

Humans really do have choices as to their destiny and quality of life.

TYPE OF PSYCHOLOGY: Learning **Note: This article is shortened for brief reading**

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The concept of learned helplessness, first observed in laboratory animals, has been applied to humans in various situations, particularly those experiencing depression. The theory states that feelings of helplessness are often learned from previous experience, and it should also be possible to unlearn them.

Introduction

The concept of learned helplessness originated with experiments performed on laboratory dogs by psychologist [Martin E. P. Seligman](#) and his colleagues.

After considerable research on the topic, Seligman and others correlated this “learned” helplessness with [depression](#). **It seemed to Seligman that when humans or other animals feel unable to extricate themselves from a highly stressful situation, they perceive the idea of relief to be hopeless and thus give up.** The belief that they cannot affect the outcome of events no matter what force they exert on their environment seems to create an attitude of defeat. Actual failure eventually follows, thereby reinforcing that belief. It seems that **the reality of the situation is not the crucial factor; what matters is the perception that the situation is hopeless.**

Attributional Style Questionnaire

As research continued, Seligman discovered that exposure to uncontrollable negative situations did not always lead to helplessness and depression. Moreover, the results yielded no explanation of the loss of [self-esteem](#) frequently seen in depressed people.

Perhaps the primary significance of learned helplessness is its model of how a person's **perception of a life event can influence that person's behavior, thus affecting his or her life and possibly the lives of others.** Seligman believes that the way people perceive and explain the things that happen to them may be more important than what actually happens. These perceptions can have serious implications for a person's mental and physical health.

Perceptions of Helplessness

The human mind is so complex and the cognitive process so unknown that perception is one of the most confusing frontiers facing social scientists. Why do people perceive situations as they do, often in ways far different from how they actually transpire? If a

person is convinced that an event occurred the way he or she remembers it, then it becomes that person's reality. It will be stored that way and may be retrieved that way in the future, perhaps blocking opportunities for positive growth and change because the memory is based on an inaccurate perception.

If children are taught that they are “stupid” because they cannot understand what is expected of them, for example, then they may eventually stop attempting to understand: They have learned that their response (trying to understand) and the situation's outcome are independent of each other. If such helpless feelings are reinforced, the individuals may develop the expectation that no matter what they do, it will be futile. They will then develop a new feeling—helplessness—that can be generalized to a new situation and can interfere with the future. **Various studies have indeed shown that many people have been “taught” that no matter what their response, the outcome will be the same—failure—so there is no reason to try to do anything.**

Role in Victimization

One example of this can be; efforts are made to teach people how to change their perceptions and give them new feelings of potency and control. The goal is to teach them that they can have an effect on their environment and have the power to administer successful positive changes.

Children are in a much more vulnerable situation, as they must depend on adults to survive. For most children in the world, helplessness is a reality in many situations; they do not, in fact, have much control over what happens to them, regardless of the response they exhibit. Adults, whether they are parents, educators, church leaders, or older siblings, have the responsibility of being positive role models to help children shape their perceptions of the world. If children are allowed to express their feelings, and if their comments are listened to and considered, they can see that they do have some power over their environment and can break patterns of learned helplessness.

Mind-Body Relationship

Research has provided validity for the suspected link between how a person perceives and influences his or her environment and that person's total health and effectiveness. There is significant evidence that the mind and body are inseparable, and one can influence the other to the point of either breakdown or healing. Leslie Kamen, Judith Rodin, and Seligman have corroborated the idea that how a person explains life situations (a person's explanatory style) seem to be related to [immune-system](#) functioning. Blood samples were taken from a group of older people who had been interviewed about life changes, stress,

and health changes. Those whose interviews revealed a pessimistic or depressive explanatory style had a larger percentage of suppressor cells in their blood. Given that suppressor cells are believed to undermine the body's ability to fight tumor growth, these discoveries suggest a link between learned helplessness (as revealed by attitude and explanatory style) and susceptibility to diseases.

Studies have also been conducted to determine whether learned helplessness and explanatory style can predict illness. Results, though inconclusive, suggest that a person's attitude and perception of life events do influence physical health some twenty to thirty years later and can therefore be a valuable predictor and a tool for prevention. Particularly if an illness is just beginning, a person's psychological state may be crucial to healing.

New Research Directions

The concepts of helplessness and hopelessness versus control over life situations are as old as humankind. The specific theory of learned helplessness, however, originated with the experiments conducted by Seligman, Steven F. Maier, and J. Bruce Overmier at the University of Pennsylvania in the mid-1960s. The idea that helplessness could be learned has opened the door to many exciting new approaches to disorders formerly considered personality or biologically oriented, such as psychosomatic disorders, victimization by gender, depression (the "common cold" of mental disorders), and impaired job effectiveness.

The idea that they actually do have an effect on their environment is of tremendous importance to people suffering from depression. Most such people mention a general feeling of hopelessness, implying that they feel powerless over their reactions and behavior, which makes the journey out of depression seem overwhelming. Research-based evidence has shown that people do have the power to influence their perceptions of their environment and therefore change their reactions to it.

If the research on perception and learned helplessness is accurate, a logical next step is to find out how explanatory style originates and how it can be changed. Some suspected influences are how a child's first major trauma is handled, how teachers present information to be learned (as well as teachers' attitudes toward life events), and parental influence. **Perhaps the most promising aspect of the research on learned helplessness is the idea that what is learned can be unlearned; therefore, humans really do have choices as to their destiny and quality of life. Considerable importance falls on those who have a direct influence on children, because it is they who will shape the attitudes of the future.**