

Learned Helplessness Experiment: Lesson Plan

Topic		
Learned helplessness is a phenomenon in which after experiencing pain or discomfort in an inescapable situation, an animal or human will cease trying to avoid the suffering. They believe they have no control over their situation, even if there is an opportunity to escape. This kind of conditioning was famously studied in Martin Seligman's Learned Helplessness Experiment, which was conducted in 1967 at the University of Pennsylvania. Dogs that were previously conditioned to associate the sound of a bell with pain from a shock would later lay down on an electrified floor panel rather than jump over to the visible unelectrified panel.		
Possible subjects/classes	Time needed	
Psychology Sociology	30-45 minutes	
Video link:	https://academy4sc.org/topic/learned-helplessness-experiment-doggone-attitude-sl/	
Objective: <i>What will students know/be able to do at the end of class?</i>		
By the end of this lesson, students will be able to <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Define learned helplessness• Explain the details and importance of Seligman's Learned Helplessness Experiment• Identify how explanatory styles play a large role in how people react to suffering.		
Key Concepts & Vocabulary		
Classical conditioning, optimism/optimist, pessimism/pessimist		
Materials Needed		
Worksheet		
Before you watch		
Present students with the following query (or a similar one):		

You're trapped in a locked room whose floor gives moderately painful but not permanently harmful electric shocks periodically. What do you do?

No matter what escape attempts the students describe, tell them that it doesn't work. After a few minutes, students will stop giving answers. Attempt to encourage them with such responses such as "Good idea, but no" or "Huh, that's a very interesting answer, but incorrect." Such encouragement will likely have no effect on them. Once the class falls silent, ask students, "are you going to wait it out then?" You will likely get frustrated responses that boil down to "yes."

Explain to students that in situations where we feel powerless - such as when every proposed solution is immediately discarded - we stop trying to avoid suffering or find an escape route. You can debrief this activity with the following questions:

1. Why do you give up instead of trying again? What discourages you?
2. What motivates you to try again? Are words of encouragement or threats of punishment always effective in getting people to behave in a certain manner?
3. What is the key difference between situations where you try your best and situations where you give up trying at all?

While you watch

Answer questions 1-3 on the worksheet

After you watch/discussion questions

1. Why do you think Seligman's findings were so ground-breaking?
2. Who would you expect to have more success, better health, and lower rates of depression—those with optimistic or pessimistic explanatory styles? Explain your answer.
3. Taking from Seligman's experiments, what are some ways you can help someone realize they have control over a bad situation?

Activity Ideas

1. Complete the worksheet and discuss answers in groups or as a class
2. Ask students to discuss times that they've been either optimistic or pessimistic about a situation.
3. Role play: students practice optimistic responses to various disappointing scenarios (i.e. getting a bad grade on a test, not getting a part in the school play, not making a sports team, losing a school election, not getting a job you wanted).

Sources/places to learn more

1. Allor Lauren B., Christopher Peterson, Lyn Y. Abramson, and Martin E. Seligman. "Attributional style and the generality of learned helplessness." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol 46, issue 3, 1984, pp. 681-687. Doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.46.3.681.
2. Klein, D. C. and Martin E. Seligman. "Reversal of performance deficits and perceptual deficits in learned helplessness and depression." *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, vol 85, issue 1, 1976, pp. 11-26. Doi: 10.1037/0021-843X.85.1.11.
3. Maier, Steven F., Jack E. Sherman, James W. Lewis, Greg W. Terman, and John C. Liebeskind. "The opioid/nonopiod nature of stress-induced analgesia and learned helplessness." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Animal Behavior Processes*, vol 9, issue 1, 1983, pp. 80-90. Doi: 10.1037/0097-7403.9.1.80.
4. Brown, Irvin & Dillon K. Inouye. "Learned helplessness through modeling: The role of perceived similarity in competence." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol 36, issue 8, 1978, pp. 900-908. Doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.36.8.900.
5. Miller, William R. and Martin E.P. Seligman. "Learned helplessness, depression and the perception of reinforcement." *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, vol 14, issue 1, 1976, pp. 7-17. Doi: 10.1016/0005-7967(76)90039-5.

Notes

It would be beneficial if before this lesson, students were made familiar with Pavlov's dogs since it was his experiment that ultimately inspired Seligman's. As such, Seligman further developed Pavlov's idea of classical conditioning in an interesting and unexpected way, which can lead students well acquainted with both scientists' works with a better understanding of both experiments.