

“Learned Helplessness”

In the 1970's Martin Seligman developed the theory of “Learned Helplessness” which had a major influence on research into depression. Seligman discovered his theory by accident while studying classical conditioning of dogs. Seligman expanded his famous theory of helplessness into the realm of human behavior. The premise was very similar in application to people as it was in the animal studies. **“Helplessness is a psychological state that frequently results when events are uncontrollable”** (Seligman, 1974). It occurs when we feel there is no response to a situation that will change the course of events. This often occurs in abusive relationships, and it is occurring for many people looking for employment in our recession. The resulting feelings of hopelessness, paralysis, and negativity are very similar to the symptoms of depression.

When life overwhelms us with loss and/or problems to be solved, we can “learn” helplessness without ever knowing what is happening to us. We begin to feel so trapped we cannot even see obvious solutions when they are presented to us. In our depression, we do not realize we have actually learned to be helpless and passive. The darkness is just replaced by more darkness.

In human studies, Seligman discovered that having some degree of control and not feeling completely helpless greatly improves performance, especially for those who are depressed and feel an all-around lack of control. This supports the idea that identifying and experiencing the areas of life one can control may help considerably to deal with the depression and helplessness resulting from the areas one cannot control. This is very good news for dealing with learned helplessness, however, this is not the first step.

Overcoming learned helplessness begins with the acknowledgment or “confession” that the learning has actually occurred. However, this is an enormous step because the awareness actually begins to loosen the shackles of the ideas, pain, and fears that bind us. Taking this responsibility for learned helplessness confronts us with the arduous task of unlearning the helplessness that is fed and nourished by depression. After taking the steps of awareness and responsibility, the next step is to identify and seek out those trusting relationships where we can communicate our feelings and overcome our loneliness. Relationship generates the **hope** that loneliness can defeat.