What Is Learned Helplessness?

Learned helplessness occurs when an animal is repeatedly subjected to an aversive stimulus that it cannot escape. Eventually, the animal will stop trying to avoid the stimulus and behave as if it is utterly helpless to change the situation. Even when opportunities to escape are presented, this learned helplessness will prevent any action.

While the concept is strongly tied to animal psychology and behavior, it can also apply to many situations involving human beings.

When people feel that they have no control over their situation, they may begin to behave in a helpless manner. This inaction can lead people to overlook opportunities for relief or change.

The Discovery of Learned Helplessness

The concept of learned helplessness was discovered accidentally by psychologists Martin Seligman and Steven F. Maier. They had initially observed helpless behavior in dogs that were classically conditioned to expect an electrical shock after hearing a tone.

Later, the dogs were placed in a shuttlebox that contained two chambers separated by a low barrier. The floor was electrified on one side, and not on the other. The dogs previously subjected to the classical conditioning made no attempts to escape, even though avoiding the shock simply involved jumping over a small barrier.

To investigate this phenomenon, the researchers then devised another experiment.

In group one, the dogs were strapped into harnesses for a period of time and then released.

The dogs in the second group were placed in the same harnesses but were subjected to electrical shocks that could be avoided by pressing a panel with their noses.

The third group received the same shocks as those in group two, except that those in this group were not able to control the shock. For those dogs in the third group, the shocks seemed to be completely random and outside of their control.

The dogs were then placed in a shuttlebox. Dogs from the first and second group quickly learned that jumping the barrier eliminated the shock. Those from the third group, however, made no attempts to get away from the shocks. Due to their previous experience, they had developed a cognitive expectation that nothing they did would prevent or eliminate the shocks.

Learned Helplessness in People

The impact of learned helplessness has been demonstrated in different animal species, but its effects can also be seen in people.

Consider one often-used example: A child who performs poorly on math tests and assignments will quickly begin to feel that nothing he does will have any effect on his math performance. When later faced with any type of math-related task, he may experience a sense of helplessness.

Learned helplessness has also been associated with several different psychological disorders. Depression, anxiety, phobias, shyness, and loneliness can all be exacerbated by learned helplessness.

For example, a woman who feels shy in social situations may eventually begin to feel that there is nothing she can do to overcome her symptoms. This sense that her symptoms are out of her direct control may lead her to stop trying to engage herself in social situations, thus making her shyness even more pronounced.

Researchers have found, however, that learned helplessness does not always generalize across all settings and situations. A student who experiences learned helpless with regards to math class will not necessarily experience that same helplessness when faced with performing calculations in the real world. In other cases, people may experience learned helplessness that generalizes across a wide variety of situations.

The Role of Explanatory Styles

So what explains why some people develop learned helplessness and others do not? Why is it specific to some situations but more global in others?

Many researchers believe that attribution or explanatory styles play a role in determining how people are impacted by learned helplessness. This view suggests that an individual's characteristic style of explaining events helps determine whether or not they will develop learned helplessness.

A pessimistic explanatory style is associated with a greater likelihood of experiencing learned helplessness. People with this explanatory style tend to view negative events as being inescapable and unavoidable and tend to take personal responsibility for such negative events.

Learned Helplessness in Children

Learned helpless often originates in childhood, and unreliable or unresponsive caregivers can contribute to these feelings. This learned helplessness can begin very early in life. Children raised in institutionalized settings, for example, often exhibit symptoms of helplessness even during infancy.

When children need help but no one comes to their aid, they may be left feeling that nothing they do will change their situation. Repeated experiences that bolster these feelings of helplessness and hopelessness can result in growing into adulthood ultimately feeling that there is nothing one can do to change his or her problems.

Some common symptoms of learned helplessness in children include:

Low self-esteem

Passivity

Poor motivation

Giving up

Lack of effort

Frustration

Procrastination

Failure to ask for help

Learned helplessness can also result in anxiety, depression, or both. When kids feel that they've had no control over the past events of their lives, they gain the expectation that future events will be just as uncontrollable. Because they believe that nothing they do will ever change the outcome of an event, kids are often left thinking that they should not even bother trying.

