

The Concept of Learned Helplessness

A

In the mid-20th century, psychologists began to explore the perplexing phenomenon in which individuals and animals fail to act in situations where action could lead to a positive outcome. This behavioral pattern, later termed “learned helplessness,” describes a condition in which a subject, after repeated exposure to uncontrollable and adverse stimuli, stops trying to avoid or escape the situation—even when escape becomes possible. The concept has since become a cornerstone in the study of motivation, depression, and behavioral psychology, with wide-reaching implications for education, therapy, and social behavior.

B

The roots of learned helplessness can be traced back to a series of experiments conducted in the 1960s and 70s by psychologists Martin Seligman and Steven Maier. In one of the most well-known studies, dogs were subjected to mild electric shocks. One group could press a lever to stop the shocks, while another group had no control over the situation. Later, when both groups were placed in a box where they could easily escape the shocks by jumping over a small barrier, the first group learned to escape quickly. The second group, however, made no attempt to escape at all. They had learned from earlier experiences that nothing they did mattered, and this belief carried over even when the situation changed.

C

The implications of these early experiments went beyond animal behavior. Psychologists soon began to observe similar responses in humans. For instance, students who repeatedly failed despite effort could become

passive and disengaged in future learning environments. Victims of chronic abuse or neglect sometimes show an inability to leave harmful situations, even when avenues for escape or improvement are available. In each case, individuals internalize a sense of powerlessness that discourages future action or change, even when change becomes possible.

D

Over time, the theory of learned helplessness was refined to include cognitive processes. Seligman later developed what he called the "attributional style" theory, which examined how individuals explain negative events in their lives. People who believe that bad events are permanent ("It will always be this way"), personal ("It's my fault"), and pervasive ("This affects everything I do") are more likely to develop helplessness. This pessimistic explanatory style has been strongly linked to depression and anxiety. In contrast, individuals who view setbacks as temporary and specific are more likely to maintain motivation and resilience in the face of adversity.

E

Importantly, the theory also applies in broader societal contexts. In institutional settings such as prisons, care homes, and underfunded schools, systemic constraints can foster environments where individuals feel powerless to influence their outcomes. This systemic learned helplessness can manifest in reduced effort, diminished participation, and low morale across entire communities. Similarly, long-term unemployment and poverty have been shown to create similar effects, reinforcing cycles of inaction and discouragement. Critics argue that without intervention or

structural change, these conditions perpetuate not only individual despair but also social stagnation.

F

Despite the troubling implications of learned helplessness, research has also illuminated possible pathways to recovery. One of the most significant findings is the role of "learned optimism"—the idea that individuals can be trained to reinterpret setbacks and failures in more constructive ways. Techniques from cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), such as identifying irrational beliefs and practicing positive self-talk, have proven effective in reversing patterns of helplessness. Educational programs that foster a "growth mindset," encouraging students to view intelligence as a skill that can be developed rather than a fixed trait, have also shown promise in counteracting helplessness in academic settings.

G

Ultimately, the concept of learned helplessness has reshaped how psychologists, educators, and policymakers understand human behavior in the face of adversity. While the original experiments focused on animals in controlled environments, the broader message is clear: individuals' perceptions of control—or the lack thereof—can deeply shape their actions and beliefs. By addressing these perceptions through therapy, education, and policy, society can help individuals move beyond passive resignation and toward empowered engagement with the world around them.

Questions

Questions 1–4: Matching Information to Paragraphs

Which paragraph contains the following information?

Write the correct letter A–G.

1. An example of how learned helplessness has been addressed in educational settings
 2. A description of experiments involving animals and electric shocks
 3. An outline of how beliefs about personal responsibility can influence helplessness
 4. A discussion of how institutions can promote feelings of powerlessness
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Questions 5–9: Yes / No / Not Given

Do the following statements agree with the information given in the passage?

Write YES if the statement agrees with the claims of the writer.

Write NO if the statement contradicts the claims of the writer.

Write NOT GIVEN if there is no information on this.

5. Seligman and Maier's experiments proved that dogs are more helpless than other animals.
6. Some people develop learned helplessness even when help is available.
7. Optimism can be taught using psychological techniques.
8. Most people in prisons exhibit learned helplessness.

9. Viewing intelligence as changeable can help counter helplessness.

Questions 10–13: Summary Completion

Complete the summary below using words from the passage.

Choose ONE WORD ONLY from the passage for each answer.

Learned helplessness is a psychological condition in which individuals stop trying to act because they believe their actions are 10. _____. It was first observed in dogs that failed to escape from electric 11. _____ even after a way out was available. Researchers found that people who attribute bad events to permanent and personal causes are more likely to develop 12. _____. In contrast, therapeutic approaches such as CBT can help change these beliefs, and educational efforts encouraging a 13. _____ mindset have also been effective.

Answer Key

1. F
2. B
3. D
4. E
5. NO
6. YES
7. YES
8. NOT GIVEN
9. YES
10. powerless
11. shocks
12. depression
13. growth