Warning: If you are planning to take Jamie Lash's Speed Reading course, please refrain from reading these articles first (let's your results be skewed).

Learned Helplessness

(quoted passages are from "Learned Optimism" by Dr. Martin Seligman)

"Learned helplessness is the giving up reaction, the quitting response that follows from the belief that whatever you do doesn't matter."

"The very thought "Nothing I do matters" prevents us from acting."

Two fish were put into the same tank. One was big, and one small. The species of the small fish was one of the favorite foods of the big fish. The big fish took off after the little fish, but a pane of glass separated them, so the big fish smashed his face...over and over again. Finally, he gave up. Then the experimenters removed the pane of glass, but the big fish never again tried to eat the little fish. Sometimes the two fish would swim right past each other, sometimes they would even brush up against each other, but the big fish never made another attempt. Apparently, he was convinced he couldn't do it, no matter how hard he tried.

Sometimes we find ourselves in a helpless situation, and there's nothing we can do about it. The point of the fish story is that we can assume our helplessness is permanent, even when it isn't. If we make that assumption, we just give up. We feel hopeless and have no energy, because we believe all our efforts are in vain.

Five gorillas were put in a room with a bunch of bananas hanging from the ceiling...too high for them to reach. A step ladder was in the corner of the room. One of the gorillas surveyed the situation and figured out what to do. He brought the step ladder under the bananas and went up, but when he grabbed a banana, he received an electric shock. Surprised and shaken, he came down with no banana. A second gorilla tried, and then a third. One by one each gorilla went up and got a shock...but no banana. The experimenters then turned off the electricity, but the gorillas never again ascended the ladder.

A few hours later one of the gorillas was removed and a new one was added. He started to go up the ladder, but the other four pulled him down. He tried again; they pulled him down again. Eventually, he gave up. The other gorillas obviously believed the bananas were still electrified. They thought they knew what would happen to him, and they knew he didn't know.

Another one of the original gorillas was removed, and a new one entered. The other four gorillas (including the one who had not been shocked) would not let the newcomer go up the ladder. By the end of the experiment, ALL the original

gorillas had been replaced by newcomers. Nevertheless, whenever a new gorilla tried to ascend the ladder, the others would pull him down.

Think about the situation. The electricity has been turned off, so there's no good reason *not* to have a banana. However, no one is having a banana, no one is allowing anyone else to have a banana, and no one knows why!

The gorilla story shows that helplessness not only can be *learned*; it can also be *taught*! Helplessness can be taught to others…even when it is not based in reality. The original gorillas had been shocked, and they educated the newcomers based on their false assumption that the bananas were still electrified. They were not trying to deceive the newcomers. Rather, they were trying to help them, based on their belief that they had superior knowledge of the situation.

Are you familiar with the name Roger Bannister? He was the first runner in recorded history to break the four-minute mile. What is especially interesting about the story is that the scientists and sports physiologists of the day said it could not be done. These experts said the human body wasn't made to go that fast. They said the runner's heart would explode and these other awful things would happen to him (although I don't know why he'd care once his heart explodes).

In 1954 Roger Bannister proved all of them wrong. For the first few laps, two of Bannister's friends set a good pace for him and shielded him from the wind. Then Bannister burst forth and did what had never been done. Now here's the truly amazing part. After the news spread about Bannister's accomplishment and people realized that the statements of those "experts" were obviously not true, the next year thirty-three people broke the four-minute mile! The year after that, over two hundred people did it!

The point is this: a thought can limit you and keep you from reaching your potential, even if the thought isn't true.

A high school teacher passed out three pieces of paper (face down) to each of her students. She then announced, "We're going to have a little competition! When I ask you to flip over the first piece of paper, you will find a word written on it. I want you to take the letters from that word and form a new word. As soon as you succeed in spelling a new word using all of those letters, raise your hand! Ready? Set? Go! Flip over the first piece of paper!"

Some of her students figured out how to spell a new word within a second or two, and their hands shot up. Some of her students struggled. The teacher waited for

about a minute or two, and then it became embarrassing, so she said, “Let’s move on to the second one.”

The students who did well on the first one, did well again, and the students who struggled on the first, struggled again. As you can imagine, many of the students who struggled were feeling rather embarrassed and stupid, seeing that they could not solve a problem in two minutes that some of their classmates solved in two seconds! But let me tell you what was really going on. Unbeknownst to the students, their teacher had not given the same words to all the students…as they had assumed. She gave half the class easy ones to solve, and the other half received words that were *impossible* to solve. There was literally no other word that could be spelled by those same letters.

She did not tell them that they had received different words. Instead, she told them to turn over the third piece of paper. With the third word, every student got the same word. It was do-able, but difficult. As you might imagine, most of the students who were brimming with confidence after conquering the first two words were able to figure out the third word as well. But only a few of the students who had failed in their first two attempts succeeded in figuring out the third one.

