Study sheds light on why some people keep self-sabotaging

What might be the underlying cause of this persistent bad decision-making? “We don’t know, but the fact most people have the same profile at retest suggests this is a kind of trait: a stable cognitive-behavioral tendency,” said Dit Bressel. “It could be related to genetics, but we don’t have the data for that. We know there are environmental factors that contribute to the Compulsive profile: It’s significantly more likely to emerge if the Action→Punisher relationship is infrequent, i.e., people will be poor avoiders and ignore helpful information if punishment probability is low, even if the punishment is severe. But this would be a case of trait-x-environment interactions. My neuroscientist side would love to explore what’s going on in the brain and map what contributes to adaptive vs maladaptive decision-making.”

This could help drive more effective public health messaging, which is typically focused on providing factual information about the risks of compulsive behaviors, whether we’re talking about smoking, drinking, eating disorders, or gambling, for instance. The results of this study clearly demonstrate that for Compulsives, information is not sufficient to change their self-sabotaging behavior. One of Dit Bressel’s lab members is now investigating better interventions for different profiles of decision-making, particularly for Compulsives.

“We definitely haven’t cracked the case yet,” said Dit Bressel. “There’s a body of work that says early over late information intervention might do the trick, but we’ve shown Compulsives in low probability punishment scenarios are impervious to early information. If the issue is they can’t

infer the winning strategy with Action→Punisher, maybe explicitly outlining the winning strategy will make more of a difference. Or maybe some potent combination of prompts. We have ideas, but the proof will be in the pudding."

Then again, "It could be the case that no amount/type of information will be enough to really sway 'that friend,' and that something far more involved would be needed," he said. "But most people will have a least some response to helpful information, so my suggestion in the absence of a full answer is to just be a good friend and give that friend the info/advice they seem to need to hear (again). It won't go the distance for everyone, but it's cheap and you'd be surprised at how many people need what seems obvious pointed out to them."

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