Chapter 1

Ignorance is not bliss: The origins of learned helplessness

You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink.
"I hope I can make your horse thirsty." Gina Martin

The term "learned helplessness "was first coined by psychologist Martin Seligman and Steven Maier in 1967 after a series of experiments with animals. In their initial studies, they discovered a phenomenon which dogs, subjected to uncontrollable stress (they used electric shocks), eventually stopped trying to escape the discomfort. These dogs had learned that their actions-no matter what they did-would have no effect on the outcome. Over time, they became passive and resigned, even when they were later given the opportunity to escape. They have learned that nothing they did could alter their situation, so they stopped trying altogether. These studies have also been replicated with mice. While these discoveries were made in animals, Seligman and Maier quickly recognized that a similar phenomenon occurred in humans. This is no longer just about dogs being shocked (which is bad enough all on its own). It is about the universal nature of learned helplessness and how we, as humans, can become conditioned to give up when we feel that our efforts will always be fruitless.

The key to learned helplessness lies in the "perception" around the idea of control. When individuals or animals perceive that they have no control over a negative outcome, they eventually stop trying to exert effort, even in situations where change may be possible. This learned passivity can result in a cycle of failure and despair that deeply impacts mental health and behavior.

Three pillars of learned helplessness

To understand the full depth of the residue of trauma that creates learned helplessness, it is essential to examine the three psychological components that underpin this condition:

Contingency- (the relation between actions and the environmental response)-The belief that actions do not lead to desirable outcomes when individuals experience repeated failure/negative outcome despite their efforts. they come to perceive that there is no meaningful/positive relationship between their actions and the results. Individuals who experience repeated setbacks often begin to believe that their actions are futile. This causes them to stop trying in future situations. This leaves a *subconscious imprint* that action steps are painful and useless. Especially for men, it is primordially waste of energy and could cause a loss of resources/death.

Cognition- (mental action/process of acquiring knowledge and understanding) How individuals think about failure and control is subjective and deeply personal.

Learned helplessness isn't simply about experiencing repeated failure but also about how we interpret failures. The subconscious imprints the inability to succeed is due to an internal, stable, and global factor that can't be controlled. This creates the slippery slop of learned helplessness. Examples of this sound like;" I am not good enough", "this always happens to me", "I can't do anything right", and so on. This cognitive pattern, is called global attribution, leading to a pervasive sense of powerlessness that permeates all areas of life. If someone fails at work, they might believe they are a failure as a person, rather than recognizing that one setback does not define their entire identity or potential.

Hint! We can also use this global attribution mechanism to reprogram our brain and emotions in a positive direction also! Remember this important fact as I continue through the heavy stuff.

Behavior- This passive resignation that follows the developed perception of helplessness is sneaky. Once A person believe that efforts do not affect the outcome, they become "convinced "nothing" will change it. They even start to look for proof or evidence that all of this is true. This often results in depression, anxiety, procrastination, through an increased decline of happiness and success. The behavior of giving up is reinforced over time by the absence of reward or success, deepening the cycle.

It's interesting to know that learned helplessness manifests easily in everyday life because it doesn't always present itself in a dramatic, life or death fashion. It often unfolds in subtle, everyday ways that are easy to overlook. Consider a student who struggles with math. After several failed tests, they may come to believe that they are simply" bad at math" and begin avoiding math-related tasks altogether, even when opportunities to improve are available. When avoiding math related subjects feels better, because they can avoid feeling stupid or embarrassed, the cycle continues. They may resign themselves to believe they will never succeed in math, "it's too hard", which then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. I found this true for myself around the subject of math as a child. It wasn't until I was in college that I realized it's not that I can't do math, it's that I don't enjoy it. Kind of like some people can eat broccoli, but they don't enjoy it.

In a relationship, learned helplessness can emerge when one partner feels that their needs or concerns are consistently ignored or dismissed. Over time, they may stop expressing their feelings altogether, then resign themselves to the idea that they cannot change the relationship dynamic. They often begin to believe that no matter what they say or do, it won't matter, increasing the emotional

distance and frustration. I want to add a disclaimer here. It is true for some people in a relationship that no matter what they do the situation will not change because the other person isn't open to it or is unable to. It should be noted, in a healthy relationship, as one person changes their behavior the other will change in behavior in some way. Another scenario, where one person in a relationship does everything within their power to provoke healthy change and the other person stays exactly the same. One or both parties are usually dealing with a mental health challenge.

In the workplace, employees who face repeated setbacks or experience unresponsive management may develop learned helplessness. Soon after a sudden or gradual disengaging from work will follow. They often stop suggesting new ideas, lack the motivation to improve performance, or just withdraw emotionally from the job. Which results it decreased productivity, lack of advancement which reinforces the perception that nothing they do will make a difference.

The most well-known frameworks for understanding the cognitive process behind learned helplessness is the cognitive triad. A concept developed by Aaron Beck, one of the pioneers of cognitive therapy. In general, it consists of three types of negative thinking.

1. Negative thoughts about oneself. (" I'm a failure," "I'm not good enough")
2. Negative thoughts about the world. (" The world is unfair," "people are out to get me")
3. Negative thoughts about the future. ("This will never end", it will only get worse")

These 3 types of thoughts are central to the experience of learned helplessness because they reinforce the belief that the individual is powerless to change their circumstances. LH develops from experiencing negative experiences *without* relief. This develops the interpretation that every setback is evidence of the inability to affect the world around them. The negative thought pattern creates a feedback loop that strengthens the sense of helplessness. This has far reaching effects and a profound impact on all areas of life. It often shows up in low self-esteem, avoidant behavior, defensiveness, overwhelmed, or passive coping skills such as procrastination, denial, and often substance abuse. With a basic understanding of how learned helplessness develops and its general effects we can move into a deeper discovery around how the residue of trauma turns into learned helplessness.

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