

The Potential Use and Misuse of Natural Consequences

What makes us really sit up and take notice?

By John Armstrong

The potency of consequences has always been known and appreciated as an essential part of learning. Ideally, from the earliest age our parents exposed us to consequences for our actions; if we refused to eat we went hungry, if we touched a hot stove we felt its fiery sting, if we came home late and dinner is over... We also hoped that our parents shielded us from some consequences that cannot be repeated, like playing in traffic. What may be less clear is to why people with and without intellectual disabilities fail to take notice of natural consequences for so many of life's decisions and actions – sometimes with devastating consequences!

For example, it is only in the relatively recent period where discoveries in neuropsychology have revealed that certain critical structures such as the forebrain are not fully developed until 21 and 22 years of age (Goleman). The forebrain's interaction with the Amygdala – a major controlling structure for emotion and motivation, is therefore erratic and prone to rapid changes in capacity and direction. Others (McGraw) state how even teenagers find it very difficult to *predict the consequences of their own decisions*. Why is it that teenagers cannot predict the results of reckless driving, binge drinking, drug use and unrestrained sexual behaviour, staying up all night, failing exams, not showing up at work on time and even being wrongly dressed for certain types of weather?

For these types of problems various authorities cry at once; “more information must be given”, “If only people knew!” “Ignorance is the problem”, and that with “proper information, people can be informed” and become “responsible”.

What is so interesting in all of this is that quite often the people can *tell* you what can happen, but simultaneously deny that it will happen to them -- “It will be OK – don't worry!” Knowledge is often not the issue – but believing the knowledge seems to be.

Take for example smokers. Can anyone say that they have never heard or learnt what smoking can do to you? But what smoker believes that it will happen to them? Of course smoking – and other forms of substance dependency introduces an additional factor – the nature of chemical addiction. Not only is brain chemistry (sometimes permanently) altered, but also the capacity to bring the addiction under conscious control without some form of external (and controlling) support.

The Amygdala has been shown to mimic the feelings of addiction yet through the activities of everyday life. It forms part of the brain's limbic system – the system that conveys such feelings (or affect) as euphoria and pleasure. This system swings into operation even by the anticipation of a sought after event. Advertising has utilised these known factors in shaping our anticipation, engaging the limbic system and linking it to a product. It is referred to as “affect transfer” -- and is extremely powerful. The creation of the McDonald's “Happy Meals” was one such invention that had multi-million dollar consequences – for the company! The problem with the limbic system is that it can

create the euphoria *without* receiving the desire anticipated. It is so powerful that in some rat studies rats will push a lever that gives pleasure and not receive the food promised even to the point where *they starve to death!*

But what about the predictions related to non-addictive behaviour? Do people not know that eating a lot of fatty food makes you fat, that not exercising leaves you unfit, that speeding is dangerous, that staying up late will leave one very tired the next day, that eating 'Tim-Tams' for breakfast will starve the body of needed nutrients? And yet we still continue to do a myriad of these and other maladaptive things.

Consequences can be denied. What the forebrain knows, the midbrain can dispute. The power of the will easily prevails over fact. It's Russian Roulette in everyday life.

Sure, there are calculated risks, but even there the calculations are easily distorted to satisfy the urge. Been shopping lately?

What about for people with an intellectual disability – is it the same? To some extent yes. The will is ever present and imposes itself on "its owner". What is less clear is how well thinking informs drive, and how well the connections between various events are understood. For example do people make the related connections between an event and its consequence, (cause and effect) and especially so if the event is some distance in time and space from its consequence. For example, do people understand that obtaining cable TV (and its extras) will bring expensive monthly bills – later! Yet many support people still believe that just permitting people to experience the consequences will teach and modify the behaviour of people. Yet if that were true, we could just leave people in the community, let them experience all of the likely natural consequences of life; rejection, abuse, condemnation, being evicted, arrested and possibly jailed. "That will teach them!" or will it?

Such is the perversion associated with "normalisation" that people who require extensive advice and guidance to the consequences of their decisions are left to receive the full brunt of a disapproving society. "Why do all the bad things in life happen to me?" Perhaps because no one would take the time to warn you, or even to protect you from your own foolishness and incompetence.

Ah – but what about the 'dignity of risk', doesn't that require that we 'let' people experience the consequences? Yes, to the level that we can predict the person can cope with. The dignity of risk is very conditional. There is little dignity in repeated failure and punishment for things one can't connect.

What seems to tie us all up is connecting the immediate urge with its long-term consequences; the desire to have it now and still keep in mind the pain of the endless payments and the exorbitant interest compared with our weekly income and the inevitable hardship it will cause. For people with intellectual disability it may be that one cannot predict the consequence. For unimpaired people it is more we don't want to believe the consequences.

We are back to the marshmallow test. That's the test where children had to wait 20 minutes before they could get a second marshmallow – but only if they *hadn't* eaten the first one. Very significantly, this simple little test ended up being the greatest predictor of future success in adulthood (for children under the age of four). It captures the essential dilemma of being a human: can I bring my cravings, desires and lusts under some conscious and thoughtful control so as to exact a beneficial consequence for myself and others close to me? The 'craving' seeks satisfaction immediately; the well-developed forebrain knows that this is misleading. Real satisfaction comes from fulfilling deeper purposes that almost always involve sacrificing my cravings, comfort and wants. The "Good Life" has always involved extensive effort to become more than we are already (with the possible exception of Paris Hilton -- but who said she had a life anyway).

The wisdom of centuries has always known this, but our rapacious modernistic society refuses to bend to this truth and instead insists that desires must be immediately fulfilled; they will not go unanswered. It was once said that the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. But now we say the flesh will be indulged and only then will the spirit be satisfied.

Leading this vanguard of individualism are *many* human services to devalued people who present a "Good Life" that is indulgent of the senses, and strident in its claims *upon other people* to make every convenience available and bear every consequence *and* provide it as a matter of 'right'.

Where might this lead? I see two groups of devalued people emerging: one group that stridently claim rights to things that no one has had before; how they must be referred to, or 'freedom' and capacity to indulge in any (especially sexual) desire etc.-- a sure recipe for being alienating and becoming alienated. The other group will continue a miserable existence within massive agencies that have extraordinary scope across people's lives and a well developed rhetoric of 'rights' and 'freedoms' of the 'choices' "that everyone else has", when there is only endless boredom and emptiness, abandonment and despair. Here again is another sure recipe for alienation. But that's OK – it can be promoted as the natural consequences of their own 'choice'.

Learning the consequences of actions and decisions is an exciting and sometimes painful journey into the world of reality. As young children we were given a graduated experience guided by our parents who (for the most part) matched our experience to our capacity to predict and respond to the consequences of our actions. And to our protestations to more advanced levels of responsibility they sometimes said "no". Overall we become (hopefully) responsible adults, adaptive in our interactions and relationships, capable of extended periods of work and effort, able to forego creature comforts to bring about learning and experiences that nourished our human spirit. The more devalued members of our community have rarely had this kind in individual tutelage.

It is about time they did – and lets hope its not too late.