Learned helplessness

Learning helplessness is an apathetic attitude stemming from the conviction that one’s actions do not have the power to affect one’s situation. It is a state of learned helplessness, a condition in which an individual believes they have no control over their environment. This concept was first developed in the 1960s and 1970s by Martin Seligman (1942- ) at the University of Pennsylvania. He found that animals receiving electric shocks, which they had no ability to prevent or avoid, were unable to act in subsequent situations where avoidance or escape was possible. Extending the ramifications of these findings to humans, Seligman and his colleagues found that human motivation to initiate responses is also undermined by a lack of control over one’s surroundings. Further research has shown that learned helplessness disrupts normal development and learning and leads to emotional disturbances, especially depression.

Learned helplessness in humans can begin very early in life if infants see no correlation between actions and their outcome. Institutionalized infants, as well as those suffering from maternal deprivation or inadequate mothering, are especially at risk for learned helplessness due to the lack of adult responses to their actions. It is also possible for mothers who feel helpless to pass this quality on to their children. Learned helplessness in children, as in adults, can lead to anxiety or depression, and it can be

A study by T. Sharpe, M. Brown, and K. Crider measured the effects of consistent positive reinforcement, favoring skills such as leadership, sportsmanship, and conflict resolution, on two urban elementary physical education classes. The researchers found that the focus on positive skills caused a significant increase in leadership and conflict-resolution behavior. These results seem to support the idea, discussed by Maynard, that leadership behavior can be non-competitive (different individuals exercising leadership in different areas) and also conducive to group cohesion.

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Further Reading
especially damaging very early in life, for the sense of mastery over one’s environment is an important foundation for future emotional development. Learned helplessness can also hamper education: a child who fails repeatedly in school will eventually stop trying, convinced that there is nothing he or she can do to succeed.

In the course of studying learned helplessness in humans, Seligman found that it tends to be associated with certain ways of thinking about events that form what he termed a person’s “explanatory style.” The three major components of explanatory style associated with learned helplessness are permanence, pervasiveness, and personalization. Permanence refers to the belief that negative events and/or their causes are permanent, even when evidence, logic, and past experience indicate that they are probably temporary (“Amy hates me and will never be my friend again” vs. “Amy is angry with me today”; “I’ll never be good at math”). Pervasiveness refers to the tendency to generalize so that negative features of one situation are thought to extend to others as well (“I’m stupid” vs. “I failed a math test” or “nobody likes me” vs. “Janet didn’t invite me to her party”). Personalization, the third component of explanatory style, refers to whether one tends to attribute negative events to one’s own flaws or to outside circumstances or other people. While it is important to take responsibility for one’s mistakes, persons suffering from learned helplessness tend to blame themselves for everything, a tendency associated with low self-esteem and depression. The other elements of explanatory style—permanence and pervasiveness—can be used as gauges to assess whether the degree of self-blame over a particular event or situation is realistic and appropriate.

Seligman believes it is possible to change people’s explanatory styles to replace learned helplessness with “learned optimism.” To combat (or even prevent) learned helplessness in both adults and children, he has successfully used techniques similar to those used in cognitive therapy with persons suffering from depression. These include identifying negative interpretations of events, evaluating their accuracy, generating more accurate interpretations, and decatastrophizing (countering the tendency to imagine the worst possible consequences for an event). He has also devised exercises to help children overcome negative explanatory style (one that tends toward permanent, pervasive, and personalized responses to negative situations). Other resources for promoting learned optimism in children include teaching them to dispute their own negative thoughts and promoting their problem-solving and social skills.

Seligman claims that parents can also promote learned optimism in children who are too young for the types of techniques outlined above by applauding and encouraging their mastery of new situations and letting them have as much control as possible in everyday activities such as dressing and eating. In addition, parents influence the degree of optimism in their youngsters through their own attitudes toward life and their explanatory styles, which can be transmitted even to very young children.

Further Reading

### Learning curve

The timeline of learning.

When a person is introduced to new information or a new skill, it may take several learning sessions to acquire that knowledge or skill. Psychologists refer to this acquisition process as the learning curve. In general, this term refers to the time it takes an individual to develop knowledge or a new skill.

Behavioral psychologists have noted that the degree, or strength, of learning reflects three factors. First, the degree of learning is associated with the number of reinforcements received during the acquisition of the behavior. In animal research, these reinforcements may be food pellets; in human research, the reinforcement may simply be knowledge about the number of correct and incorrect answers. In general, as the reinforcement increases, so does the performance level.

Second, there is a maximal level of performance associated with any behavior. This maximum is called the asymptote. Once this asymptote is reached, no further improvement in performance is possible.

Third, the greatest increase in the acquisition of the behavior will occur in the initial phases of learning. As the performance of the behavior approaches the asymptote, there is increasingly less room for further improvement.

Psychologists often use graphs to depict learning curves. The amount of practice at a task appears on the horizontal axis; the strength or accuracy of a response is recorded on the vertical axis. For a single individual, the tendency is to improve over time or practice, although an improvement may be temporarily followed by a decline in performance.

When a large number of individuals are tested and their average performance plotted, the learning curve gives the appearance of a gradual, smooth improvement over time. In the hypothetical learning curve in the accom-