

## Learned Helplessness

Does your child complain to you that they are dumb, or that they can't do a task, even before they have really tried? Do they give up easily, or regularly complain of being bored with tasks? If this is something you recognise happening regularly with your child then it can be a real problem. It is called Learned Helplessness. It occurs when a person gives up trying because they believe past failures were outside their control, therefore there is no real point in their even trying. For example, they failed because of a character trait, "I'm dumb", or an external factor "The test was too hard", rather than something that could be changed or improved upon. "I didn't study hard enough."

Happiness guru Martin Seligman first theorised Learned Helplessness in 1965 and his research showed that the way people view negative events that happen to them can have an impact on whether they feel helpless or not. Furthermore, when a child fails repeatedly at a task (or an audition, or an interview) and begins to believe that failure is inevitable and inescapable, self-esteem plummets. The brain "learns" that success is beyond their control, even later when posed with an event or task where success **is** possible. And so can begin a vicious cycle that can lead to anxiety, stress and even depression.

Learned helplessness can manifest in a number of ways; the negative self talk and self put-downs when it comes to learning or reading; an assumption that they will never be able to improve certain skills, or a belief that if they are no good at maths then they are no good at English. This can lead to the belief that if you can't do something then there is no point in trying. "Why bother?" This negative way of thinking can affect everything in their life including academic performance and friendships, and later on, job performance and satisfaction, the quality of their personal relationships, parenting style and ultimately their happiness.

The most encouraging thing about learned helplessness is that it can be unlearned.

### **Here are some ideas on how you can help your child:**

- Avoid the use of negative labels: Hearing words like "slow", "lazy" or "dumb" can be devastating for a learner and can do permanent damage.
- Break larger goals into smaller more achievable goals: if your child finds maths overwhelming, focus on a particular skill to master at a time.
- Be specific in your praise: rather than saying, " Good job" or "Well done" say things like, "I like the way you kept working until you got that right."
- Give choices where possible: allowing choices engages your child and gives them an investment in the outcome. Maybe where they sit or what TV show they would like to watch when they are finished.
- Don't over protect: protect them from the fear of failure but not from failure itself. Experiencing failure and developing a positive attitude in the face of it is essential in developing a resilient personality.

- Be supportive: encourage your child to ask questions and even for your help, but not to do it for them. Remind them often that you are there to support them.
- Have high, but realistic expectations: give them something to strive for. This increases their satisfaction at having made achievements. A low bar actually has a negative impact.
- Encourage physical exercise: hardly needs any explanation, but among other things, it boosts motivation.
- Be positive in your approach to problem solving; say things like “I know you can do this.” “I have faith in you.” “I know you can work it out.” Or, “We can work this out together.”

As parents we can be guilty of enabling helplessness. Sometimes it's just easier and faster to do it ourselves... to tie those shoe laces, make the lunches, tidy the bedroom, “help” with the homework, micro-manage their social life. Try to recognise if you are contributing to the problem by doing too much. When you start to make changes, expect a little “push back” as you “pull back”. Your child might become a little more demanding and needy as you relinquish some of your helping behaviours. Ask yourself, “If I do this for my child now, will he/she be able to do this for him/herself later on?” Don't be afraid to say, “I know you can do this.” “I think I've been doing too much for you. I want you to grow up to be responsible kid.”

If you recognise the traits of Learned Helplessness in your child or teenager, remember that change is possible. Start by helping them to achieve small successes and celebrate those with them. As your child's self esteem grows, so will their motivation to take on bigger challenges. Be patient. Don't give up if it takes a while for the signs of helplessness to diminish. And our favourite piece of advice: model the behaviours you want to see develop in your children. When faced with a challenge of a difficulty, use positive and constructive language around how you are going to tackle it, and if you fail, model coping and talk about how you will work towards a better out come when you try again.

If you are not sure or need help, don't be afraid to talk to your child's teacher or to seek some professional advice.

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