Aggression Essay, Research Paper

Verbal aggression is message behavior which attacks a person’s self-concept

in

order to deliver psychological pain.(Infante, 1995) Studies of verbal

aggression

have focused primarily on children and adolescents in educational and social

settings. Very few studies were found to examine verbal aggression in adults

in the

workplace.(Ebbesen, Duncan, Konecni, 1974) The consequences of verbal

aggression in the workplace can lead to social isolation, job related stress,

health

related problems, as well as problems in career advancement. It therefore

should

be considered important, for the individual and management, to identify and

address the causes of verbal aggression.

This program attempts to understand verbal aggression by 1) identifying the

various functions of verbal aggression. 2) identifying the antecedent

conditions of

verbal aggression. 3) Avoiding the antecedent conditions of verbal

aggression.

Method

Subject

The subject, Shirley J., is a 49 year old African American female. Shirley

J. has

several advanced degrees and is employed as a school psychologist in a

metropolitan school district. She is married with two adult children. The

subject

readily agreed that the target behavior, verbal aggression, is a problem as

it

interferes with her relationships with others. She was enthusiastic in her

desire to

reduce, if not eliminate, this behavior. It would seem that self-monitoring

for

verbal aggression and antecedent control would be valuable as it would allow

for

consistent avoidance of verbal aggression. As a school psychologist the

subject was

very familiar with the basic principles of applied behavioral analysis and

frequently

offered programmatic suggestions. A behavioral contract was developed

jointly

between the therapist and subject. The contract outlined the target

behavior,

success criteria, and individual responsibilities of the therapist and

subject. (see

Appendix A)

Apparatus

A basic checklist was used to document the frequency of verbal aggression on

a

daily basis. The checklist was designed to track only the occurrence of the

behavior. It was felt by the therapist that the content of the verbally

aggressive

message would be too open for subjective interpretation and that no

meaningful

data would be gained from such documentation. In addition the subject made

frequent comments of significant success or failure in avoiding verbal

aggression

for discussion with the therapist. The weekly discussions were used to

evaluate the

appropriateness of the procedures used and make any necessary adjustments to

the

program.

Procedure

For the first two weeks of the program no intervention was applied. Given

that

the subject self-reported that verbal aggression was a problem it was

important to

determine if the frequency of the behavior merited intervention. Therefore,

the

subject documented the daily frequency of verbal aggression. The results of

the

baseline period revealed a high rate of verbal aggression. (see Appendix B)

Given

the results of the baseline data as well as the demanding, often stressful,

nature of

the subjects job, it was mutually agreed that reducing verbal aggression

would be

the focus of the program.

Verbal aggression was defined as cursing, yelling, and screaming at others.

The

agreed upon goals of the program was to decrease verbal aggression by 75% of

baseline for four consecutive weeks. Treatment would consist of identifying

and

avoiding the antecedent conditions to verbal aggression. Avoidance of the

antecedents is considered less restrictive, more proactive, and most

effective.

During the initial consultation it was determined that the antecedent

conditions

included, but was not limited to: work stress, time of day, verbal behavior

of others

(ie. tone of voice, inflection of voice and content of conversation, etc.),

and non-

verbal behavior of others (ie. facial expression, body posture, eye contact,

etc.). In

addition, the subject was required to self monitor for the following

antecedents:

clenched fists, tight jaw, rapid heart beat, and the emotions of anger,

frustration and

disappointment. Lastly, it was suggested by Infante (1995) that appropriate

strategy

must be taken to prevent verbal aggression from escalating.

Successful avoidance of the antecedent conditions consisted of removing

oneself

from stressful situations, when possible, as well as not responding verbally

when

provoked. Weekly consultation revealed that verbal aggression was most often

used to: 1) Escape demand situations. 2) Avoid demand situations. 3)

Relieve job

stress. The subject was to document the frequency of verbal aggression and

record

the circumstances of significant success or failure during the work week for

discussion at weekly consultation sessions.

A schedule of reinforcement was developed for the subject. The

reinforcement

was to be given for successful avoidance of verbal aggression. Reinforcement

included: five minutes alone for ‘quiet time’, when possible, or a short,

silent prayer.

Considering the stress and escalating nature of verbal aggression time alone

was

considered appropriate for ‘cool down’. If time alone was not possible or

convenient the subject would say a short prayer when provoked.

Results

The results of the baseline phase revealed what was considered an

extraordinarily

high rate of verbal aggression. However, after the first week of data

collection it

was realized that verbal aggression was not operationally defined. The

subject

considered verbal aggression on much broader terms than did the therapist

which

included subjective, rather than objective, behavior observations. Weekly

consultation sessions revealed that cursing was the most common manifestation

of

the target behavior. When correctly defined using objective terms a decrease

in

verbal aggression was noted. Based on the results of baseline data it was

mutually

agreed that 4 to 8 episodes of aggression per day was significantly high and

merited

intervention.

The results of the intervention phase of treatment revealed a sharp increase

of

verbal aggression over the first three weeks. This increase is thought to be

due to

extinction. Afterwards, a gradual decrease of verbal aggression was noted

during

weeks 4 through 9. No data was collected during week 10 due to subject

illness.

The treatment phase ended with a weekly average of one episode of verbal

aggression. After week five the subject stated that she no longer delivered

the

reinforcement after the behavior. She reported that the ability to control

her

emotions was in itself reinforcing and would maintain the behavior.

Discussion

The results of this program show that verbal aggression can be successfully

decreased by identifying and avoiding its antecedent conditions. As stated

previously, the subject used verbal aggression for escape from demanding or

difficult situations, relief from stress, and avoidance of demanding or

difficult

situations. The behavior appears to be maintained through positive

reinforcement.

Because the subject is in a position of some power and influence there were

relatively few consequences for the behavior. Ebbesen, Duncan and Konecni

(1974) suggested that verbal aggression could be reinforced and maintained in

such

a manner. Since the most common form of verbal aggression was cursing, the

method of identifying and avoiding the antecedents proved very successful.

Infante

(1995) used a similar method with young students. When replicating this

program

it may be appropriate to focus on the positive behavior rather than the

negative.

Instead of documenting the frequency of verbal aggression it may have been

better

to document the frequency of successful avoidance of verbal aggression. In

this

way we would help to internalize the strategy to maintain the behavior, as

well as

having a more positive and constructive program. A question raised by Golin

and

Romanowski (1977) was is there a sex difference in the rate and target of

verbal

aggression. Although this question was not investigated in the current

program, it

does raise an intriguing question for future study.

References

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