

A negative reinforcer is an unpleasant stimulus that, when removed, increases the likelihood of a behavior. This is part of operant conditioning, where a behavior is strengthened by the removal of something aversive, such as a loud alarm stopping when you buckle your seatbelt. It is not a punishment, which is designed to decrease a behavior; negative reinforcement is used to increase a behavior by making it an effective way to escape or avoid an unpleasant situation.

How it works

- Removal of an aversive stimulus: A negative reinforcer is something undesirable, unpleasant, or irritating that is taken away after a specific behavior is performed.
- Behavioral change: This removal acts as a reward, making the preceding behavior more likely to happen again in the future.
- Avoiding discomfort: The motivation is to stop or avoid an uncomfortable or negative outcome.

Examples

- Seatbelt alarm: The loud, annoying sound stops once you buckle your seatbelt. The removal of the sound makes you more likely to buckle up in the future.
- Sunscreen: You apply sunscreen to avoid the unpleasantness of a sunburn. The act of applying sunscreen is reinforced by avoiding the negative outcome of a burn.
- Homework: A student completes their homework to avoid the negative consequence of detention or nagging from a parent.

Key difference from punishment

- Negative Reinforcement: Increases a desired behavior by removing something unpleasant (e.g., stopping a loud noise when you buckle your seatbelt).
- Punishment: Decreases an unwanted behavior by adding something unpleasant or removing something pleasant (e.g., grounding a child for breaking a rule).