

2-MINUTE TIP: CRITICISM FAILS TO CHANGE BEHAVIOR CATCH THEM DOING THINGS RIGHT

Don't police mistakes. Do This.

- Criticism and correction tells someone what to stop; reinforcement teaches what to repeat. Humans are survival-wired—we spot what's wrong faster than what's right. So we criticize more than encourage. Ironically, it's practice with encouragement and reinforcement that leads to most survival skills. Kids, clients, coworkers, ourselves – we grow by noticing movement in the right direction and shining light there – skill-building.
- We're wired to detect threats. We're attuned to notice what's wrong, what could go wrong, or what violates our expectations. That makes us criticize, scold, or complain about what we want to see stopped or changed. But it does not request what we want, teach it, encourage it, or reinforce it. With a little effort, we can deliberately shift our attention to the behaviors we want to increase -- strategic behavior change.

What Works Instead - Core Skills in Action - [Read our companion piece “Criticism Fails” for more ideas.](#)

- We don't shape excellence by catching errors. We shape it by catching effort, growth, and courage—and naming it out loud. Catch small successes. Name the specific behavior. Instead of searching for errors, look for efforts, progress, and moments of showing strength. “You stayed with your anxiety, and made the call anyway—that's courage.” Depression: “You acted despite low motivation—you're rebuilding momentum.” “You pushed through low to finish something – that shows initiative and determination.” “You shared without being asked—kindness like that matters.” So, we don't ignore problems; we grow capacity faster by reinforcing what is working.
- [In Therapy](#) It seems more natural to set goals to reduce problem behaviors when it may be more effective to set goals for new behavior the person will do instead. When the person starts to be less depressed, what will they do instead? Set a goal for that. It means reinforce new behavior over only a symptom focus.

Therapists has a number of questions aimed at doing that. Here are a few.

** Think of a time this symptom (problem) was not present, even briefly, or was lessened. What were you doing then?

** When you ____ (whatever behavior countered anxious avoidance), what positive feelings did you notice?

** What new words can you say about yourself now that you _____?

** A year from now after some excellent therapy, when we look back over the great work you have done here, what will you notice has changed, how far you have come?

**When you are moving in a better direction, what's the first thing you will notice that will please you and encourage you?

** Notice (remember, focus on) that you were abstinent (improved) 90% of the time versus 10% before, is that not correct?

** On a 0-10 scale, where 10 is achieving _____, you rated your improvement as 7. What made it 7 instead of, say, 5? When it's an 8, what will you be doing more of or differently?

** In sum, look for what's right. Name it. Build it.**

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