Within a span of about five minutes, their teacher had wounded half the class psychologically. By this time they faced the third word, most of them felt hopeless and had little energy to make a serious effort. By the time they received the third word, they expected to fail…and they did.

Their teacher then undertook to heal their wounds by telling them the truth. She confessed to her students that she had given half the class two unsolvable problems. To a large degree, this revelation healed the psychological wounds of those who had started wondering if they were idiots. When they learned that the first two problems were unsolvable, they could let go of that depressing thought.

When the truth changed what they were *thinking*, it also changed what they were *feeling*. The depression that emanated from the false belief disappeared when the students learned the truth. Hope returned.

If we believe our efforts are in vain, we feel hopeless, and we have very little energy. Why even try?

We must learn to tell ourselves the truth in order to guard our minds from learned helplessness and from the depression that accompanies it.

Learned Helplessness #2 (Seligman and Teasdale)

(quoted passages are from “Learned Optimism” by Dr. Martin Seligman)

Have you heard of Marty Seligman? He started doing Learned Helplessness experiments in the 1960's. For example, he took two sets of dogs and administered electric shocks. The first group of dogs had a lever in their cages. As they danced around in their attempts to evade the shocks, they would eventually knock into the lever, and the shock would stop immediately. All the dogs in this first group eventually learned to press the lever intentionally. Whenever a shock began, they would simply press the lever and stop it. These dogs remained friendly, chipper, and energetic.

The second group of dogs received the same shocks, but there was no lever in their cages, so they could do nothing to stop the shocks. Not surprisingly, these dogs who got the *inescapable* shocks became hopeless and depressed. Even though the floor was shocking them, many of the dogs lay down and whimpered.

The next day both sets of dogs were brought to a room for a completely different experiment. This experiment involved no electric shocks. Instead, the experimenters played a noise the dogs found very annoying. The room was divided in half—consisting of a box on one side and a box on the other. If a dog jumped from one box to the other, the obnoxious noise would immediately stop.

The dogs that had learned to press the lever to escape the shocks in the first experiment tried to figure out a way to escape the horrible noise. Eventually, all of these dogs learned to jump to the other side.

The results were very different for the other set of dogs. About two-thirds of the dogs that had been helpless in the first experiment ASSUMED they were helpless in the second, even though they weren't. All they had to do was jump to the other box, but they didn't even try to escape the horrible noise. Many just lay down once again and whimpered.

Donald Hiroto, a thirty-year-old graduate student, then said, “I want to try it with people, rather than dogs or rats, and see if it really applies to the human condition.” Hiroto set up experiments *with people* parallel to what had been done with the dogs.

> “He first took one group of people to a room, turned on loud noise, and gave them the task of learning how to turn it off. They tried every combination on the panel of buttons at their fingertips, but the noise was unstoppable. No pattern of button pressing would turn it off.

> Another group of people could turn off the noise by pushing the right pattern of buttons.
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> When Hiroto took both groups of human subjects into a completely different situation, the results were very similar to the animal experiments. "[As to the people who were able to turn off the noise in the first experiment]…they learned to turn the noise off easily!" Hiroto said. However, two-thirds of those who were helpless to turn off the noise in the first experiment ASSUMED they were helpless in the second. Hiroto said, "It was as if they'd learned they were helpless to turn off noise, so they didn't even try, even though everything else—the time and place, all that—had changed."

Marty Seligman spent a semester in London on sabbatical. He was invited to share about Learned Helplessness at Oxford University--an intimidating place to give a lecture. The audience included several prestigious academicians, including such notables as the father of British psychology, a professor on loan from Harvard, and a Nobel Prize winner. Marty Seligman's ideas about Learned Helplessness were very different from the Behaviorism that dominated the field of psychology at the time, so Dr. Seligman was a bit concerned about how his speech would be received. No worries. The audience loved it! With the exception of one man who was frowning quite a bit and shaking his head "no" at certain key points, the audience laughed at all the right moments and nodded their approval. Afterward, Seligman thought, *That went really well.*

Traditionally, the only thing left in the program was that a "discussant" would rise to say a few nice words about the speaker and the message, and then the meeting would conclude. But who do you suppose the discussant was? You guessed it. The frowning man rose to his feet and approached the microphone. His name was Dr. John Teasdale.

"You really shouldn't be carried away by this enchanting story," Teasdale told the audience. "The theory is wholly inadequate. Seligman has glossed over the fact that one-third of his human subjects never become helpless. Why not? And the ones who did, some bounced back right away; others never recovered. Some were helpless only in the very situation they learned to be helpless about; they no longer tried to escape from noise. Yet others gave up in brand-new situations. Why?"

