

Learned Helplessness in Adolescents

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Abstract: *Pessimism among adolescents is a state of mind in which they tend to think that failure in school is their own fault. They consider the cause of their failure is their own stupidity, lack of talent, shyness and dependence on others which is permanent; therefore they do not bother to change it. As a result of this passivity several psychological disorders like depression, anxiety, phobia, loneliness starts playing negative consequences in the minds of the adolescents and so they learn to be helpless. Learned helplessness is a condition of resignation or give up which reduces adolescents self reliance, motivation, personal performance, social assurance and holds them back from achieving their goals. However it is important here for the parents and teachers that not all children react to failure with learned helplessness or depression. If they consider their child/student is showing the sign of learned helplessness, it is best for them to provide adequate treatment.*

Keywords: Adolescents, Depression, Learned Helplessness, Psychological Disorder, Resignation.

1. Introduction

In the present scenario, teachers are facing the challenge of educating students who learn in unique and individual ways. Some students show persistent behavior when they face failure whereas others give up or choose a task which is less challenging. Those students, who give up, do so; because they have experienced repeated failure to make the situation better. They generally believe that they are incapable to accomplish the task or change the situation. This phenomenon was first found in animals and was referred to as learned helplessness.

The learned helplessness response pattern was first discovered by Martin Seligman accidentally during mid 1960s in his study of animal learning. In his study he found that after repeatedly exposure to inescapable electric shock some dogs passively accepted the shock even when they could take action to avoid it. The same learned helplessness response pattern was also found in adolescents in their academic setting when their continuous exposure to failure contributes to their withdrawal, lack of persistence and unwillingness to do a novel task. This pattern of withdrawal reinforces the students that they cannot ever get rid of their academic difficulties.

2. Learned Helplessness

Learned helplessness is an act of giving up or stop trying a task by individual or organism which they fail to accomplish even due to previous repeated attempts. It is the result of the general belief that one has very little or no control over the environment. It occurs when individual attributes the negative events in life to internal (it's me!), stable (it'll last forever!) and global (it'll affect everything I do!) factors.

The learned helplessness phenomenon works in three interrelated areas i.e. cognitive, affective and motivational (Comer, 2004). In cognitive area an individual or organism fails to find association between new stimulus and response, in affective area organism shows depressed affect and in area of motivational functioning organism shows a retarded

initiation of responses i.e., they learn that the entire attempt to solve a problem goes futile (Comer, 2004).

Learned helplessness can be developed at any stage of one's life and affects his behavioural, cognitive and affective domain. When a learned helpless person is in habit of putting things off or give up he is affecting his behavioural domain. When a person reduce confidence in him and increases the feeling of frustration in him his cognitive domain will be affected. The affective domain is affected when a person shows the sign of depression, blames his lack of ability when failed and credits his luck when succeeds.

3. Learned Helplessness Theory

Learned helplessness occurs when an individual considers a situation or event as unfavorable stress. To avoid this stressful situation he tries to make it less challenging and more favorable, but when he fails to influence the situation using multiple failed responses, response-outcome independence is learned, which is the key assumption of the learned helplessness theory. In response-outcome independence, individual or organism create an expectation that there will be no relationship between his action and the outcome in future activities as his earlier outcome of an action is independent of self initiated action. As a result of this response-outcome independence frustration develops related to individual's uncontrollable and unpredictable future event. The response-outcome independence produces three effects on helplessness: 1) the motivational effect, 2) the cognitive effect and 3) emotional effect (Maier & Seligman, 1976).

Motivational Effect: The motivation to effect any situation or event occurs with the expectation of the individual that his response to a particular situation or an event will change the outcome. But his motivation to respond reduces, with the perception that outcome of any of the future event is independent of his action and as a result he decreases his attempts to respond.

Cognitive Effect: As a result of the response-outcome independence, individuals or organism also experience

cognitive deficiency (i.e. inability of the individual to understand which action produces what outcome). This cognitive deficiency is not restricted to the current situation but also applicable to the future situation, resulted impairment in future learning. If in future his action produces the desired results he becomes unaware of his success and his action worked.

Emotional Effect: When an individual or organism face a situation which he is unable to change, he experience negative emotional state. Negative emotional state is characterized by anxiety, depression and frustration. This

state remains persistent till an individual become able to control the situation.

The following figure (Fig. 1) represents the Learned Helplessness Theory. This figure shows that as an individual or organism experiences stress, challenges and other unfavorable situations, he attempted to perform such action which modifies the present undesired situation. His failure to change the situation creates response-outcome independence. This response outcome independence produces motivational, cognitive and emotional effect on the individual that through repeated failed attempts to change the situation leads to learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975).