Academic struggles can often lead to feelings of learned helplessness. A child who makes an effort to do well but still does poorly may end up feeling that he has no control over his grades or performance. Since nothing he does seems to make any difference, he will stop trying and his grades will suffer even more. Such problems can also affect other areas of the child's life. His poor performance in school can make him feel that nothing he does is right or useful, so he may lose the motivation to try in other areas of his life as well.

Learned Helplessness in Mental Health

Learned helplessness is thought to contribute to feelings of anxiety and may influence the onset, severity, and persistence of conditions such as generalized anxiety disorder (GAD). When you experience chronic anxiety, you may eventually give up on finding relief because your anxious feelings seem unavoidable and untreatable. Because of this, people who are experiencing mental health issues such as anxiety or depression may refuse medications or therapy that may help relieve their symptoms.

As people age, learned helplessness can become something of a vicious cycle. When encountering problems such as anxiety or depression, people may feel that nothing can be done to ease these feelings. People then fail to seek out options that may help which then contributes to greater feelings of helplessness and anxiety.

Overcoming Learned Helplessness

So what can people do to overcome learned helplessness? Research suggests that learned helplessness can be successfully decreased, particularly if intervention occurs during early onset. Long-term learned helplessness can also be reduced, although it may require longer-term effort.

Therapy can be effective in reducing symptoms of learned helplessness. In one study, for example, some participants were asked to try to complete an unsolvable task. Those who received a therapeutic intervention after failing at the task were more likely to try again and successfully complete a follow-up task. Those who did not receive an intervention were more likely to experience learned helplessness and give up.

So what can people do to overcome learned helplessness? Cognitive-behavioral therapy is form of psychotherapy that can be beneficial in overcoming the thinking and behavioral patterns that contribute to learned helplessness. The goal of CBT is to help patients identify negative thought patterns that contribute to feelings of learned helplessness and then replace these thoughts with more optimistic and rational thoughts. This process often involves carefully analyzing what you are thinking, actively challenging these ideas, and disputing negative thought patterns. <https://youtu.be/YMPzDiraNnA>

Under current laws, scientists are “only allowed to genetically edit human embryos for 14 days for research purposes, after which they must be destroyed, and it is illegal to implant them into a womb”, says [The Daily Telegraph](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/2018/07/16/designer-babies-horizon-ethics-council-gives-green-light-genetically/).

But the [Nuffield Council on Bioethics](http://nuffieldbioethics.org/) says it could be acceptable to changes these laws, provided safeguards were met. The council’s report says that gene-editing procedures would be acceptable if they secure the future person’s welfare and do not increase disadvantages, discrimination or divisions within society.

“The potential use of genome editing to influence the characteristics of future generations is not unacceptable in itself,” said panel chair Karen Yeung, a professor of law, ethics and informatics at Birmingham University.

The discussion about the ethics of designer babies has been brought into sharp focus by the development of a technology called Crispr-Cas9 that “makes it remarkably simple to directly tinker with the human genome (the DNA sequence) of an early embryo”, says [Wired](https://www.wired.com/2015/12/youre-only-human-but-your-kids-could-be-so-much-more/).

When combined with IVF, “these new genetic tools allow scientists to change the DNA, which is the blueprint of a human embryo, when it consists of just one or a few cells”, the magazine explains.

Although technical hurdles remain, “advances in gene editing mean that it is possible to contemplate a time when embryos can be modified so that genetic diseases, or even genetic predispositions to disease, are eliminated”, reports [The Times](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/no-moral-bar-to-creating-designer-babies-medical-ethics-body-claims-2hd0nql56).

