

DEPRESSION AND LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

(Based on a sermon by David Antion 10/4/1998)

Dr. Martin E.P. Seligman first coined the words "learned helplessness" referring to a condition that happens to humans as well as to animals. This condition is manifested by a complete lack of incentive to do anything about one's external circumstances.

Now Dr. Seligman is focusing on "self-talk" and depression and pessimism. "The rates of depression and pessimism among young people and middle-aged adults have never been higher", he said. To prevent this Dr. Seligman believes that psychologists will have to teach people how to think and take advantage of a simple skill they already have -- disputing. However, he believes most people use this self-talk skill incorrectly!

Since humans have a need to explain the world around them, our particular explanatory style may be linked to pessimism and therefore depression. Learning how to dispute negative reactions internally is a critical step in order to avoid depression.

One task in understanding our setbacks, tragedies and problems is to determine whether they are caused by internal or external circumstances. In other words who did it to you? Did you do it or was it external people or circumstances? If you always blame yourself for bad events you are likely to have a drop in self-esteem. On the other hand, if you always attribute everything to external circumstances, you are likely to fall into "learned helplessness" -- nothing can be done about it.

Some who lose a job or a relationship bleed all over the place. Even though their marriage is intact, their health is good they begin their pessimistic self-talk like this: "It's never going to change, its going to wreck everything I do. It's all my fault. I'm stupid. I'm unlovable." This talk leads to depression and helplessness.

Others may look at a lost job or lost relationship as only transient. "I didn't work hard enough at it. I'll do better the next time. I'll learn more about my job and relationships. But I still

have my marriage and I can still enjoy a good joke and another day will come and this too shall pass." This kind of talk is more likely to avoid depression and helplessness.