

Podcast #12 - Learned Helplessness

In 1967, psychologists Martin Seligman and Steven Maier conducted a famous experiment.

They divided dogs into two groups. (and, yes, be prepared now to hear about animal abuse in the name of “science”)-Dogs in Group 1 were given mild electric shocks at random times, but these were shocks which the dog could end by pressing a lever.

Each dog in Group 2 was paired with a Group 1 dog. Whenever a Group 1 dog got a shock, its paired dog in Group 2 got a shock of the same intensity and duration. However, the lever for the Group 2 dogs did not stop the shock.

Dogs in Group 1, in other words, had the power to escape an unpleasant situation by learning that they could press a lever and stop it. In other words, they had some control. For dogs in Group 2, however, their shocks began and ended completely at random because the cessation of the shock was dependent entirely on the actions of the dogs to which

they were paired in Group 1. Thus, for Group 2 dogs, the shock was "inescapable."

Not yet done with torturing animals, Seligman and Maier then put each dog in what they called a "shuttlebox" — this was a rectangular box with two compartments separated by a very low wall. So, you have to picture this....The floor of the compartment into which a dog was first placed was then electrified, sending mild but unpleasant shocks to the dog. The dog could easily end its suffering by stepping over the low wall into the second compartment which was shock-free. They found that those original dogs from Group 1, the ones who had learned that they could exercise some control over being shocked by pressing a lever, also quickly and easily learned to jump over the shuttlebox wall to avoid the aversive shocks in the first compartment.

However (and this is what constituted Seligman's great "discovery") the dogs from Group 2 who had "learned" that there was nothing they could do to end their suffering — these dogs didn't try to jump over the shuttlebox wall. Instead, they simply laid down in the electrified chamber and made no attempt to escape. Seligman

hypothesized this: These dogs, he speculated, had developed a cognitive expectation that nothing they did would prevent or eliminate the shocks. Here's the heart of the matter: These dogs had learned to be helpless and their helplessness generalized to include complying and surrendering to other aversive situations.

SO, THIS IS THE ORIGIN OF THE CONCEPT OF "LEARNED HELPLESSNESS." SELIGMAN AND OTHERS SUGGESTED THAT Learned Helplessness might, therefore, be seen as lying at the heart of depression. WHY? WELL THINK ABOUT IT-- Depressed people believe that nothing they can do will help them feel better. Their grim expectations of the future, combined with a demeaning belief in their own lack of efficacy contribute to the symptoms of clinical depression.

We can see the workings of learned helplessness in people in many different situations. Some children who are not helped to learn math, for example, come to believe that nothing they can do will help them acquire this ability and may live their entire lives convinced that there is something intrinsically wrong with them. A man who is shy in social

situations may, without help, come to believe that his shyness is an intrinsic character defect that can never be overcome and, thus, he avoids social situations, which only worsens the problem. Or, for example, a woman I saw in therapy grew up in a family in which she was rarely helped comes to feel that help isn't there to be found and thus doesn't ask for it – even when it might actually be quite plentiful. If there is a general rule for people in therapy it's that they feel that the world is a fixed thing that they can't change and, as a result, they give up.

Experts in child development, in fact, argue that it's vital for parents to help their children feel that their efforts and actions are important, that the children can learn, and, further, to actively help them, help kids, to create repeated experiences of success. But imagine, now, what happens with parents who, say, can't tolerate seeing their children struggle and fail? We all know such parents, right? They deprive their children of the experience of learning and of mastering something through their own efforts. The big takeaway is that success breeds a feeling of efficacy which

breeds further success. Successful learning is an antidote to learned helplessness.

Helplessness is such a toxic feeling. And, you know--So much of our social life seems outside our control that I might argue learned helplessness is increasingly the norm in our society. Think about the fact that few of us really control the conditions of our work. Or what about low voter turnout? We talk about cynicism in our politics today—what what's cynicism if it's not learned helplessness?

When Seligman noticed some people seemed more resistant than others to developing and experiencing learned helplessness, he wondered why. Well, simple as it sounds--he found that such people were more optimistic and he set about to try to teach optimism to people. He helped them think about their successes and failures in a different way, e.g. that "bad" things were the exception and not the rule, that remaining confident in the face of adversity had many advantages, and that this mode of thinking could be actively practiced. Seligman claimed great success for this "treatment," although his results have been disputed.

Whether logic and rational optimism is the cure or not, the malignant effects of learned helplessness are obvious.

Believing we are powerless, when there are actually opportunities for control, undermines confidence and encourages cynicism and despair.

People need to have experiences in which their intentions and efforts to improve their lives are successful.

Psychotherapy, at its best, tries to help people do just that.

It helps people understand the origins and irrational logic of their depressive beliefs and encourages them to behave in ways that defy their pessimistic expectations and, therefore, allow for experiences of success. Success, then, begins to breed transformation.

It's clear that feeling you have little or no control over important things in your life creates depression. As a society, we have to figure out how people can become empowered in every area of their lives and, thus, become more immune to learned helplessness. We need to be like the dogs in group #1 and less like their poor brethren in group #2.