

## What is time out?

Time out is an intervention based on the behavioural tradition. This argues that behaviour is controlled by the response that it receives and that the environment can also make particular behaviours more or less likely to occur. Time out is simply the process of removing access to reinforcement. For example, one government circular<sup>1</sup> describes it as “restricting the service user’s access to all positive reinforcements as part of the behavioural programme”. As such time-out is technically described as a Type 2 punishment<sup>2</sup>.

There are three types of time out shown below in ascending order of restrictiveness:

1. non-seclusionary time out, where the service user remains where they are, but is deprived of reinforcers such as attention or tangible materials
2. exclusionary time out, where the service user is removed from the setting where the target behaviour occurred, but not isolated
3. seclusionary time out, where the service user is restricted to an isolated area<sup>3</sup>

## Planning for positive behaviour

If it is to be used effectively, time-out must be just one strand within an overall intervention plan. One planning framework suggests that a comprehensive plan will include:

- An understanding of what service user is trying to achieve or communicate through his or her behaviour
- Adaptations to the environment so that it can better meet the service user’s needs
- Approaches that will be used to teach and encourage the service user to use new, more appropriate behaviours, and to cope with difficulties and tensions when his or her needs are not being immediately met
- Ways to reward the service user when he or she invests effort and engages positively with the plan
- Planned responses that will be used when the service user’s behaviour is challenging

This framework presents some challenges to the implementation of time-out. For example, if the service user is trying to communicate a message or a need through

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<sup>1</sup> DfES (2002) Guidance on the Use of Restrictive Physical Interventions for Staff Working with Children and Adults who Display Extreme Behaviour in Association with Learning Disability and/or Autistic Spectrum Disorders

<sup>2</sup> Type 2 punishment involves the contingent withdrawal of a stimulus or event, leading to a decrease or weakening of response rate, duration or intensity. In the case of time out, attention and social interaction is withdrawn. By contrast, Type 1 punishment is the contingent presentation of a stimulus or event that leads to a decrease or weakening of response rate, duration or intensity. For example, the natural consequence of pain on touching a hot surface would be a type 1 punishment, as would the logical consequence of being required to tidy up after an outburst had damaged a room.

<sup>3</sup> Note that the inappropriate use of seclusion may be unlawful. Further guidance on the use of seclusion is available at <http://www.bild.org.uk/05faqs.htm>

their behaviour, is it legitimate to respond to this message by withdrawing attention? Furthermore, has the environment been adapted so that it actually meets the service user's needs? Is it sufficiently reinforcing so that withdrawal from that environment actually has the desired effect?

The multi-element framework also suggests that withdrawal from reinforcement will not be sufficient to teach the service user what to do instead. Time-out needs to be coupled with a positive programme to increase the range of options available to the service user. In addition, the service user should be supported and debriefed following an incident to help them select alternative behavioural possibilities.

The principle of least-intrusiveness suggests that, even where time-out has been identified as an appropriate responsive strategy, staff should employ more subtle ways to interrupt behaviour, such as distraction and diversion. However, it is important to notice that strict use of time-out can often drift in use. In other words, staff may apply it in anger, or may apply it too soon. In one sense, this is hardly surprising, since the application of time-out may serve as a negative reinforcer for staff by removing the source of their own frustration or distress.

## Using time-out effectively

If time-out is to be used effectively, it must be applied in a neutral manner, rather than in the heat of the moment. This requires a high degree of pre-planning where the service has developed answers to at least the following questions<sup>4</sup>:

1. Is the usual environment sufficiently rewarding to the service user?
2. Is there a clear description of the target behaviours that will lead to time out?
3. Has a functional analysis been conducted to determine the meaning or purpose of the target behaviour?
4. Has a multi-element plan been developed, based on this functional analysis?
5. How is the service user being supported to display alternative more positive behaviours?
6. What type of time out will be used (non-seclusionary; exclusionary; seclusionary)?
7. Is the time out area safe and appropriately monitored?
8. How long will the time out period last?
9. How will the service user be warned that their behaviour will lead to time out?
10. What will the service user be expected to do during time out (e.g. simple sitting? Independent activity? Reflective writing?)
11. How will staff judge whether the service user is calm enough to rejoin the usual environment at the end of the time out period?
12. What will happen if the service user is not calm enough to rejoin the usual environment at the end of the time out period?
13. Who is responsible for telling the service user about the time out procedure?

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<sup>4</sup> For further specific guidance, see, for example, Table 1 "Time-out task analysis" in McGimsey, JF, Greene, BF & Lutzker, JR (1995) Competence in aspects of behavioural treatment and consultation: implications for service delivery and graduate training *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* **28** pp 301 – 315

14. Who is responsible for collating data on frequency, duration and context of the use of time out in order to determine its effectiveness?