

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Generality of Learned Helplessness in Man

Hiroto, D. and M. E. P. Seligman (1975). "Generality of Learned Helplessness in Man." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 31(2): 311 - 327.

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Summary/Conclusions

The present study sought to validate the presence and impact of learned helplessness in humans. Learned helplessness is a trait that can develop when people find themselves in situations that are negative and inescapable. Individuals may suffer interference with learning and motivation following the negative situation. The present study discovered that individuals placed in a learned helplessness state did not perform as well with subsequent tasks within their control. Even when individuals completed different (i.e. cognitive or mental) tasks, learned helplessness still had a negative impact on performance.

Limitations of Information

The study did not identify how easy or difficult it is to fall into or escape learned helplessness. The present study only consists of a small sample of college students from one university. Consequences for not solving the problem or performing the task were small. It is unclear how larger consequences may impact behavior. Tasks were completed relatively quickly, it is unclear if the results would remain consistent if the duration was adjusted.

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

Overcoming Helplessness

Prior research with animals and individuals has identified a trait called learned helplessness. An individual may experience learned helplessness when they face an inescapable negative event. Individuals experiencing this trait display problems with learning and motivation. In the present study, researchers sought to validate learned helplessness in humans and if there were any impact with physical or cognitive tasks.

Researchers recruited 96 undergraduate students to participate in the study. Participants were assigned to one of twelve groups. The groups were broken down by task type (physical or cognitive) and states (helpless, empowered, or control). For the first half of the experiment individuals were given tasks to experience. The empowered groups received tasks with a possible solution and were given feedback. The helpless groups were told to complete tasks; however, there were no solutions for the tasks. Control groups were instructed just to inspect the problems. Next the groups either kept or switched their task type (physical or cognitive) and were instructed to again complete the tasks. This time all tasks had solutions. Researchers tracked the time it took for participants to complete tasks, the number of failed attempts, and the number of times it took to complete the tasks. The results for each group were compared.

The helpless group performed significantly worse in three of the four possible task type combinations. Individuals that were in the helpless group complet-

ed tasks slower, needed more attempts to complete tasks, and failed with more tasks than individuals not placed in the helpless group. The study was the first to confirm that humans can suffer the effects of learned helplessness. Additionally, learned helplessness existed regardless of the type of task assigned.

Practical Applications for Probation Officers:

- ✓ Ask probationers about prior challenges and if they feel capable and ready to face current challenges.
- ✓ Review assessment information (e.g. ASUS-R strengths/motivation scales) for additional clues that a probationer's self-efficacy is low. This may create a foundation for a healthy dialogue.
- ✓ For probationers who feel helpless, try finding small action steps that can be completed quickly to develop confidence and belief in success.
- ✓ Regularly review case plans for action step and goal completion.
- ✓ Point out accomplishments and celebrate success.
- ✓ When probationers struggle with completing a task successfully, consider providing reinforcement for continued effort and resilience.

Practical Applications for Probation Supervisors:

- ✓ Provide officers positive feedback for extending effort and making progress.
- ✓ Ask officers what you can do to help them be successful with their probationers.