

<title>Learned Helplessness

Learned helplessness occurs when experiencing uncontrollable events leads to expectations of future lack of control. It is characterized by decreased motivation, failure to learn and negative emotions such as sadness, anxiety and frustration. The learned helpless response pattern was discovered accidentally in the study of animal learning during the mid-1960s when psychologist Martin Seligman observed that after exposure to inescapable electric shock some dogs passively accepted the shock even when they could take action to turn it off. The “helpless” dog puzzle initiated decades of research and theory on learned helplessness that covered topics ranging from passivity in laboratory rats, clinical depression, children’s classroom behavior, success in selling insurance policies, to mortality in nursing homes.

Learned helplessness is formally defined as a disruption in motivation, affect and learning following exposure to noncontingent (uncontrollable) outcomes. There are three crucial elements to its definition; contingency, cognition and behavior. Contingency refers to the objective relationship between actions and outcomes and for helplessness to occur there must be no relationship between a person’s actions and the outcome he or she experiences. Cognition is involved in how the person perceives the contingency, explains it and extrapolates from this understanding. The perception of uncontrollability (noncontingency) may be accurate or inaccurate but once it occurs the person attempts to explain it. From this explanation they make extrapolations about the future and, when learned helplessness occurs, they expect that their behavior will not influence future outcomes. Behavior refers to the observable effects of being exposed to uncontrollable outcomes. Most often it involves ‘giving up’ - weaker attempts to

control the situation or even failure to try to do so at all – a behavior incompatible with new learning. The response is also accompanied by negative emotions such as anxiety and sadness.

<head 1> Learned Helplessness in Children

It was not long before the idea of learned helplessness was extended to child behavior. In the early 1970s, Carol Dweck demonstrated that some children adopted the view that once failure occurred the situation was out of their control and that there was nothing they could do.

Specifically, she used children's explanations for failure on a questionnaire to study two groups, those who viewed failure as due to insufficient effort and those who did not. She was able to document two response patterns to failure by having fifth and sixth grade students talk out loud while attempting problems too difficult for their age level immediately after successfully solving age-appropriate problems. She labeled the patterns, learned helpless and mastery oriented.

The learned helpless pattern, shown by children whose questionnaire responses did not invoke insufficient effort for failure, involved denigrating their abilities upon encountering failure, overestimating the number of problems they did not solve and expressing considerable self-doubt. Their performance deteriorated as they were less likely to solve problems after experiencing failure even when the problems were identical to those solved before the failure.

Integral to this response pattern is the experience of negative feelings including anxiety, sadness and expressed boredom. Thus, the helpless pattern comprises a reaction to failure that undermines the self and impairs performance.

The mastery oriented pattern, in contrast, leads to increased motivation in the face of failure. Children who demonstrate this response pattern typically show some form of self-instruction or self-monitoring when they encounter failure. Their mood remains positive and they maintain the belief in their ability to perform well. Their optimistic view is matched by their behavior as most (over 80%) maintain or improve their problem-solving strategies and they solve just as many, or more, problems as they did prior to experiencing failure. In sum, these children view failure as a challenge and as a learning opportunity, not as an indictment of their ability.

In considering these response patterns it is critical to note that the differences are not due to ability. Children who display learned helplessness versus mastery oriented patterns perform equally well prior to encountering failure but those who are mastery oriented show superior performance following a failure experience. About 80-85 percent of all students clearly demonstrate one of the response patterns with students of all abilities falling into each group. It is therefore not uncommon to find very intelligent, bright students who are learned helplessness, a group that is all too easily overlooked in the classroom.

<head 1> Learned Helplessness in the Classroom

Because the patterns described were identified in rigorous experimental studies, it is important to note that they have also been shown to occur on typical classroom tasks. Specifically, children who encountered confusing instructions in a questionnaire booklet in the classroom performed differently on subsequent questions depending on whether they fell into learned helplessness or mastery oriented groups. Under these circumstances, the number of children answering all questions correctly was lower for those showing the learned helplessness response pattern (34.6%) as

compared to the mastery oriented pattern (71.9%). When, however, the instructions were clear there was no appreciable difference in the performance of helpless (76.6%) and mastery (68.4%) groups.

