Behavioral experiments in seven steps

An Everyday Insight tool
behavioralexperiment.com

A behavioral experiment is a planned activity, carried out in real life, that tests a belief. You say what you expect, you do the thing, and you compare the prediction with what you observed. It is one of the core tools of cognitive behavioral therapy.

1 Name the belief

Write the worry as a prediction. If I do this, then that will happen. Rate how much you believe it, 0 to 100. Pick one that matters and that you are willing to test.

2 Choose the situation

The best test you are willing to try now, not the scariest. Real situations beat imagined ones, and many take minutes. Give it a date and time.

3 Make the prediction observable

“I will be boring” cannot be checked. “People will look at their phones and leave within a few minutes” can. Write down how you would know it had come true, then rate how likely it feels.

4 Decide what to leave out

Safety behaviors are the precautions that feel helpful and quietly stop you from finding out, like rehearsing, gripping the cup, sitting by the door, checking, or asking someone to come along. Name them and choose which to drop. Decide where your attention will go. Outward, on what people actually do.

5 Do it, and watch

Drop the safety behaviors. Stay until the prediction has really been tested, rather than leaving when the urge to escape peaks. Feelings rise and fall on their own.

6 Record the facts and re-rate

What a camera would have seen. Did the prediction come true, in full, in part, or not at all? Rate the prediction and the belief again. A drop of ten or twenty points is progress.

7 Draw the lesson and build on it

What does the result say about the belief in general, about how people react, about how well you can cope? Keep one sentence to reread. Then listen for the “yes, but” and make it the next experiment. Repeat, scale up, vary.

If the feared thing happens

The experiment has not failed. You now test the second half of the fear. Was it as bad as you expected, how did people actually respond, and how long did it matter? The real cost is usually far smaller than the imagined one.

Things to know

A single experiment rarely settles a belief held for years. A series of them, with the learning written down, does. Rate the prediction, not your anxiety, unless the belief is about anxiety itself. Experiments involving trauma, a real medical risk, or thoughts of self-harm are for work with a professional, not for doing alone. If you have a therapist, plan experiments with them and follow their advice.

More, including a worksheet you can fill in online and the research behind the method, at behavioralexperiment.com.

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