Using a Behavior Chain to Change the Outcome of Emotionally-Intense Episodes

Objective

To de-escalate and change the outcome of an emotionally-intense episode by using a behavior chain.

You Should Know

You might have a hard time recognizing important events or situations that trigger or escalate intense emotional episodes. Using a Behavior Chain can be a helpful way to link various choices and behaviors to specific events.

When you identify triggering events that contribute to episodes that escalate to destructive or self-harming behaviors, you can trace thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (the "links" in the chain) from that point. Emotionally-intense episodes are actually a sequence of events, and steps can be taken at different places in the "chain" to think or act differently to change the consequences or outcome. Research indicates that if you take the time to analyze the series of events surrounding harmful behavior, you are more likely to make different choices to support your well-being and avoid self-destructive choices. The sooner you notice patterns, the quicker you can identify alternative strategies to deal with episodes more effectively to avoid hurting yourself or loved ones.

What to Do

Pick a specific incident that led to destructive or self-harming behavior, and ask the following questions. Always start with an event – even if it does not seem that the event "caused" the behavior. Questions you can ask yourself:

- What specific event started the chain reaction?
- When did the sequence of events that led to the behavior begin?
- When did the problem start?
- What was going on just before the problem started?
- What was I doing, thinking, feeling, or imagining?
- Why did the problem behavior happen on that day instead of the day before?

Problematic Event: _____

When did the problem begin? _____

Who were you with?

_____

_____

What were you feeling and thinking? Be specific.

_____

_____

_____

_____

What did you do next? _____

_____

What happened as a result of your actions?

_____

_____

_____

What were you thinking and feeling immediately after?

_____

_____

_____

What factors or events made you more vulnerable to the chain of events? Areas you might consider are (*check off any that apply*):
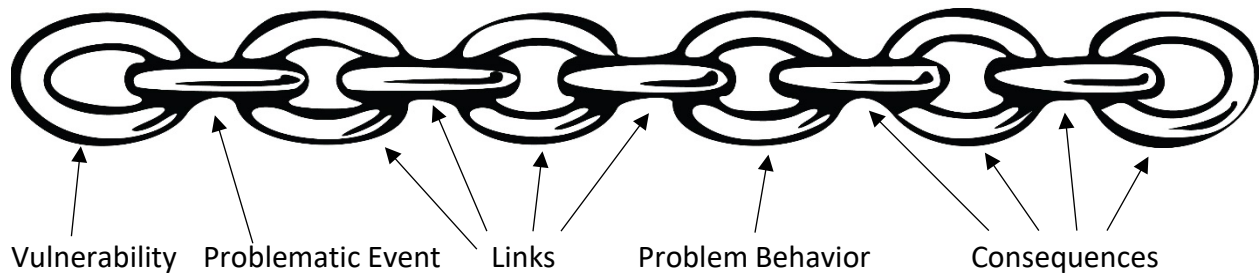
_____ Physical illness or injury. Describe: _____

_____ Unbalanced diet or lack of sleep. Describe: _____

_____Use of drugs or alcohol or misuse of prescription drugs. Describe: _____

_____ Stressful life events. Describe: _____

_____ Intense emotions (e.g., sadness, anger, or loneliness). Describe: _____

_____ Other? Describe: _____

Vulnerability   Problematic Event   Links   Problem Behavior   Consequences

Here are some ideas for making different choices to "stop" the chain of events:

1. **Identify when problems are brewing.** The sooner you recognize problems coming, the quicker you can take alternative actions to break the chain of events.

2. **Use your skills.** It can be helpful to write down frequently-used skills that help you. You might call a supportive family member or friend, distract yourself, exercise, and so forth. Write down a few ideas:

_____

_____

_____

3. **Remove yourself from the situation**. If you can remove yourself from the situation, you are more likely to avoid or minimize the damage. Leave, surround yourself with support, or go to a place where you are less likely to do something destructive.

4. **Make a different choice.** Even if it sounds simple, just do something differently – anything at all! This makes it more likely you will break the pattern and avoid negative consequences.

At each link of the chain, what could you have done <u>differently</u> to "stop" the chain of events? For example, are there alternative thoughts, actions, or choices you could have made? Referring to the image above, write down your ideas.

Link 1 – Vulnerability (*e.g., lack of sleep and drinking too much alcohol*):

_____

_____

_____

Link 2 – Problematic Event:

_____

_____

_____

Links 3-6 – Thoughts, feelings, other people that were involved, etc.:

_____

_____

_____

Link 7 – Problem Behavior (*harmful or self-destructive choices or reactions*):

_____

_____

_____

Links 8-11 – Consequences of Problem Behavior:

_____

_____

_____

Reflections on This Exercise

After completing this exercise, were you better able to de-escalate and modify the outcomes of an emotionally intense episode? Why or why not?

_____

_____

_____

How helpful was this exercise? ____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

_____

_____

_____