

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS: CONTROL OF EMOTION IN RELATIONSHIP

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Abstract

Learned helplessness the concept discovered by Martin E.P. Seligman, helplessness experimented on animals, The impact of learned helplessness has been demonstrated in different animal species, but its effects can also be seen in people. Learned helplessness has also been associated with several different psychological disorders. Depression, anxiety, phobias, shyness, and loneliness can all be exacerbated by learned helplessness. If you believe you are no good and everything you do is inferior or wrong, you are likely to feel a huge loss of control over your life. Learned helplessness is thought to contribute to feelings of anxiety and may influence the onset, severity, and persistence of conditions such as generalized anxiety disorder. Learned helplessness is thought to contribute to feelings of anxiety and may influence the onset, severity, and persistence of conditions such as generalized anxiety disorder. Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) is a form of psychotherapy that can be beneficial in overcoming the thinking and behavioral patterns that contribute to learned helplessness.

Key words: *learned helplessness, psychology, humans, relationship, family, behavior, depression.*



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Introduction: Martin E.P. Seligman, discovered the concept of learned helplessness. Learned helplessness, the failure to escape shock induced by uncontrollable aversive events, was discovered half a century ago. Seligman and Maier (1967)

Learned helplessness occurs when an animal is repeatedly subjected to an aversive stimulus that it cannot escape. Eventually, the animal will stop trying to avoid the stimulus and behave as if it is utterly helpless to change the situation. Even when opportunities to escape are presented, this learned helplessness will prevent any action.

While the concept is strongly tied to animal psychology and behavior, it can also apply to many situations involving human beings.

When people feel that they have no control over their situation, they may begin to behave in a helpless manner. This inaction can lead people to overlook opportunities for relief or change.

When people feel that they have no control over their situation, they may begin to behave in a helpless manner. This inaction can lead people to overlook opportunities for relief or change (<https://www.britannica.com › science › learned-helplessness>).

Definition- Learned Helplessness:

Learned helplessness is a phenomenon observed in both humans and other animals when they have been conditioned to expect pain, suffering, or discomfort without a way to escape it (Cherry, 2017) ([Learned Helplessness: Seligman's Theory of Depression](https://positivepsychology.com › learned-helplessness-s...) <https://positivepsychology.com › learned-helplessness-s...> 12-July,2021).

When people feel like they have no control over what happens, they simply tend to give up and accept their fate. This symptom comes under behavioral psychology.

Discovery of learned helplessness:

The concept of learned helplessness was discovered accidentally by psychologists Martin Seligman and Steven F. Maier (1967). They had initially observed helpless behavior in animal i.e. dogs that were classically conditioned to expect an electrical shock after hearing a tone.

Later, the dogs were placed in a shuttle box, that contained two chambers separated by a low barrier. The floor was electrified on one side, and not on the other. The dogs previously subjected to the classical conditioning made no attempts to escape. Even though avoiding the shock simply involved jumping over a small barrier (Medically reviewed by Steven Gans, MD on June 7,2020 , online article).

Learned helplessness is noticed in animals as mentioned above and more importantly it has been identified and studied among following areas:

1. Human Beings,
2. Children,
3. Marital Behaviour,
4. Mental Health

1. Learned helplessness in human beings:

The impact of learned helplessness has been demonstrated in different animal species, but its effects can also be seen in people. Example: A child who performs poorly on math tests and assignments will quickly begin to feel that nothing he does will have any effect on his math performance. When later faced with any type of math-related task, he may experience a sense of helplessness.

Learned helplessness has also been associated with several different psychological disorders. Depression, anxiety, phobias, shyness, and loneliness can all be exacerbated by learned helplessness. Example: A woman who feels shy in social situations may eventually begin to feel that there is nothing she can do to overcome her symptoms. This sense that her symptoms are out of her direct control may lead her to stop trying to engage herself in social situations, thus making her shyness even more pronounced. Researchers have found, however, that learned helplessness does not always generalize across all settings and situations.

A student who experiences learned helplessness with regards to math class will not necessarily experience that same helplessness when faced with performing calculations in the real world. In other cases, people may experience learned helplessness that generalizes across a wide variety of situations (Medically reviewed by Timothy J. Legg, PhD, PsyD — Written by Jayne Leonard on May 31, 2019).

2. Learned helplessness in Children:

Learned helplessness often originates in childhood, and unreliable or unresponsive caregivers can contribute to these feelings. This learned helplessness can begin very early in life. Children raised in institutionalized settings, for example, often exhibit symptoms of helplessness even during infancy.

Assessed the depressive symptoms, life events, and explanatory styles of 168 8–11 yr olds 5 times over a 1-yr period to test the prediction that the maladaptive explanatory style would be associated with higher levels of depression, lower school achievement, and higher incidences of helpless behaviors in the classroom. Ss completed the Children's Depression Inventory, the Children's Attributional Style Questionnaire, and a life events questionnaire. Measures of school achievement (the California Achievement Tests) were obtained once during the year (Nolen-Hoeksema, S., Girgus, J. S., & Seligman, M. E. (1986). Learned helplessness in children: A longitudinal study of depression, achievement, and explanatory style. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51(2), 435-442. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.51.2.435>).

