CHAPTER TWO

The law of effect would be truer if it held that a person, being rewarded, employs his past successes in whatever way he thinks is likely to bring him satisfaction in the future . . . An individual’s past performances often mean little or nothing to him. Only if the [self] would be served thereby, does he engage in a repetition of the successful act. (Allport, 1943, p. 468)

Conflict Situations. Conflict situations provided another fertile area for testing Lewin’s ideas. It is customary to distinguish three different conflict situations. In an approach–approach conflict, one must choose between two alternatives of near equal attractiveness. For example, a person might want to watch two equally enjoyable TV shows or be forced to choose between two equally attractive universities. In an avoidance–avoidance conflict, one must choose between two alternatives that are equally repulsive. For example, a person might be forced to clean the bathroom or take out the trash or be caught between a rock and a hard place. Finally, an approach–avoidance conflict occurs when a person must choose whether to undertake an action that has both positive (approach) and negative (avoidance) properties. For example, a child might wish to pet a dog, but at the same time be afraid of being bitten.

Drawing on work in animal learning by N. E. Miller (1944), Lewin believed that approach–avoidance conflicts are difficult to resolve and create psychological tension. The difficulty arises because the strength of the two forces increases at different rates, with the avoidance force increasing more rapidly as we approach the goal (see Figure 2.6). To illustrate, suppose you decide you’d like to take a trip to Europe next year. With the