: *With the definition of these behaviors established, we must explore the specific psychological mechanism that allows an intentional action to harden into an automatic habit.*

2. The Anatomy of a Habit: Formation and Maintenance

The journey from a single choice to a lifelong habit is driven by two distinct psychological phases:

1. **The Reinforcement Stage:** Initially, a behavior is driven by **positive reinforcement**. Whether it is the social approval of peers or the physiological "high" of an activity, these rewards motivate the individual to repeat the act.
2. **The Environmental Association:** Over time, the behavior becomes independent of the reward. It becomes tied to **environmental stimuli** (triggers). In this stage, simply being in a specific setting or facing a familiar situation triggers the behavior automatically.

Learning Narrative: *While all habits follow this developmental path, they are categorized by their ultimate impact on our long-term physiological survival.*

3. Core Categories: Enhancing vs. Compromising Behaviors

In health psychology, we differentiate behaviors based on whether they build the body's reserves or deplete them.

Category	Core Impact	Specific Examples
Health-Enhancing Behaviors	Building Well-being: These actions improve current health status and protect the future self.	Regular exercise, weight control, adequate sleep, personal hygiene (brushing teeth), and accident prevention (wearing seatbelts).
Health-Compromising Behaviors	The Survival Trade-off: These involve "compromising" long-term health for short-term gratification or stress relief.	Smoking (tobacco), excessive alcohol consumption, and poor nutritional choices.

Learning Narrative: *Now that we understand the categories of behavior, we turn to the landmark research that empirically linked these daily choices to life expectancy.*

4. The Gold Standard: The 7 Pillars of Health (Belloc & Breslow)

In 1972, researchers Belloc and Breslow identified seven specific habits that serve as the foundation for health. Their findings established that longevity is not accidental, but a result of these "Gold Standard" practices:

- [] Sleeping 7 to 8 hours per night.
- [] Not smoking.
- [] Eating breakfast every day.
- [] Limiting alcohol consumption to no more than one or two drinks per day.
- [] Engaging in regular physical exercise.
- [] Avoiding snacking between meals.

- [] Maintaining a weight no more than 10% above the ideal.

Key Insight: The Survival Advantage

A follow-up study conducted nine years later confirmed the power of these habits. Among participants who strictly adhered to these pillars, the mortality rate was significantly lower: **28% for men** and **43% for women**. These figures represent a stark survival advantage compared to those who did not practice these habits. Additionally, practitioners experienced significantly fewer days of physical disability.

Learning Narrative: *These pillars represent the "what" of health psychology; however, the "why" is far more complex, as several internal and external forces dictate our ability to maintain these standards.*

5. Influencing Forces: Why We Do What We Do

Human behavior is shaped by a constellation of variables. To understand why some individuals maintain "good" behaviors while others do not, we must cite the following academic factors:

- **Emotional Factors:** Research by **Law & Klepper (1988)** and **Mechanic & Cleary (1980)** indicates that high stress often triggers overeating, while high self-esteem and general psychological well-being are strong predictors of health-enhancing practices.
- **Perceived Symptoms:** We act based on how we interpret bodily signals. For instance, experiencing a persistent cough or a "vaspy" sensation (irritation/wheezing) and throat discomfort often serves as the primary motivator for a smoker to attempt to quit.
- **Socio-Economic & Systemic Factors:** Access to the **health care system** is a major determinant. **Kirscht (1983)** found that individuals of higher socio-economic status have easier access to vaccinations and check-ups, which accelerates the development of "good" habits compared to those in lower-income brackets.
- **Cognitive Factors:** This involves the "Health Practice" belief. If an individual firmly believes that a specific behavior (like a diet or exercise regimen) will be effective in improving their health, they are significantly more likely to adopt it.
- **Socialization:** This refers to the early childhood period where parents model health behaviors. Habits like brushing teeth or eating at regular intervals are often modeled without resistance during this phase.
- **Social Factors:** Peer influence and social values are critical. **Loventhel & Clery (1980)** highlighted that adolescents are often pressured into smoking by peers. Furthermore, **Langlie (1977)** noted that "desirability" varies by culture; for example, some cultures view exercise as more desirable for certain demographics, influencing participation.
- **Demographical Variables:** Age, education, and gender play roles. **Gottlieb & Green (1984)** found that younger, highly educated individuals with lower stress levels are more likely to engage in enhancing behaviors like exercise and adequate sleep.

Learning Narrative: *Understanding these influences reveals why bad habits are so difficult to break, leading health psychologists to prioritize a specific strategic approach: stopping the habit before it starts.*

6. Strategic Intervention: The Power of Primary Prevention

Primary Prevention is the frontline of health psychology, utilizing two core strategies to protect public health:

1. **Changing Existing Habits:** This involves structured interventions to help individuals unlearn poor habits, such as weight loss programs for obesity or diabetes management protocols.
2. **Preventing the Development of Habits:** This involves stopping a negative behavior before it becomes a subconscious habit.

Pro-Tip: Prevention vs. Cure

Psychological research concludes that **Strategy 2 (Prevention)** is vastly superior to Strategy 1. It is far more effective to prevent an adolescent from starting to smoke through education and peer-resistance training than it is to treat a long-term smoking addiction later in life.

By identifying these influencing factors and behaviors in your own life today, you can strategically architect a lifestyle that ensures long-term vitality and a higher quality of life.

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Health Behaviour

Meaning and Nature

- Maintenance and improvement of health
- Types: Poor and Good
- Health Habit: Automatic and unconscious
- Positive Reinforcement origin

Seven Good Health Habits (Belloc & Breslow)

- 7 to 8 hours sleep
- No smoking
- Daily breakfast
- Limited alcohol consumption
- Regular exercise
- No snacking between meals
- Maintaining healthy weight

General Types

Health Enhancing Behaviour

- Exercise
- Weight control
- Regular check-ups

Health Compromising Behaviour

- Smoking
- Drinking alcohol

Emotional Factors

- Stress-related conditions
- Self-esteem levels
- Psychological factors

Perceived Symptoms

- Pain or cough

Health Care System

- Socio-economic factors