But opponents of designer babies “warn that permitting the practice could lead to the creation of super humans who have an unfair genetic advantage over others”, says German newspaper [Deutsche Welle.](https://www.dw.com/en/gene-editing-of-babies-could-be-ethical-experts-say/a-44703597)

Here are brief summaries of arguments from both sides of the debate:

##### For

* Since many diseases are caused by a single genetic mutation, those in favour ask why we shouldn’t edit the DNA of an embryo or the sperm and egg to remove the mutation entirely. “In effect this would remove a fault from humanity forever,” says [The Times](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/designer-babies-and-editing-human-dna-wkdwz08j5).  John Harris, a bioethicist at the University of Manchester, says: “The human genome is not perfect. It’s ethically imperative to positively support this technology.”
* Those in favour argue that these scientific advances can be regulated in order to avert potential doomsday scenarios. “I still think you can try to regulate the technology,” Arthur Caplan, founding head of the Division of Bioethics at New York University, told [USA Today](https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/2017/08/03/bioethicist-dont-worry-designer-babies-worry-regulation/537885001/). “It would be nice if we had an international group; set out some rules. It would be great if the scientific community - with religious and ethics and legal leaders - would set up some rules of how to operate. It would be nice if journal editors would say, ‘We’re not publishing anything unless these rules are followed.’”
* In the US, a poll found that 83% of people thought genetic modification to make a baby more clever would be “taking medical advances too far”, according to [MIT Technology Review](https://www.technologyreview.com/s/535661/engineering-the-perfect-baby/), published by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. However, proponents of genetic engineering argue that higher IQ is exactly what we should be considering. Nick Bostrom, an Oxford philosopher best known for his work on the risks of artificial intelligence, wrote in a [2013 paper](https://nickbostrom.com/papers/embryo.pdf) that even a small number of “super-enhanced” individuals could “change the world through their creativity and discoveries, and through innovations that everyone else would use”.

##### Cons

* There is the possibility that people will use the technology for “enhancements”, rather than fighting disease, American TV host John Oliver said recently on his show [Last Week Tonight](http://www.realclearlife.com/daily-brief/playing-god-john-oliver-warns-against-dangers-of-gene-editing/). “The more control people have over the ability to design their children, the bigger the moral questions that raises - up to and including, who decides what constitutes a genetic problem that needs to be ‘fixed’?”
* Another issue is that of practicalities. Doctors say that just because we can change a gene does not mean we know what that change will do. “Most diseases are not caused by a single gene but many. Changing lots of genes could have lots of effects elsewhere,” reports The Times.
* Any ethical debate “will also naturally run against practicalities like funding”, says [The Independent](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/designer-babies-gene-editing-genetics-genome-nuffield-ethics-disease-a8449971.html). Many patients are subject already to a postcode lottery in accessing fertility treatment based on their local NHS funding, and “gene editing could initially be out of reach for all but the richest”, adds the newspaper. Acknowledging this problem, panel chair Professor Yeung said that if funding inequalities “were to exacerbate social injustice, in our view that would not be an ethical approach”.

### **Concerns rise as genetically modified babies debate continues**

He Jiankui’s university has claimed it was not aware of the study, and that the researcher had been on unpaid leave.

Another cause for concern is the strange choice of HIV as the focus of the study. The safety profile of gene editing technologies such as CRISPR/Cas is far from fully understood, and they may cause mutations that result in pathologies such as cancer.

Because of this, their use so far has been restricted to adults with extremely severe diseases.

Although in theory there is a chance that HIV will pass from the father to the child during in vitro fertilisation of the embryo, this risk has been mitigated by the use of techniques such as ‘‘sperm washing’’ and retroviral drugs.

For conditions like cystic fibrosis that lack a cure, embryonic editing may be justified; for HIV, the benefits seem slim.

For Lulu and Nana, there are likely to be many downsides to being the first GM children: the twins have an increased risk of developing genetic diseases and an increased risk of developing cancers such as lymphoma (which killed the famous ‘‘bubble boy’’ David Vetter in the 80s).

Disruption of the CCR5 gene is also likely to increase their chance of catching some other viral infections, such as common colds.

