

## UNLEARNING HELPLESSNESS

We live in an age of labels. We have made up a glossary of expressions that freeze-frame and nominalize hundreds of sub-optimal human behaviors. It seems that the very fact of naming them gives them credibility and weight.

This is a fascinating phenomenon of the last few decades. Until this trend took hold, we used to use adverbs and adjectives to describe the temporary features of otherwise regular human beings. Rather than organizing people into sets by label and forming support groups around each label, we tended to speak of people as individuals having passing experiences. “Gus is out of sorts.” “Mary is certainly in high spirits.” “Sam is in one of his moods today.” “Don’t bother grandma right now; she’s in a tizzy.”

An interesting example of the power of labels arose recently in a leadership meeting. The term “learned helplessness” was used by a member of the group to describe a tendency of people in his organization to look to others to take leadership, to cave in to disappointing circumstances or events, to doubt constructive new ideas, or to support the *status quo*, even in the face of compelling suggestions for positive change.

In the context of the discussion, the person suggested that most change processes are slowed to a crawl, if not entirely thwarted, by this aspect of human nature. He suggested that many people seem perpetually resigned to the enemy they know, and too afraid of the unknown to step into it, even for the promise of better things.

“Learned helplessness” is an expression brought into common parlance by the highly respected psychologist Martin Seligman, who later followed it with studies that led to a more hopeful idea, Learned Optimism. The considerable body of research that has accumulated around both “learned helplessness” and “learned optimism” appears, after very brief review, to make two general assumptions. (1) Optimism and pessimism are both acquired sets of behaviors. (2) Both must be taken seriously and addressed case by case as real and sustained life factors for affected people.

A tremendous amount of truly helpful work based on these assumptions has resulted in progress across many disciplines in teaching people how to overcome their learned helplessness over time, and in teaching people how to learn to be more optimistic. The work is complex because there are so many individualized dimensions to the experience of both states. As I reviewed the literature, I found myself bogged down in theories and techniques about behavioral change, and longing for a simpler, more direct route to helping people.

This brought to mind a frequent admonition from my parents during my early teen-age years when I passed up the spontaneous joys of childhood and became captured by the morose, self-directed dramas that characterize puberty. “Try to think of something useful to do. Get your mind off yourself for a while.” They would send me on my way to do an errand for a neighbor, or to look up something they wanted to know at the library, or to take a friend to the movies. They were wise enough to offer a simple, in-the-moment alternative to my preoccupations, rather than probing the depths of my grim imagination and trying to influence it. They seemed to know, intuitively, that if I got my mind off something for a while it would not fester and infect my later judgment, just as turning away from negative gossip leaves one free, later, to give the subject of that gossip a non-judgmental fresh start.

As I looked at the literature on learned helplessness, I wondered what would have happened to me if my parents had taken a different direction during those years in which I was so drawn into my own head full of sorrowful thoughts. What if they had continually tried to “understand” what was bothering me and get to the bottom of it? What if they had worked with me when I was feeling low, to get me to go into greater detail about all the sad and troubling things on my mind? What if they had looked desperately for the cause of my blues, and perhaps even wondered about themselves and gotten caught up in their own parental self-doubt? What if they had started to worry about me, and concluded that I might be disturbed, and sought help for me? What if they had insisted that I focus on and talk more and more about my least constructive and most painful thinking, rather than showing me, without instruction, that I could think about something different at the drop of a hat and my whole experience and state of mind would change?

I remember when my “blue period” began. I would come home from junior high school at 4 p.m. in a huge rush to tell my mother how upset or angry or sad I was and to go on and on about the ills being done to me by others and by life. My mother would usually sit down and talk to me for a few minutes about what she was making for dinner, or something she’d read or heard, or some little anecdote about a friend. She’d give me a hug and tell me to “save” my troubles for when my father came home, so they could both hear them together. I’d go to my room to do my homework, or go practice my piano lesson, or go outside to rollerskate. Hard as I tried to hang onto my troubles, by the time my father came home, I generally would have lost the edge of my sorrow. Usually, I couldn’t even squeeze out a single tear as I recounted my day. And sometimes, I would actually end up with the giggles because the stories I was telling began to sound funny to me, try as I might to bring forth their tragic nature. Then my mother would utter a motherly platitude, like “I’m glad you’ve brightened up since you first got home, dear. Nothing can get you down for long.”

