



Pooh's Behavioral Experiment

Practicing "Assertive Defense of the Self"

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The session that led to Pooh's behavioral experiment can be viewed in its entirety on our CBT Training video, "CBT for Social Anxiety."

Pooh had agreed to conduct a behavioral experiment in which she would practice "**Assertive Defense of the Self.**" A few weeks after the interview session, Pooh and Dr. Padesky exchanged several emails in which she reported on her behavioral experiment. We have combined the emails into the following dialogue / exchange.

POOH: *I did the experiment at the Mall of America last Sunday, December 18, while the crowd was crazy shopping for Christmas. At first I was disappointed because very few people looked at me. You were right, not many people are lucky enough to have somebody come up to criticize them. That reminded me that most people probably don't really care or look at other people like I thought they did. I had just felt that people were watching me and I must do my best at anything I do.*

What impressed me most was that I went to the Banana Republic Store at the Mall of America. As soon as I went in, the sale representative uttered, "Ohhew." I got quite a kick of that reaction, thinking that my experiment was successful.

I have enclosed a photo of what I wore that day with this e-mail so you can find out for yourself why I got such a reaction. I practiced the mental response, "I'm comfortable with what I'm wearing," but I found it difficult to say that to the sales rep because I would never

in my life wear these clothes anywhere. So, I used, "I might not look great, but I'm okay" instead. Do you have further suggestions?

PADESKY: What a smile you brought to my face. Congratulations on your experiment. It sounds like you learned at least two things:

- (1) Not everyone is looking at you, even when you are far from perfect
- (2) When people do look and criticize, you are able to face criticism and respond to it in a self-assertive way

I thought your response to the man in Banana Republic was a good one and wondered how you felt saying it. Sometimes, in a first experiment, we do not feel as confident as in later experiments so I hope you continue to practice facing criticism.

But I wonder what your emotional experience was this first time?

POOH'S RESPONSE: *You asked what my emotional experience was for the first experiment. Well, to be honest, my focus shifted. I am usually afraid of what people think of me, but in this experiment I was looking for reactions from others instead of taking a passive role wondering what they are thinking -- e.g., "They must think I don't know how to put on the right make-up." I understand that by wearing the outfit I wore for the experiment, it increases the odds of people criticizing me.*

PADESKY: I encourage you after this initial success to think of some more experiments [that will] to give yourself practice facing criticism with good humor. Some of these experiments may be "naturally occurring." Over time, you can develop a range of responses.

Here are a few examples of ways people sometimes respond to criticism:

- Assertive Defense ("I might not look great, but I'm okay....")
- Acceptance (of legitimate feedback) Without Shame or putting yourself down ("Thank you for this feedback. I will think about it and try to learn from it")
- Standing Up For Your Beliefs ("We seem to have different opinions about this. I think X is right because...").

In addition to your experiments facing criticism, you may want to:

- Observe how other people respond to criticism (in real life, in movies and on TV, etc)
- Notice which responses you think are helpful or unhelpful
- Evaluate your own responses to criticism in terms of how you feel inside
- Sometimes, it may be helpful to feel sadness or regret (e.g., when you have actually hurt someone else it can be humane to feel regret
- At other times it is more helpful to simply feel acceptance of a mistake made

POOH'S Response: *I wonder if it would be more helpful to experiment on something that would be more similar to my daily situation. I'm not sure how to explain it. Wearing such an outfit is far from what I usually wear. I do not feel comfortable at all wearing that outfit. I couldn't respond, "I'm comfortable with what I'm wearing." I felt more confident to say that to you when we were on stage because it was true that I was comfortable. What good does it do to put myself in a situation that I do not experience on a daily basis (i.e., wearing an odd outfit)? Wouldn't it more helpful to live my life normally, but mentally respond assertively every time I feel the wave of fear of criticism? However, I have to admit that this experiment did teach me that most people didn't look at me like I thought they did. That is a relief. :-)*

PADESKY: You can learn some important things from doing an extreme experiment like you did. But I agree it may be more helpful now to think of more "normal" experiments to do. Responding mentally when you notice a fear of criticism is a great idea. Also, you can be alert to real situations where people are critical of you and think of how to respond, trying this out in reality when it makes sense to do so.

Thank you again for volunteering for the clinical demonstration, Pooh. Many people came up to me the next day at the conference and said how much they learned about cognitive therapy and helping people with social criticism fears. I think we made a DVD that will be very helpful to therapists and students of therapy. In turn, this will help many clients overcome fear of criticism. Thank you for your generosity in making this possible.

POOH: *I truly appreciate you taking time to reply to me with so many helpful suggestions. I'll find a way to do more experiments that will help me with the fear of criticism. I don't mind if you would like to post my e-mail on your website or for other training purposes. When I watch training videos I always wonder what happened to the person next. I believe it is useful for other psychology students and professionals to learn more about the participant after a demonstration.*

*Best wishes to you and Happy New Year.
-- Pooh*

PADESKY: I agree that it is helpful for therapists to know what happened after a demonstration so that is why I asked your permission to post a portion of your email and put the photo on the DVD (see end credits). Thank you for this permission. I think it will be very helpful to therapists learning cognitive therapy.

I wish you every continued success in learning to face and accept criticism in whatever ways are helpful to you.

Best wishes to you for a Happy New Year!
-- Christine Padesky
