



What is Learned Helplessness?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Many years ago, long before some of the legislation regarding harm of animals, some psychologists conducted research projects. In one of them, they placed a dog in a cage which was fitted in the middle with a vertical grate that rose to half the height of its walls. The psychologists had rigged a device that would give the dog a small electric shock. When the dog received the shock, it would jump over the center grate to the other side of the cage. The psychologists would then move the dog to the original side of the cage and give it another shock.

This process was repeated over and over again. Then the researchers decided to change the rules.

The dog was placed on the original side of the cage and given a shock. When it jumped over the grate, however, it was then given another shock on that side of the cage. It didn't take long until the dog didn't bother to jump over the grate. It knew that no matter which side of the cage it was on, there would be a shock over which it had no control.

The dog lay down in the corner of the cage and just took the shocks as they occurred.

Finally, the researchers opened the door of the cage to let the dog out. How surprised they were to watch the dog continue to lie in the corner and not even try to leave. The dog had developed what we term as "learned helplessness".

Many individuals have had experiences in their lives which conditioned them to accept harmful life events without feeling like they can change things or take control. We hear of people who are in relationships involving domestic violence that is so severe that hospitalization is required on occasion. They are repeatedly beaten but return to the relationship over and over after each incident.

Some people stay in career positions where they are disrespected, taken advantage of or even abused. When offered a better employment position, they turn it down.

People who suffer from learned helplessness do not think that they have control in their lives which would result in a positive outcome. They use a passive behaviour style and allow fear to form the bars of their own cages. They tend not to take many risks and usually suffer from low self-esteem.

The good news is that assertiveness is teachable and distorted thinking can be changed. Do you feel that you are trapped as a victim in life or don't know how to reach your potential? Try talking with a psychologist who will help you to develop the confidence you need in order to make good decisions and craft an amazing future.