

A WEEK IN *Learning*

Learned Helplessness & How to Overcome It

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“Raise your hand if you are majoring in psychology. Everyone take a look around at the students raising their hands. They probably won’t pass this class, as their majors only require this course in order to weed out the less intelligent.” These were the words of my college calculus professor, and one of those weary hands in the air belonged to me.

In that moment, I reflected back on the various times I failed in math. It was never my strongest subject in school, and with my track record, I felt as though another failure was approaching - so why even try? If the major I fell in love with came along with an obstacle I have never been able to hurdle, then I should just give up.

An extended period of negative emotions, persistent failures, or the feeling of having no control in a situation, can lead to learned helplessness. This phenomenon was first developed through a controversial experiment performed by a psychologist in the late 60’s named Martin Seligman. In this study, one group of dogs were given unavoidable, small shocks to their paws. (Not a nice way to treat a man’s best friend, I know.) The second group of dogs were not given shocks at all. During the second trial, both groups were then administered shocks to their paws, but were given a chance to escape the shock by jumping over a barrier to a safe area. Seligman discovered that the first group of dogs failed to seek out the safe area, whereas the second group of dogs successfully did. These results indicated that the first group of dogs had *learned* to give up based off their traumatic past experience. Though unethical, this experiment did generate interest amongst other researchers around the concept of learned helplessness in humans.

Can you think of a time in your life where a past failure had influenced your decision to not move forward? Have you ever felt like you had no control in a difficult situation? As humans, when we begin to feel powerless over and over again, it becomes rooted within us. This sense of helplessness then does not only become a response, but a pre-determined behavior. We just give up.

Learned helplessness can arise in many situations, even outside an individual’s personal life. It can become imbedded within an organization’s culture. If repetitive, negative behavior from an organization occurs, then we can expect those who work there to feel hopeless. People’s thoughts and beliefs



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become dictated by past experiences and they begin to believe they have a small locus of control over their future. Fortunately, learned helplessness can be UNLEARNED. *Shocking*, right? Consider some of these actions to take, along with resources Goodwill offers:

- **Set realistic goals:** Ensure you are making goals that are reachable for *you*. Setting goals for yourself will increase the feeling of being in control
- **Focus on your successes:** Instead of failed attempts, concentrate on the things you are good at and the things you have accomplished. Get in the habit of even celebrating your small successes!
- **Recognize the controllable:** There are some things you cannot control; steer your focus on what you *CAN* control
- **Be more open to other answers:** Every problem can contain various solutions. Remind yourself that just because you tried one and failed, there are other paths to take
- **Surround yourself with positive relationships:** Learned helplessness can start with the observation of how others react to failure. Make sure you pursue those who will influence your life in a positive way
- **Seek help:** Prolonged helplessness can lead to many chronic distresses, so reach out when necessary. Our job seekers can access crisis resources on www.mycareeradvisor.com under the resources tab and can work with a career advisor to locate them to the best-fit help

GCNA team members are also encouraged to reach out to a career center for specific resources. In addition, you can contact EAP at 1-800-854-1446 for three face-to-face visits, or telephonic consultations, at no cost. Please contact our benefits team for further assistance, if needed.

There are those who take on failure as fuel to push onward, but it is not easy for everyone. At Goodwill, we have the incredible opportunity to support those who are feeling powerless - from our job seekers to the person working beside you! I challenge you to focus on that which you *CAN* control. You may have given in to the shocks on your paws once or twice before, but remember: you have the capability to jump over the barrier and land somewhere safe. Success may just be one more try away - *or one more math class*.

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