

Learned Helplessness

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In early 1965, [Martin E. P. Seligman](#) and his colleagues, while studying the relationship between fear and learning, accidentally discovered an unexpected phenomenon while doing experiments on dogs using Pavlovian (classical conditioning). As you may observe in yourselves or a dog, when you are presented with food, you have a tendency to salivate. Pavlov discovered that if a ringing bell or tone is repeatedly paired with this presentation of food, the dog salivates. Later, all you have to do is ring the bell and the dog salivates. However, in Seligman's experiment, instead of pairing the tone with food, he paired it with a harmless shock, restraining the dog in a hammock during the learning phase. The idea, then, was that after the dog learned this, the dog would feel fear on the presentation of a tone, and would then run away or do some other behavior.

Next, they put the conditioned dog into a shuttlebox, which consists of a low fence dividing the box into two compartments. The dog can easily see over the fence, and jump over if it wishes. So they rang the bell. Surprisingly, nothing happened! (They were expecting the dog to jump over the fence.) Then, they decided to shock the conditioned dog, and again nothing happened! The dog just pathetically laid there! Hey, what's going! When they put a normal dog into the shuttlebox, who never experienced inescapable shock, the dog, as expected, immediately jumped over the fence to the other side. Apparently, what the conditioned dog learned in the hammock, was that trying to escape from the shocks is futile. This dog learned to be helpless! This result was opposite to that predicted by B.F. Skinner's behaviorism, which argued that the dog must have been given a positive reward (like a yummy dog biscuit) to just lie there. (In order to salvage their position, they even went so far as to suggest that the cessation of pain acted as the reward for the dog to sit, but this was not a very good argument. One could alternately argue that when the shock went on while the dog was sitting, it was being punished for sitting. Reminds me of that old joke, "Q: Why did the man pound his thumb with a hammer? A: Because it felt so good to stop.) These observations started a scientific revolution resulting in the displacement of behaviorism by cognitive psychology. What you are thinking, determines your behavior (not only the visible rewards or punishments).

The theory of learned helplessness was then extended to human behavior, providing a model for explaining [depression](#), a state characterized by a lack of affect and feeling. Depressed people became that way because they learned to be helpless. Depressed people learned that whatever they did, is futile. During the course of their lives, depressed people apparently learned that they have no control.

Learned helplessness explained a lot of things, but then researchers began to find exceptions, of people who did not get depressed, even after many bad life experiences. Seligman discovered that a depressed person thought about the bad event in more pessimistic ways than a

nondepressed person. He called this thinking, "explanatory style," borrowing ideas from [attribution theory](#).

For example, let's say you fail a math exam. How do you explain why? You could think: 1) I am stupid. 2) I'm not good in math. 3) I was unlucky, it was Friday the 13th. 4) The math teacher is prejudiced. 5) The math teacher grades hard. 6) I was feeling ill that day. 7) The math teacher gave an especially hard test this time. 8) I didn't have time to study. 9) The teacher grades on a curve. Seligman found that these explanations could be rated along three dimensions: personalization: internal vs. external, pervasiveness: specific vs. universal, and permanence: temporary vs. permanent. He found that the most pessimistic explanatory style is correlated with the most depression: The statement "I am stupid" is classified as internal (use of I), universal, and permanent. This response conveys a sense of [discouragement](#), hopelessness, and despair. On the other hand, a more optimistic person would blame someone or something else, such as "The math teacher gave an especially hard test this time." The most optimistic explanatory style is external, specific and temporary. Conversely, for a good event, the explanatory style reverses. For example, for a perfect score on the math exam, the depressive would say: "I was lucky that day," discounting his intelligence. The optimist would say something much more [encouraging](#), such as "I am smart." We often learn explanatory styles from our parents.

There are advantages to both optimistic and pessimistic explanatory styles. Certain jobs call for an optimistic outlook, such as [inventing](#) or sales. Other jobs, such as accounting or quality control, call for a more pessimistic outlook.

Seligman suggests in his book "Learned Optimism" that one can overcome depression by learning new explanatory styles. This is the basis of cognitive therapy. In such therapies, the counselor challenges the client's beliefs and explanations of life's events. If you feel depressed because you failed that last exam, then dispute the explanation, and learn or search for a more optimistic one according to the above criteria. Or read a few [jokes](#). The whole self-help movement is based on the optimistic belief that we can change ourselves for the better.

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