

# Learned Helplessness

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## **WHAT IS LEARNED HELPLESSNESS?**

It is a habit of expecting help because of a learned belief that one cannot do something - without even attempting to try. It arises out of protectiveness of those around us when we were small and truly needed lots of help. Most children rise out of it and start rejecting help out of a feeling of competence or pride. Then there is a feeling of mastery. Mastering a difficult task brings a feeling of pride, accomplishment and leads to growth and independence. Some children do not break out of their shell and do not insist of doing things themselves. The reasons for that are not important - the result is - a belief that one is incompetent.

## **LEARNED HELPLESSNESS LEADS TO DEPENDENCY**

When a person grows up believing that they are incompetent and therefore needs help with each new task, they come across as dependent and helpless. From time to time, people will be glad to help and guide, until they notice that the person expects lots of feedback for every little step. At times people will react to that with impatience and go ahead and do it themselves, at other times people will just turn away and find someone else to do the task. All this fulfills the person's belief that they are incompetent.

A dependent person may find a few strong friends who do not mind having a dependent person for a buddy, and they might marry a strong person. However, they are still dependent in those relationships. They cannot shake the feeling of incompetence. Eventually, the dependent people feel anger toward their strong friends because they have no power in the relationship. All they can do is tag along.

## **DEPENDENCY LEADS TO DEPRESSION**

People who feel powerless in life and in relationships tend to compare themselves to what I call the "Ideal Lump". The "ideal lump" is an idealized image of a person to which they compare themselves. This "Ideal Lump" has all the physical characteristics and personality traits which the depressed person admired in others. The problem is, that all these characteristics are fragments of other people which the person lumped together for a creation of a fantastic model for a human. No one fits that ideal, no one could. Therefore, the chances of the depressed person measuring up favorably to this fantastic ideal are close to zero. Thus perpetuating the feeling of incompetence.

### **THE REMEDY FOR LEARNED HELPLESSNESS**

Challenge yourself, if you are such a person. Make yourself do things that you believe you cannot do without assistance. Start with small tasks and work your way up to harder ones. Instead of asking people for help, read a book on how to do it. Read up on it on the Internet. If you do not succeed, think about how you went about it. Try to figure out where you made the mistake. Try again. Once you succeed, you will feel good about it.

Some people have a habit of criticizing others and pointing out what they did wrong. So if you do something, and someone criticizes it, thank him or her for their input. If they have a point, change your strategy. If they are just criticizing because you didn't do it their way, don't be upset, it's just their bad habit of criticizing. None of us are perfect.

If you have a child who acts like they are beaten down by life and asks for help with everything, this is what you can do. Watch that child carefully and compliment them on the smallest ventures into doing new things by themselves. Say things like, "I didn't know you could do that?" "Grandma, did you know that Joey can do that?" If you know your youngster knows how to do something, pretend like you don't know what to do. Ask them to show you. Ask them to show you twice before you "get it". Have other family members act in a similar way.

Encourage your young ones to try to figure things out by themselves. Part of growing up with competence is learning how to learn. Brag about them to relatives, detailing their accomplishments.