

## Classical and Operant Conditioning in Relationships

### Part A.

Read the following information about classical conditioning to help you answer questions about its application to love and marriage.

#### Classical Conditioning

Classical conditioning occurs when an existing response to a particular stimulus becomes attached to a new stimulus due to the repeated pairing of the old stimulus with the new one.

#### Examples

1. A dog generally salivates (*response*) when seeing its food (*stimulus*). After many times of hearing a bell ring (*new stimulus*) as its food is presented, a dog begins to salivate at hearing the bell even when the food is not presented at all. The dog has been classically conditioned to salivate when hearing a bell.
2. A toddler generally shows fear (*response*) when startled by a loud noise (*stimulus*). After many times of seeing a spider and hearing his mother scream, a toddler begins to show fear when seeing a spider, even when the mother doesn't scream. The toddler has been classically conditioned to fear spiders.

### Part B.

Read the following information about operant conditioning to help you answer questions about its application to love and marriage.

#### Operant Conditioning

Operant conditioning occurs when the consequences of a behavior affect the likelihood of its recurrence. If a positive consequence follows a behavior, it is more likely to be exhibited again. If a negative consequence follows a behavior, it is less likely to occur again.

#### Examples

1. A student who is late for class is given a detention. The student is less likely to be tardy again than if the detention had not been given.
2. A shy student who rarely contributes to class discussions is praised by the teacher for an excellent answer to a question. The student is more likely to contribute to the next discussion than if the praise had not been given.

**Part C.**

Read the following scenarios about love and marriage. In each case, decide whether classical or operant conditioning is the best choice for explaining what occurred, and why. The principle you choose may not entirely explain the events, but choose the one which most closely applies. Be prepared to discuss your answers.

1. Tom absolutely loves going to the beach every summer. He loves the sun, the cool breezes, the ocean water, and the smell of salt in the air. One summer, he kept seeing a girl named Sally every time he went for a swim. They began to talk, walk along the beach together, and play beach volleyball. By the end of summer, Tom found that he was deeply in love with Sally even though, at first glance, she did not seem to be the kind of girl who typically interested him.
2. At the end of summer, Sally was not quite sure how she felt about Tom. She had enjoyed the time she spent with him and knew she wanted to keep in touch. Every time she wrote a letter to him, Tom sent her flowers. Every time he sent her flowers, she called him on the telephone. Every time she called him, Tom ended up asking for a date and taking her to her favorite restaurants. One thing seemed to lead to another, and pretty soon Sally was sure that she loved Tom.
3. Tom and Sally enjoyed discovering things they enjoyed doing together, such as hiking, seeing movies, skiing, and visiting craft shows. They had so many happy times as they spent time together doing something they each naturally enjoyed. They grew more and more in love.
4. Finally, they decided to get married. However, they didn't realize that the first year of married life is often the most difficult. They had many expenses, including rent on their apartment, car payments, insurance, and grocery bills. Each one got a job, and they found they rarely saw each other. When they drove home at the end of each day, they were tired from working many hours. There were chores to do around their home. They didn't have money for the fun things they used to do. Now, whenever they saw each other, they usually discussed or did things that caused tension and stress, such as paying bills and discussing finances. After months of this, they learned to feel a little uncomfortable around each other.
5. Then Sally and Tom began to notice that they preferred being at work where there were interesting projects to do. Each began to find that they enjoyed being at work, where they were having fun, and didn't enjoy being at home, where there seemed to be only chores and bills. After months of this, Tom started coming home late and began quietly thinking about leaving Sally for a coworker he had come to know well as they worked many hours on a challenging project together.
6. Tom decided he wanted to save his marriage and made some effort to get closer to Sally again. He began helping with some of Sally's more tiresome chores even though they had agreed long ago about which person was going to do certain chores. Sally found herself constantly irritated with Tom and responded to his help by saying in a nasty tone of voice, "Well, it's about time you helped out more around here!" Tom decided he wanted to spend even less time at home and avoided helping her any more.
7. Eventually, the situation deteriorated to the point that Tom decided to leave Sally. When she realized their marriage was about to fall apart, she convinced Tom to go to marriage counseling with her. They learned a lot from the counselor. One of the most helpful pieces of advice was to begin doing some enjoyable things together again. They were to begin with the inexpensive ones, such as hiking, if money was still causing too much tension. They had to promise to save all arguments until a set time so that the hiking experience was an enjoyable one. Gradually, they began to pull their marriage back together.