When children need help but no one comes to their aid, they may be left with feelings that nothing they do will change their situation. Repeated experiences that bolster these feelings of helplessness and hopelessness can result in growing into adulthood ultimately feeling that there is nothing one can do to change his or her problems.

Common symptoms in children of learned helplessness as follows:

- Failure to ask for help,
- Frustration,
- Giving up,
- Lack of effort,
- Low self esteem,
- Passivity,
- Poor motivation.

Case example: Few cases are identified to explain Learned helplessness. These are anonymous cases and they are self explanatory.

Case 1: Sumit (name changed), 6 years old boy, comes to me in court for counselling as per the order of court; was to ascertain the wishes of child in divorce filed by father. Child was living with mother. Father had an objection that mother has relation outside marriage so child should be handed over to him.

Sumit was very well dressed initially he was scared to talk to me but as I initiated the discussion started talking about his school friend and favourite sports he slowly started opening up, and started speaking. I observed that Sumit had speech difficulty, stammering while speaking. After seeing child condition I discussed with parents about the child's situation. Both started blaming each other, finally they revealed that earlier child didn't have the issue of the stammering, as they fought with each other child witnessed that incident since then he was bed wetting and stammering. They were referred to child psychologist and also told them to attend speech therapy for child to tackle child's speech problem.

Problem diagnosis: In this case child facing psychological impact due to the dispute among parent had impacted the child in such a manner that child became intro ward and started stammering,

Intervention: after diagnosing this problem; reality orientation was given to parents and explained the parenting role and responsibility. Suggested to visit child psychological and speech therapist. To work on child's helpless feeling due to dispute needs to be dealt by psychologist. The problem which child is facing can be handled and things may change that was explained.

With regular follow-ups during counselling on court dates; parents updated that the stammering problem is reduce due to speech therapy and regularly sittings with child psychologist and the child is also opening up and started showing interest in his studies.

Follow up with psychologist also done and she shared the milestones of improvement. When child seemed in good condition parents were given the parenting plan so that after divorce they can continuously be plying their role and taking parent responsibility effectively. Accordingly child's emotional social financial responsibility were divided between parents and matter was amicably settled for divorce.

Case 2: Isha (name changed), 18 years old came to my cabin along with mother very stressed and expressing feeling of haplessness and anxious and worried what happens if she is unable to complete graduation in china who will pay for fees as well as lodging boarding in china?

Isha had filed for maintenance case against father as parents had divorced, long back. She was doing 12th std studies in Chinese language in China, father had paid the fees till 12th Std but once she turned 18, he stopped and she had to return to India abruptly she was staying with mother in rental house and for further study (graduation) she filed Civil MA application for maintenance.

Reality orientation, positive stroke, finding solution together and bringing down to possibility of what is other options available helped to bring her out of that feeling of helplessness.

2. Learned helplessness in marital relationship:

Components of learned helplessness in relationship 1contingency 2 cognition and 3 behaviour

We wondered if person is being abused why don't they tell someone about it and get help? Or if its an adult who is being hurt, why don't they leave the relationship? It sounds like common sense, but the truth is, leaving an abusive relationship can be extremely difficult for both children and adults. This is because abuse is not about harm – it's about power.

Regardless of whether the abuser is a parent or partner, their goal is to gain control and power over the relationship through means such as producing fear, making threats, manipulation or physical harm. While many of us are familiar with the threats, manipulation or physical harm. While many of us are familiar with the definition of physical abuse and can understand the obvious harm that is caused by this type of abuse. There are lesser known forms of abuse that tend to have more severe and long-term consequences on the victim. Verbal abuse, (name calling), emotional abuse, (neglect, degradation, humiliation) and psychological abuse,

(manipulation, threats) are much more common than physical abuse in both spousal and parent-child relationships, and these three types of abuse frequently accompany physical abuse.

While the effect of physical abuse is more obvious, the effects of verbal, emotional and psychological abuse are more difficult to spot- however, they are typically the reason that a victim has difficulty leaving an abusive relationship. For example, we learn $2+2=4$ how, most likely, this was repeated to you over and over by people in your life who had some kind of authority, and you were given examples of why this was true, so eventually you came to believe it. Verbal, emotional and psychological abuse work in much the same way. If you are constantly told that you are incompetent, ugly or worthless by an authority figure or someone who is close to you, such as a parent or partner, and they point out examples that reinforce these statements, (e.g. child failed a spelling test, or a spouse burned dinner,) eventually you are likely to believe there is some truth to these hurtful statements. Over time, such beliefs may become a very significant part of your sense of identity, causing you to believe that you do not have value or deserve better than what you are currently receiving in an abusive relationship. Many times, the perpetrator of the abuse is likely to point out to the victim that they are “lucky” to have someone who stays with them and puts up with their many flaws.