However, on the upside, there is some evidence that those without CCR5 are more likely to be resistant to smallpox.

<https://youtu.be/P5djr480IVw>

**1.**“When you complain, you make yourself a victim. Leave the situation, change the situation, or accept it. All else is madness.” Eckhart Tolle

**2.**“Stay away from ‘still’ people. Still broke, still complaining, still hating, and still nowhere.” Anonymous

**3.**“Complaining never makes anything better.” Anonymous

**4.**“If you don’t like something, change it. If you can’t change it, change your attitude. Don’t complain.” [Maya Angelou](https://www.awakenthegreatnesswithin.com/22-inspiring-maya-angelou-quotes/)

**5.**“Go 24 hours without complaining. (Not even once). Then watch how your life starts changing.” Anonymous

**6.**“Someone else is happy with less than what you have.” Anonymous

**7.**“If you have time to whine and complain about something then you have the time to do something about it.” Anthony J. D’Angelo

**8.**“Happiness comes a lot easier when you stop complaining about your problems and you start being grateful for all the problems you don’t have.” Anonymous

**9.**“Spending today complaining about yesterday won’t make tomorrow any [better](https://www.awakenthegreatnesswithin.com/have-the-courage-to-begin-again/).” Anonymous

**10.**“Be thankful and stop complaining.” Anonymous

**11.**“The only thing complaining does is convince other people that you are not in control.” Anonymous

**12.**“Do not listen to those who weep and complain, for their disease is contagious.” Og Mandino

**13.**“Stop complaining about how your [life](https://www.awakenthegreatnesswithin.com/brian-tracys-master-your-time-master-your-life/) isn’t what you want and start making your life the way you want it to be.” Anonymous

**14.**“I think some people enjoy complaining almost as much as they enjoy doing nothing about it.” Anonymous

**15.**“Happy are they who take life day by day, complain very little and are thankful for the little things in life.” Anonymous

**16.**“Complaining does not work as a [strategy](https://www.awakenthegreatnesswithin.com/35-inspirational-quotes-on-strategy/).” Anonymous

**17.**“The worst person to be around is someone who complains about everything and appreciates nothing.” Anonymous

**18.**“Any fool can criticize, condemn, and complain, and most do.” Dale Carnegie

**19.**“Never complain and never explain.” Benjamin Disraeli

**20.**“The world becomes a better place when people get busy doing what they love instead of complaining about what they hate.” Anonymous

**21.**“The pessimist complains about the wind. The optimist expects it to change. The realist adjusts the sail.” William A. Ward

**22.**“Complaining is a complete waste of one’s [energy](https://www.awakenthegreatnesswithin.com/32-inspirational-positive-energy-quotes-that-will-elevate-your-life/). Those who complain the most accomplish the least.” Anonymous

**23.**“Complaining is finding faults. Wisdom is finding solutions.” Ajahn Brahm

**24.**“Life becomes more challenging if all you do is complain.” Anonymous

**25.**“Train hard instead of complaining and making excuses.” Anonymous

**26.**“Complaining doesn’t help you make progress.” ATGW

**27.**“Stressing and complaining will change nothing. Take action, make a change, and never look back.” Anonymous

**28.**“Don’t complain. Just [work](https://www.awakenthegreatnesswithin.com/hard-work/) harder.” Randy Pausch

**29.**“Be happy with what you have while working for what you want.” Helen Keller

**30.**“As you breathe right now, another takes his last. So stop complaining and learn to live with what you have.” Anonymous

**31.**“If you spend five minutes complaining, you have just wasted five minutes.” Anonymous

**32.**“Enough complaining! Take action to reduce the things in life that cause you irritation and grief.” Anonymous

**33.**“I have the choice to be angry at God for what I don’t have, or be thankful for what I do have.” Nick Vujicic

**34.**“If you aren’t willing to [work](https://www.awakenthegreatnesswithin.com/how-to-be-an-action-taker/) for it. Don’t complain about not having it.” Fearless Motivation

https://youtu.be/NRpAGLkTzuU