Learned helplessness in the classroom can result from teacher behavior. This discovery emerged from the observation that girls in grade school receive higher grades and less negative feedback in the classroom than boys. Although the feedback girls receive confirms their competence they tend to question their ability in the face of failure putting them at greater risk of displaying learned helplessness. In an attempt to address this conundrum Dweck and colleagues observed the pattern of evaluative feedback given to boys and girls in grade school classrooms (Dweck, Davidson et al., 1978). They found that the contingencies of feedback differed in that 45 percent of boys' work-related feedback referred to its nonintellectual aspects (e.g., neatness) whereas for girls the feedback referred almost exclusively to its intellectual quality. Teachers also more frequently ascribed boys' failures to lack of motivation. They then conducted an experiment to show that both boys and girls who received the teacher-girl contingency were more likely to view subsequent failure feedback from that evaluator as indicative of their ability.

The teacher-boy feedback pattern allows boys to avoid ascribing failure to their ability and to even blame the teacher for negative feedback allowing them to enter a new grade with high expectations of success. This option is less likely for those experiencing the teacher-girl contingency as the areas of academic performance remain similar and hence failure attributed to lack of ability will remain relevant. If correct, boys should be able to enter a new grade level with higher expectancies for success as compared to girls but these differences should decrease

as children experience evaluation from the new teacher. This is precisely what Dweck, Goetz and Strauss (1980) found when expected success was assessed at the beginning of a school year (October) and later in the year (December).

There is some evidence that the learned helpless and mastery oriented patterns are socialized by parents. For example, parents who attribute their children's failures to their children's ability tend to have children who display helpless behaviors (Fincham & Cain, 1986). Observation of third grade children and their mothers performing a series of solvable and insolvable problem-solving tasks showed that mastery oriented children had mothers who increased task-focused teaching behaviors and maintained high-positive affect during the insolvable puzzles whereas mothers of children showing learned helplessness reciprocated their child's negative affect. Similarly, when children mentioned performance goals mothers of the learned helpless group responded by focusing on performance whereas mothers in the mastery oriented group redirected attention by focusing on a learning goal (e.g., "let's see if we can figure out a pattern here").

<head 1>Implications of Learned Helpless for Educators

Attempts to remediate learned helplessness have largely focused on changing the ability attributions associated with learned helplessness to effort attributions (e.g., "work harder and you'll do better"). These attempts efforts have met with limited success possibly because little attention has been given to the perceived credibility of the feedback. When credible, such feedback likely increases motivation but it may be demoralizing if not credible. Effort attribution feedback is likely most successful in the early stages of learning and for difficult tasks, when greater effort can produce better results and its credibility is high. However, Dale Shunk has

found that ability feedback (e.g., “you’re good at this”) given when children succeeded early in the course of learning enhanced achievement better than effort feedback.

Although feedback that focuses on controllable attributions (e.g., effort, strategy use) is widely recommended, recent research suggests that focusing a student’s attention on the goal of learning rather than on showing how well they can perform has beneficial effects in combating helplessness. Success obtained in attempts to remediate learned helplessness has occurred largely in short term interventions and it remains to determine how best to produce lasting changes. In view of evidence that a relationship develops over time between learned helplessness patterns and children's achievement level (Fincham, Hokoda, & Sanders, 1989), there is an urgent need to address this gap in our knowledge.

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<crossref> Attribution retraining, Attribution theory

Recommendation

If an image is needed here is a graph

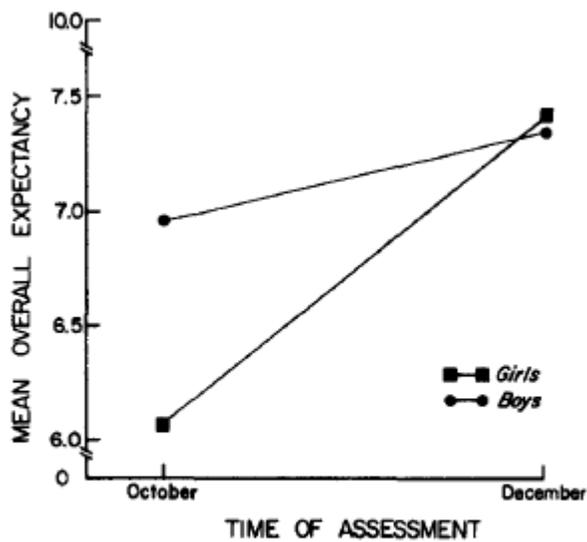


Figure 2. Mean overall performance expectancies for boys and girls on their first and second report cards.

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