This is where the term “learned helplessness” is key. If you believe you are no good and everything you do is inferior or wrong, you are likely to feel a huge loss of control over your life. If, no matter how hard you try, you are still constantly receiving the message that your efforts are not good enough, strong feelings of helplessness and powerlessness are likely to surface, because you do not feel that you have control to change the things in your life that are “wrong”. So, if you do not have the power to change things for the better, it may feel easier to just resign yourself to the way your life is now – furthermore, there is no guarantee that changes will be for the better. This often results in a decision not to seek help, even if the victim has learned that they are helpless to better their situation, and gives up trying, thus not seeking help or pressing charges.

While many other factors also play a role in learned helplessness and abusive relationships (e.g. multiple calls about domestic violence incidents that have not resulted in charges, or calls to child welfare that have not resulted in an investigation), the factors described above

are significant (why abuse can create learned helplessness beyond www.growbeyondwords.com – link cycle of abuse).

Case 3: Sarita (name changed), 35 year old along with Mahesh, her husband, came for counselling the husband had filed for divorce under Hindu Marriage Act. There were lot of differences among Sarita and Mahesh. Issues mentioned that husband is having relations outside marriage, also chronic Alcoholic. She was feeling helpless and depressed. Husband stated that she is having suspicious nature. He agreed that he drinks, now ready to leave this habit for children and wife.

She was so much in helpless situation that she can't change this situations and she can't handle, in three sitting of counselling with her and husband helped in bringing calmness in her (positive feed backs given, helped her to recognition of her qualities which will enhance her personality and ability to handle situation) and husband also started the counselling for the alcoholism.

3. learned helplessness and mental health:

Learned helplessness is thought to contribute to feelings of anxiety and may influence the onset, severity, and persistence of conditions such as generalized anxiety disorder(GAD).

When you experience chronic anxiety, you may eventually give up on finding relief because your anxious feelings seem unavoidable to non treatable. Because of this, people who are experiencing mental health issues such as anxiety or depression may refuse medications or therapy that may help relieve their symptoms.

As people age learned helplessness can become something of a vicious cycle. When encountering problems such as anxiety or depression, people may feel that nothing can be done to ease these feelings. People then fail to seek out options that may help which then contributes to greater feelings of helplessness and anxiety.

A pessimistic explanatory style is associated with a greater likelihood of experiencing learned helplessness. People with this explanatory style tend to view negative events as being inescapable and unavoidable and tend to take personal responsibility for such negative events (scholarly articles for learned helplessness and mental health, generally of learned helplessness in man. Hiroto - cited by 1582, women: the mediating role of learned helplessness - Bairagi - cited by 204, learned helplessness, depression, and the attribution - Klein - cited by 640).

Overcoming learned helplessness: Learned helplessness is thought to contribute to feelings of anxiety and may influence the onset, severity, and persistence of conditions such as generalized anxiety disorder. Study suggests that learned helplessness can be successfully decreased, particularly if intervention occurs during early onset. Long term learned helplessness can also be reduced, although it may require longer term effort.

Therapy can be effective in reducing symptoms of learned helplessness. In one study, for example, some participants were asked to try to complete an unsolvable task.

Those who received a therapeutic intervention after failing at the task were more likely to try again and successfully complete a follow up task. Those who did not receive an intervention were more likely to experience learned helplessness and give up.

Cognitive behavioral therapy is a form of psychotherapy that can be beneficial in overcoming the thinking and behavioral pattern that contribute to learned helplessness. CBT helps person to identify negative thoughts patterns of learned helplessness and replace these thoughts with optimistic and rational thoughts. The process involves carefully analyzing what you are thinking, actively challenging these ideas, and disputing negative thought patterns. (what is learned Helplessness and why does it happen <https://www.verywellmind.com> › what-is-learned-helpless.)

So what can people do to overcome learned helplessness? Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) is a form of psychotherapy that can be beneficial in overcoming the thinking and behavioral patterns that contribute to learned helplessness.

The goal of CBT is to help a person to identify negative thought patterns that contribute to feelings of learned helplessness and then replace these thoughts with more optimistic and rational thoughts. This process often involves carefully analyzing what you are thinking, actively challenging these ideas, and disputing negative thought patterns. (By verywell, <https://www.verywellmind.com> › what-is-learned-helpless.).

Conclusion: While working in family court as a Counselor; learned helplessness in various relationships like husband-wife, parent-child, siblings, as well as on the individuals in various situation or incidents. Case studies shows the helpless and if it not dealt in right time and it can turn in to learned helplessness, so thought came in mind that this particular aspect should be highlighted. And as counsellor there is belief that in any situation of life any problem or issues has solution it can be sorted out if tackled in right time in right direction.

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