

Dog Drool and You

By Suze Hargraves

Ivan Petrovich Pavlov worked with dog drool. Mind you, he did a lot of other things that made him the great physiologist, psychologist, and physician that he was, but most of us ordinary folks know him primarily for his work with dog drool and something called “conditioned reflexes”. Conditioned reflexes are responses that occur based upon specific previous experiences. Our friend Pavlov noted that his dogs began drooling at the sight of the person who usually fed them and not just when stimulated by actual food. Simply put, our minds develop habitual responses to certain stimuli. That’s really putting it in a nutshell, but for our purposes that summary will do quite nicely.

Negative conditioned responses can take over our lives and be a source of anxiety, health problems and other very tangible negative effects on the mind and body. One example is called “white coat syndrome”. David Calhoun, MD, associate professor of medicine, Vascular Biology and Hypertension Program, University of Alabama at Birmingham explains: “White-coat syndrome refers to the situation in which the blood pressure measured in a physician's office is consistently higher than when the patient measures it at home or at work. The cause of the syndrome is unclear but may be a conditioning phenomenon -- the anxiety of early visits to the physician's office is "learned" and subconsciously repeated during subsequent visits. Studies suggest that for patients with white coat hypertension, the heart disease risk is between that of patients with true hypertension and patients with normal blood pressure. That is, cardiovascular risk is increased, but is not as high as someone with sustained hypertension.”

Another example of a destructive conditioned response would be a fear that inhibits quality of life. For example, a person may not know why their body responds with sweating, heart palpitations and general anxiety when they’re faced with public speaking, but it happens to them every time the situation arises. Such a fear would compromise a person in both work and social situations. Coming to terms with how the fear is affecting their lives and overcoming it can be a difficult journey but the first step is always the same: acknowledgement.

When we make a conscious acknowledgement of an unhealthy fear we begin to take its power away. If we have learned a particular response to a situation, we can also unlearn it. Mind you this is not always a simple, quick or even pleasant journey. Discovering the root of the problem can take time and very often requires the intervention of a qualified professional. Once we uproot the source of the fear we can move forward free of the restrictions and burdens that an unhealthy response puts upon our lives.

Pavlov’s pups and their drool opened a world of possibility to humans. They taught us that we control our lives through our ability to learn and unlearn our responses to what happens to us and around us. That control allows us the freedom to choose how we want to live and respond to our world.

I don’t know about you but if I had a tail it would be wagging.

Suze Hargraves is a staff member and writer for White Mountain Community Health Center, a non-profit health care provider. serving the Mount Washington Valley. Call (603) 447-8900, Ext. 1, for an appointment or information.