

Escape & Avoidance Learning

It is best to try this exercise after you have mastered the exercises on Negative Reinforcement. Go back to [Operant Conditioning](#) Page to complete these exercises.

ESCAPE LEARNING involves the person or animal acquiring a response that allows it to terminate an undesirable stimulus.

Imagine that you are placed in a large box like room. There is a chair and a series of colored buttons (a red button, a green button, and a yellow button) on a console in front of the chair. You sit in the chair and wait. A loud noise fills the room and the yellow button on the console is flashing. You have no idea what all this means, but in desperation you press the yellow button to see what happens. The loud noise abruptly stops. A few minutes later another loud noise fills the room and the green button is flashing wildly. You press it and the noise stops. There is a good chance that in the future your button pressing behavior will occur more quickly to terminate the sound.

Your button pressing behavior has been **NEGATIVELY REINFORCED**. This behavior is strengthened because it removes an unpleasant stimulus. You have also learned how to **ESCAPE** from the loud noise by pressing the flashing button.

AVOIDANCE LEARNING involves acquiring a response that prevents the aversive stimulus from occurring.

During your strange episode in the room, you start to wonder if there is any way you can prevent the sound from starting in the first place. After awhile you begin to notice a few things that could help you to avoid this unpleasantness all together. For instance, the red button flashes a few seconds before the noise is introduced. Moreover, you notice that it flashes once when the yellow button will be used to turn off the sound, and it flashes twice when the green button will be used. You decide to test an idea. The red button flashes twice, so you push the green button before the sound comes on, and discover the sound is not produced. A few minutes later the red light flashes once and now you press the yellow button. No sound. You have now learned how to **AVOID** the unpleasant stimulus.

Both escape and avoidance learning lead to the same end result: You don't have to deal with the unpleasant stimulus anymore. However, in escape learning the stimulus is already present and you have found a way to stop it by doing a certain behavior. While in the case of avoidance learning, you have learned to behave in a way that prevents the unpleasant stimulus from even occurring.

Let's try a few examples to see if you can distinguish escape learning from avoidance learning.

Tammy comes home from work to a hot apartment. She turns on the air conditioner to cool down her apartment. Is Tammy showing escape or avoidance learning?

Liam has had a very bad day. He overslept and missed the bus that he needed to get to work on time. His boss yelled at him for being late, and was sharp with him the rest of the day. The next day Liam gets up earlier in the morning. Is Liam showing escape or avoidance learning?

While foraging for food a rabbit is spotted and chased by a falcon. The rabbit quickly rushes into a nearby hole. Is the rabbit showing escape or avoidance learning?

Wanda loves her new apartment, but the old woman who lives next door is always pestering her whenever she sees Wanda. Wanda realizes that the neighbor is probably lonely, but Wanda doesn't have the time to always chat with her. Lately, Wanda has been leaving earlier in the morning when she knows that her neighbor will still be asleep. Is Wanda showing escape or avoidance learning?

Peter hates public speaking. He selects his courses on the basis of whether the instructor requires students to give a speech, and signs up for those whose teachers do not make this a requirement of the course. Is Peter showing escape or avoidance learning?

ANSWERS

Tammy is showing **escape learning**. She has learned how to escape the heat by turning on the air conditioner. If she had remembered to leave the air conditioner on before she left in the morning she would have been demonstrating avoidance learning. By turning on the air conditioner ahead of time, she would have avoided having to deal with a hot apartment in the first place.

Liam is showing **avoidance learning**. He has found a way to avoid any further unpleasantness with his boss.

The rabbit is showing **escape learning**. The only way the rabbit could avoid the falcon would be to come out at night for food (although it would then have to dodge the owls).

Wanda is showing **avoidance learning**. Contrast this with being cornered by the neighbor and saying "Is that the phone I hear?" and excusing herself from the situation. This would be escape learning. Wanda has found a way to completely avoid the problem.

Peter is showing **avoidance learning**. He is selecting his courses ahead of time on the basis of them not requiring a speech.