

## The Quest4Life Podcast Show Notes:

### *Season #3, Episode #16: Unlearning Helplessness*

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Learned helplessness what social science researchers call it when a person is unable to find resolutions to difficult situations even when a solution is accessible.

More technically, according to the American Psychological Association, learned helplessness occurs when someone repeatedly faces uncontrollable, stressful situations, then does not exercise control when it becomes available. In effect, they have learned that they are “helpless” and no longer try to change even when change is possible.

What follows are ways people can level-up their mindset in the attempt to perform at life more effectively.

#### **Background**

In 1967, researchers Martin Seligman and Steven Maier stumbled upon the idea of learned helplessness while studying animal behavior, specifically dogs. They discovered that dogs who had been exposed to a series of inescapable shocks stopped trying to get away from the electric shocks altogether.

As a result, Seligman and Maier experimented with human beings, using loud noises instead of electric shocks, and found that people had a similar reaction. This research led to a new and greater understanding of traumatic events people experience whereby repeated abuse or exposure to other aversive situations can lead to feelings of helplessness if nothing they attempt changes their circumstances. In many ways, these people simply succumb to the belief that since nothing they did worked well enough to get out of a traumatic or aversive situation in the past, nothing will work in similar situations in their present or future.

#### **Learned Helplessness**

When learned helplessness takes over, a person doesn't feel sure of themselves in their ability to handle challenges or deal with adversity, which begins to erode self-efficacy and internal locus of control. It should be noted that each of us, from time to time, can experience feelings of helplessness...if for no other reason the stress and distractions of life can lead us to NOT be at the top of our game. This is perfectly normal.

When self-efficacy and internal locus of control erode, however, that is when learned helplessness and its damaging effects take over. The result of this can be seen in the following symptoms:

- 1) Low Self-Esteem. With learned helplessness, people hold a negative view of themselves and begin to doubt their ability to accomplish even the most insignificant task. 2

- 2) Frustration. People with learned helplessness have a low frustration tolerance, which is to say they get easily overwhelmed when engaging with work or other people.
- 3) Passivity. Such individuals tend to hold the attitude that, “Bad things happen to me.” Ironically, these people often don’t put much effort to improve their odds of success.
- 4) Lack of Effort. People with learned helplessness tend to procrastinate and avoid making decisions, operating under the assumption that nothing good will come of their efforts even if they try.
- 5) Giving Up. These individuals tend to quit pretty quickly on tasks even when they are met with minimal adversity.

### **Overcoming Learned Helplessness**

If you or someone you know have experienced these symptoms for a prolonged period of time, it is worth addressing, as, if left unchecked, learned helplessness can lead to serious negative life outcomes, such as addiction, substance abuse, dissatisfaction with life, and hopelessness. Working with a licensed mental health professional is cogent starting point.

Beyond that, there are a number of directions a person can go to help level-up with mindset to perform at life more effectively.

- 1) Focus on what you can control. While the notion of “control what you can control” seems trite, for people with learned helplessness, feelings of being unable to control situations and the outcome of situations are palpable. Thus, being able to identify things that the person CAN control and emphasizing those elements instead of focusing on those things that are outside of their control helps reframe their mindset. Essentially, the person is ratcheting up their focus and attention of factors that are within their control while simultaneously tamping down those things they can’t control.

For example, students have little to no control over the material they are required to study and learn or the quality of their teacher. They do, however, control how much attention they pay in class, how much effort they put into studying, and how they leverage outside resources, such as tutors, to help. And when focused attention is paid on what is within their control, it tamps down those factors that are beyond their control.

- 2) A change in attributional style, AKA explanatory style, is needed, which refers primarily to how people interpret adverse events. According to research, there are 3 patterns of thinking that are common among people with a pessimistic explanatory style, which likely increase developing learned helplessness.

First, these people perceive negative events as personal, which means they perceive negative events as being their fault. They place the blame for an unfavorable outcome on themselves, which seems to create a negative feedback loop of sorts relating back to low

self-esteem and a low internal locus of control even if the negative outcome had nothing to do when they doing anything wrong.

Next, people with learned helplessness perceive negative events as pervasive, which means that they believe negative events will occur in all areas of their life. Even though these negative events are likely limited to specific situations, these individuals make a global appraisal that all areas of their life will be subject to unfavorable results.

Finally, these people perceive negative events or outcomes as permanent, which means that they begin down the road of hopelessness holding the belief that the situation at hand will never improve. And, within these patterns of thinking, there are domains, which is to say how people with learned helplessness orient their mindset.

- 3) A third approach or technique a person can try is using positive reinforcement. In terms of motivation, it is commonly accepted that positively reinforcing behavior helps shape future desirable behavior. A person experiencing learned helplessness benefits from positive reinforcement because it can enhance their self-esteem, which reduces feelings of helplessness.

Simply describing a list of positive characteristics is enough to induce higher levels of self-esteem in study participants even if the commentary was somewhat generic, such as, “He is able to show concern and respect for others” or “She is thoughtful and possesses the ability to connect well with others.” Still further, people with learned helplessness can use positive reinforcement when retroactively evaluating past events that were perceived as negative or unfavorable.

Said differently, these folks can look back at past events and evaluate them in a way that provides positive reinforcement. For example, instead of ruminating on past negative events as bad, individuals can reframe past decisions or actions in a positive way by highlighting the fact that the choices were made using a logical or rational approach. Or, the outcomes of past events can be reframed positively by emphasizing the fact that the person learned valuable lessons from their experiences and how they now have more knowledge to handle similar situations differently in the future even if the past experience itself was negative.

## Summary

Learned helplessness is a state of mind where someone believes that they are unable to act effectively, especially when it comes to avoiding negative outcomes.

Next, learned helplessness is inherently problematic and can lead to a host of mental and physical issues, such as depression, loss of interest in life, and feelings of worthlessness.

There is hope, however, as identifying things within a person’s control and focusing on those things rather than those things outside of their control helps reduce and, potentially, overcome learned helplessness. These people can also seek positive reinforcement in addition to working

on shifting their attributional style to avoid viewing negative outcomes as something personal, pervasive, and permanent.

### **Final Thoughts**

There is little doubt that, at some point in the future, you will recognize symptoms of learned helplessness in others and can provide a measure of comfort as they navigate that season of their life.

It should also be noted that, like other mental health disorders, such as depression, it is easy for people to underestimate the negative effects to people's lives.

If that is your default position, consider rethinking it, as for people with learned helplessness, it isn't as simple as picking themselves up and dusting off. It is more layered and nuanced than that and it requires that we show grace and love them enough to be a beacon of hope and a light in the dark for them.

As usual, it's food for thought, Fellow Questers.