Baffled looks appeared on many of the faces in the audience. Teasdale's piercing critique had thrown everything into doubt. Seligman says, "I was almost dumbstruck. I thought Teasdale was right, and I was embarrassed I hadn't thought of these objections myself. Ten years of research, which had looked

definitive to me when I began the talk, now seemed full of loose ends. I felt for a moment as if years of work might have been for nothing."

To his credit Seligman did not become defensive. Instead, he asked Teasdale for his help in constructing a theory that would incorporate Teasdale's concerns. Teasdale agreed. Seligman had no way of knowing that the Teasdale challenge would end up bringing about the thing he wanted most: the discovery of a way to help people overcome Learned Helplessness and the depression that accompanies it.

Seligman and Teasdale began taking long walks and brainstorming together. Up until this time, Seligman had focused on those who had learned to be helpless. But Teasdale focused on those who refused to give up.

"Yes, Teasdale had granted in his rebuttal, two out of three people became helpless. But, he'd stressed, one out of three resisted: No matter what happened to them to make them helpless, they would not give up."

Why would people who face the same adversity have such different responses? Teasdale believed the answer could be found in how the individuals explained the adversity to themselves.

When going through a helpless situation, many people jump to a pessimistic ASSUMPTION that their helplessness is permanent...even when it's not. Even though they have no solid evidence to support such a belief, they become convinced their helplessness will last forever. This is a rather depressing thought. If people believe "It's always going to be like this," they may start looking for a good bridge to jump off of.

Similarly, many people jump to a pessimistic assumption that their helplessness is pervasive, even when it's not. In other words, they assume their helplessness extends beyond the specific situation into many other situations as well. It becomes generalized or even universal within their own minds.

Although the original helplessness is real, it spreads within the minds of these subjects beyond its real borders, so that the subjects come to believe they're helpless when they're really not. At this point their lives are being dominated by an illusion.

Imagine a man finds himself in a situation in which he truly is helpless. He discovers there is nothing he can do that will make any difference at all. If he explains his adversity to himself in permanent and pervasive terms, then he will be thinking something like, "This is never going to end, and it's going to affect every area of my life." Not surprisingly, when people make assumptions of this

nature, it kills their hope. It makes them think their actions are in vain, and depression will likely result.

If, on the other hand, the man sees his helplessness as being temporary and specific (rather than permanent and pervasive), his hope does not die. Depression does not take root. He does not give up.

Imagine all the second graders who will flunk a math test this year. Some might respond to this adversity by saying to themselves, "Obviously, I'm terrible in math." Once a child has jumped to this assumption of PERMANANT helplessness, the hopelessness robs the child of energy. Why try…if it's hopeless! As a concerned parent or teacher, you might intervene and spend hours trying to tutor one of these children in math, but the child's eyes are likely to be glazed over. These children don't feel motivated to work at it and to figure it out, because they already feel hopeless. They believe their efforts are in vain. They're thinking, "YOU'RE good in math; I'm no good in math."

To make the problem even worse, some children will respond to the flunked math test by saying, "I'm stupid!" Their view of themselves is now tainted, not just in the math area, but in all academic areas. Can you imagine the impact such a belief is likely to have in the life of a child?

It's possible for someone of any age to be defeated in this way--not by reality, but by an illusion. Do you remember the big fish who believed he could not eat the little fish, even though the glass barrier had been removed? The illusion was enough to defeat him.

By making assumptions of permanence and pervasiveness that are not based in reality, people are sowing the Seeds of Hopelessness into their own hearts. As people come to believe their actions are futile, depression descends upon them.

- when depressed, "small obstacles seem like insurmountable barriers."

- "Depressed people often cannot get started on any but the most routine tasks, and they give up easily when impeded."

- "A setback is a defeat. And a defeat in one battle is the loss of the war. They don't begin to try again for weeks or months, and if they try, the slightest new setback throws them back into a helpless state."

- they don't think very well and are inattentive. "They [have] extraordinary difficulty learning anything new."

Is it possible that millions of people have been severely damaged by believing things that aren't even true?

The story is completely different for other second graders who might respond to the same situation by saying to themselves, "Well, I didn't study very much. If I put more into it and get some help from my Mom or my teacher, I can do better on the next one." Because their explanation is temporary and specific, these second graders do not lose hope. They don't buy in to the notion that they are helpless when they're really not. Therefore, they do not quit. Because their hope remains alive, their energy level remains strong. They can work to improve their performance on the next test.

Seligman writes, "Your way of explaining events to yourself determines how helpless you can become, or how energized, when you encounter the everyday setbacks as well as momentous defeats."

Is it possible that people can learn to change their inner dialogue, and thus liberate themselves from Learned Helplessness and its devastating effects?

In the next Comp Test, you will learn how to do just that.