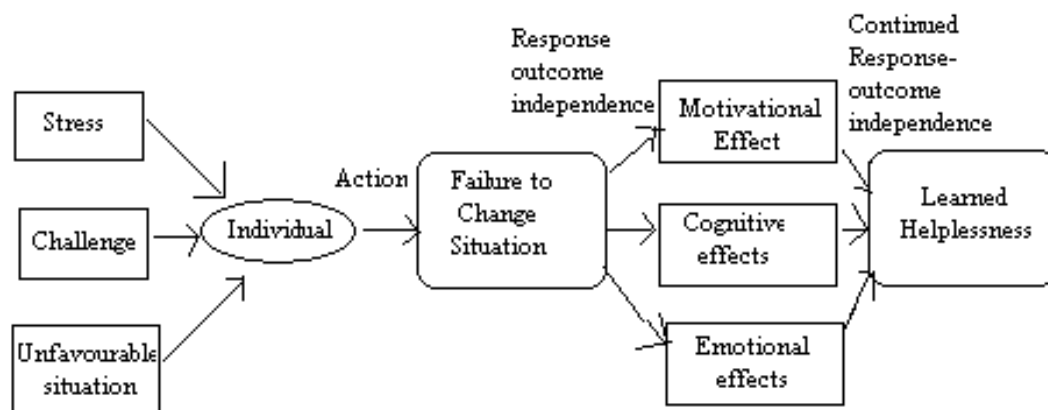


Figure 1: Figure showing Learned Helplessness Theory

4. Learned helplessness of adolescents in school/classrooms

The learned helpless students are generally considered by educators as shirk workers, inattentive and disruptive. These students try to do only that task which require very little effort as they feel despite the best efforts they will not get good grades so why try. Basically, they have developed a learned helpless response style, because after repeated academic failures they begins to doubt their own abilities and consequently reduce their efforts, particularly when facing difficult or challenging academic task. These students lack confidence in their own ability and intelligence and underestimate their own performance even when they can do well in classroom. They generalize their failure from one situation to other situations where they can perform well. They focus on what they can't do rather than their strengths and hence because of their passivity, their school performance deteriorates.

Among many other school subjects, learned helpless students were generally found in mathematics as mathematics is the area of curriculum where teachers generally encounter students who are discouraged, disengaged and have lower achievement (Yates, 2009). Some students behave during mathematics lessons as if they believe they are powerless to influence the outcomes of their learning (Seligman, 1995). They do not make much effort to learn, do not persist when mathematics tasks become difficult, often refuse to try, avoid work wherever possible, engage in a variety of off-task behaviours, respond badly to failure, or simply give up (Diener & Dweck, 1978). When

presented with new or different mathematics tasks or problems, disaffected students are likely to complain that they are too hard or they cannot do them, even before they have attempted to do so (McLeod, 1992). These students have learned to be helpless (Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993) and believe that the subject matter is beyond them, this belief is more commonly espoused by girls than boys (Monaco & Gentile, 1987; McLeod, 1992).

In Western societies mathematics is often considered to be a subject only for the very able (McLeod, 1992). Students often explain away their failure in mathematics by saying their parents were not good at math's when they were at school (McLeod, 1992). In addition, many students think that mathematics is governed by rules and that problems should be able to be solved within a few minutes (McLeod, 1992). These beliefs have negative effects on students' behaviours, particularly when they are confronted with problems which have no quick and easy solutions. The net result of these negative attitudes is that when students encounter difficulties in learning mathematics, many attribute their failure to their lack of mathematical ability and consequently decrease their efforts, engage in a variety of work avoidance strategies, or simply give up trying and opt out altogether. In response to repeated failure, students exhibit characteristically passive learned helplessness behaviours in the classroom (Peterson et al., 1993; Seligman, 1995) and reduce their participation in the activities and lessons provided by the teachers. This in turn interacts with their lower achievement (Brookhart, 1994), to create a vicious cycle of failure.

5. Symptoms of learned helpless adolescents

Following symptoms were generally found in learned helpless adolescents:

- Lack of cognitive efforts.
- Lack of confidence in their own skills.
- Inability to take initiatives.
- Demonstration of extreme negativism.
- Social isolation.
- Lack of basic drives.
- Lack of motivation to learn.
- Low self esteem.
- Poor coping skills.

6. Remedies to Prevent Learned Helplessness among Adolescents

In order to provide remedies to helpless adolescents to prevent their learned helplessness, it is necessary to keep in mind that success builds success and failure builds failure. So to prevent helplessness among adolescents, educators and parents should try to help the students to avoid their failure and achieving more and more success by using following remedies:

1. Educators should create an environment in the classroom to encourage students to make an effort even if the result is failure.
2. Educator should help the students to master the needed skills in the intervention classes.
3. Educators or teachers should keep students motivated all the time and encourage them to study those topics in which they are interested.
4. If the students are not responding to the teachers call, students should be given time to discuss the concept with their classmates so that they can respond confidently.
5. Teachers should teach children to avoid or distract themselves from those thoughts which depress them.
6. Teachers should motivate the students to change their unrealistic thoughts to the realistic and flexible ones.

7. Future Scope/ Implications

With the help of remedies used by educators to prevent learned helplessness in adolescent,

1. Adolescents will maintain belief in their ability of problem solving. They view failure as a challenge and focus on effort attribution rather than ability.
2. Focusing students' attention on the goal of learning rather than on showing how well they can perform will have beneficial effects in overcoming the problem of helplessness.

8. Conclusion

Through careful observation, planning, scaffolding and accountability, teachers can help learned helpless adolescents to be successful. It will take thoughtful, caring

teachers who, despite the challenges, are willing and able to build success with students who thus far may not have had a successful and motivating school experience.

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