

You are NOT a Pavlovian Drooling Dog!

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2009, published in the *Houston Home Journal* on April 18, 2009

First year college students majoring in psychology associate Ivan Pavlov with the phenomenon of “conditioned reflex.” Few people, however, realize that Pavlov received a Nobel Prize in 1904 for his earlier work in physiology.

In the late 1800’s, Pavlov did his pioneering studies on the stomach. Our understanding of how digestion is regulated was very limited. Pavlov developed a new way of monitoring how food is digested. He surgically implanted a tube (a “fistula”) into the stomach of animals to allow continuous sampling.

This allowed Pavlov and his aides to monitor what was happening, taking samples of body fluids while the animals functioned normally. Studying the natural reflexes of the stomach in accomplishing digestion led Pavlov to later study the effects of environmental factors on behavior.

Knowing that the secretion of saliva makes swallowing food easier, and knowing that saliva contains enzymes that begin the digestion of food, Pavlov applied his fistula sampling technique to salivary glands. Early in his experiments, he noticed the tendency of his experimental dogs to salivate when people in white lab coats approached their cages.

Realizing that his lab assistants fed the dogs, Pavlov hypothesized that the dogs had associated food with the white lab coats. He constructed the well-known experiment that many people now associate with Pavlov. He instructed the lab assistants to ring a bell each time the dogs were fed.

Pavlov determined that a natural reflex (salivation) could be triggered by a change in the organism’s external environment (the repetitive ringing of a bell). His studies determined that the cerebral cortex of the brain is the organizer of the interaction of the organism with its surrounding environment. Pavlov postulated that it is in this portion of the brain where “conditioned reflex” develops.

The development of radio and later television led to applications of the “conditioned response” concept to humans. Marketing experts realized that they could capitalize on Pavlov’s findings, creating advertising that would encourage us to purchase items that we might never have sought to own.

For example, the catchy jingle, “Winston tastes good, like a _____” can be completed by many people, even though the advertising slogan has been off the air for over thirty years! Every youngster who has ever tried that first cigarette can attest that the initial taste of cigarette smoke is not very enjoyable. Yet advertising for the past sixty years has caused millions of individuals to become addicted to the nicotine contained in cigarettes.

Maybe you are not a smoker. Think about the associations you’ve made with other products you routinely use in your home. Do you make the decision to purchase those products uniquely each time you go to the store? Or have you established habits that control your choices even without your intentional consideration?

We all have unconscious “associations” that influence our behaviors. Some are constructive. They have no negative side effects, and they actually help you make it through every day. For example, when you finish breakfast, do you have an urge to brush your teeth? Does an occasional glance at that family photo on your desk remind you why you devote so much time and energy to your work?

Ah, but not all your associations are beneficial. Some lead to detrimental outcomes. For example, aren’t there certain circumstances that seem to trigger your anger to flare up? When a valued colleague reminds you that you’ve failed to follow-up on a promise you made, don’t you feel just a twinge of guilt?

Fortunately, you are not a Pavlovian drooling dog! As a human, you have the freedom to choose your response to every situation you face. Next week, we’ll look at how you can take control of even your automatic choices, making sure that your behaviors are leading to outcomes that are beneficial for you and for those you influence!

Every leader has both strengths and limitations. Dennis helps leaders capitalize on their strengths and minimize the effects of their limitations. Contact Dennis at dhooper2@juno.com, or call 478-988-0237.