I grew up learning that resilience is ordinary, that everyone bounces back and we all have ups and downs. I can’t say I really “understood” that, or that I never got sucked into the quicksand of my “downs” later in life. Nor, thinking back on it, can I say that I didn’t

conclude, as my own parenting skills were challenged, that my parents must have been naïve. When I was rearing my own moody teenager, I rejected my parents' easygoing stance towards troubled teens and became absorbed in all the literature about how to "deal with" the frightening symptoms that I observed every day. I botched the parenting job badly, in that respect, for quite a while. And I told myself that my own relatively calm teen-aged experience with my parents was the result of living in a simpler time, with fewer real problems and temptations.

At some point, though, I resumed reflecting on the lessons to be learned from my parents and wished they were still alive to help me. What I learned from them early in life set the stage for what I learned later about the role of thought and the direct link between how we're thinking and how life looks to us. Remarkably, years of awkwardness and unpleasantness fell away as the significance of that realization dawned on me. I had been using my own thinking against myself and others by taking the scary, hateful or negative things that came to mind much more seriously than the ordinary thoughts that made up most of my day, passing virtually unnoticed. I simply had no idea that I was the thinker of my own thoughts and I had the power to change my mind.

With all due respect to the work I read about learned helplessness, it reminded me of how I had gone astray. It seemed to be taking people in the direction of thinking more and more and harder and harder about what is on their minds when they are most frightened, rather than pointing them towards understanding the role of thought generally in life and then being free to go about life, taking helplessness and optimism together as thoughts that naturally come and go. Who hasn't felt helpless sometimes? And who hasn't felt optimistic? And who hasn't run the whole gamut of thinking in between?

So, back to my colleague's concerns and his feeling that agents of positive change must somehow "circumvent" learned helplessness. To circumvent something is to walk around it, to believe it is real and really an obstacle, and to abandon those who are experiencing it to the hopeless battle they are fighting. That is like slamming the closet door shut and putting up a barricade when a small child is frightened that there may be "a monster in there." It leaves the child with the notion that there *may* actually be a monster in there, and leaves him to imagine how the monster will find a way to get past the barricade. It never addresses the underlying truth of the child's fear: the monster does seem real when he's thinking about it because we all have the ability to make things up and bring them to light through the power of our own minds. But that same power can be used to step back and reflect, to gain an insight into what is imagined and what is actually in the closet, to find the wisdom to recognize the workings of our own capacity for thought.

What about preventing learned helplessness by engaging people's natural capacity to see for themselves how thinking actually works? It seems quite possible to eliminate learned helplessness as a label for a long-term state of mind by drawing on people's natural strength and ability to bounce back and look forward with optimism, regardless of how

long something negative has been on their minds. To quote a friend who works successfully with troubled people, “The life of a thought is only as long as you’re thinking it.” Some will say, “Yes, but some people really do have monsters in their closets! And some people’s lives have been bedeviled by misfortune and terrible circumstances beyond their control! Haven’t they “earned” their helplessness?

My gut feeling is that to suggest that any human being has no choice but to be helpless is to negate the beauty and power of the human spirit and to deny the common bond of humanity, the innate capacity to recover and learn from life. No matter what has happened in the past, no one would prefer to face the uncertain future from a stance of helplessness. If people recognized there was an internal choice to be made, they would choose to face it from strength. The missing piece for most of us is not the choice itself, but the knowledge that we are free to make it, the understanding that we have the ability to think our way intuitively and insightfully through the rest of our days, and, if we fall short, to think again. This is not learned behavior; it is a deeply spiritual realization of the creative power of thought.

©Judith A. Sedgeman, EdD