How to Fight Learned Helplessness at Work

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We all fall into a slump every now and then. But, what if you can't kick yourself out of that slump? When you fall into a similar emotion — or when you give up on your dreams over and over — that could be an indication of learned helplessness. I don't know the answers, but I know that this is a situation you have to fight. As an entrepreneur, a leader, and as an employer, I've seen indications of learned helplessness at work, among those I care about and associate with.

COVID-19 says that we are all in this together. The riots have said we are all in this together. We can help each other in the workplace when you see someone with learned helplessness.

Coined by psychologist Martin Seligman in the late 1960s following controversial studies involving dogs and electric shocks, this is when subjects give up hope when facing an uncontrollable situation. For example, Seligman "subjected study participants to loud, unpleasant noises, with a lever that would or would not stop the sounds," write the folks over at *Psychology Today*. "The group whose lever wouldn't stop the sound in the first round stopped trying to silence the noise in the second round."

At some point, we've all experienced a similar feeling in our lives, including the workplace. Whether if it's a rotten culture, unrealistic work expectation or complex problems like time management, feeling helpless doesn't just impact your

performance and productivity. It can also damage your health and well-being by contributing to anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic disorder.

The good news? You don’t have to feel this way. In fact, you can fight back against learned helplessness so that you can get back on track and keep your health and well-being in check.

Unlearn learned helplessness.

“Learned helplessness is a form of conditioning,” explain the Psychology Compass team. “If something is reinforced/rewarded, we are more likely to repeat that behavior again. And likewise, if we are punished, we’re more likely to avoid that same behavior in the future.”

While it takes time to unlearn this association and to decondition the response, it is feasible. In fact, you can help yourself or a coworker by pointing out the following three methods:

- **Identify your explanatory style.** First, you need to determine if you tend to be more optimistic or pessimistic. Taking a Learned Optimism Test can help you figure this out. The goal is to change “the way you look at the causes of events in your life.”
- **Use the ABC method.** Next, you want to use this strategy to change your interpretation of negative situations. Using the following step-by-help process, A – Adversity; B – Belief; C – Consequence; D – Disputation; E – Energization, can help you respond by optimistically.
- **Feel more in control by being SMART.** The third and final step is to set S.M.A.R.T. goals to keep you motivated.

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Take action.

“What we do know from research is that one of the biggest precipitators of anxiety is a feeling of helplessness when everything seems out of your control,” says Dr. Kerry Ressler, professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. One effective way to regain control is by giving back. If you weren’t aware, volunteering has several benefits like improving your health and wellness, connecting you to others, and adding meaning to your life.

Other ideas are to help others solve problems, pick-up a hobby, or learn something new. All of these make you feel active, as opposed to passive. And because these can make you feel like you’re moving forward, you have a greater sense of control.

If you feel unsatisfied with your career, or fear that your job is in jeopardy, be proactive. Use your downtime to polish up your resume or develop new skills. You could also start networking more frequently with influencers within your industry.

Focus on solutions, not problems.

One of the main reasons I decided to limit my social media usage is that I couldn’t stand the complaining. I don’t want to come across as callus here. I’m well aware that some people have no other outlet then to vent on Facebook, Twitter or whatever their preferred platform is.

I also don’t mind assisting others. However, I noticed a particularly troubling trend. Whenever advice was offered, a lot of times, the complainer would just dismiss it or make excuses on why the suggestions wouldn’t work. In short, they didn’t want help. They just wanted to complain.

So, how can you stop your mind wandering toward the negative?

“Do not just react, take the time to fully analyze the problem, then make a list of possible solutions,” recommends Dr. Ivan Misner.

And, because that’s often easier said than done, here’s a simple process from Dr. Misner to get you started:

- *Identify the problem(s)*
- *Identify what you did before in a similar problem*
- *Brainstorm possible solutions.*
- *Change what doesn’t work*
- *Find and use resources*
- *Decide which solution is best*
- *Put that solution into play*
- *Build on each successive step*
- *Try to do more of what works*
- *Use an alternative solution if not achieving the required results*

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Embrace dark moods, but don’t dwell on negative thoughts.

Forcing yourself to be happy can have the opposite effect. At least, that’s what one study conducted at UC Berkeley and published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* discovered.

“We found that people who habitually accept their negative emotions experience fewer negative emotions, which adds up to better psychological health,” wrote senior study author Iris Mauss, an associate professor of psychology at UC Berkeley.

“Maybe if you have an accepting attitude toward negative emotions, you’re not giving them as much attention,” Mauss said. “And perhaps, if you’re constantly judging your

emotions, the negativity can pile up."

"It turns out that how we approach our own negative emotional reactions is really important for our overall well-being," added study lead author Brett Ford, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Toronto. "People who accept these emotions without judging or trying to change them can cope with their stress more successfully."

At the same time, ruminating on negative thoughts can also be a problem. For instance, are these thoughts or feelings helping you solve a problem, or are they taking a toll on your health and well-being? If it's the latter, then you need to snap out of this vicious cycle.

There are many ways you can do this. But, again, it's not about neglecting your helplessness. It's acknowledging and using them to your advantage.

Here's what helps prevent me from dwelling on the negative:

- Block out worry or rumination time.
- Determine what can be solved or just a figment of your imagination.
- Focus on the goals you want to achieve.
- Don't waste time and energy on the things that you can't control.

Additionally, I try to find happiness. That doesn't mean putting on a fake smile. It's more about lifting my mood when I need it by:

- Practicing gratitude – writing in a journal or saying "thank you."
- Taking my dog for a long walk outside.
- Listening to music.
- Practicing my signature strengths.
- Sprucing up my workspace by investing in a standing desk and plants. Proper lighting, surrounding yourself with

personal items, and healthy snacks also help.

Don’t be antisocial.

Besides personalizing your workspace, leveraging your working environment and culture can also help combat learned helplessness. For example, instead of eating lunch alone, grab a bite with a co-worker. You could also suggest team-building activities or after-work social events.

Another idea would be to plan a walking or standing meeting, as opposed to sitting down. Besides ensuring that the meeting is short and concise, movement brings oxygen to the brain. You could also ask for feedback, or offer this to others.

And if there are colleagues you aren’t getting along with, then find alternatives. If you’re in a leadership position, that may mean moving to let them go if they are toxic. If you’re not in a leadership role, ask if you can be moved to a different part of the office or join another group.

Most importantly, if you need to talk to someone, please do. Whether if it’s a family member, friend, colleague or a therapist, just know that you don’t have to go this alone.

Tap into intrinsic motivation.

Did you know that there are two types of motivation? The first is “extrinsic” (or external). An example of this would be receiving a promotion or bonus by meeting a deadline. The second is “intrinsic” (or internal). Learning a new skill or hobby during your downtime is a typical example of this type since you’re striving towards personal satisfaction or accomplishment.

In other words, extrinsic motivation often relies on “if, then” rewards. While there are times when these can be

effective motivators, researchers have found that they can worsen performance.

That’s why you should focus on intrinsic motivation. An excellent starting point would be the three elements required for inherent motivation from author Dan Pink: autonomy, mastery and purpose. Don’t sweat about hitting all three. The idea is to use them to find and create opportunities.

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Change your situation.

Let’s say that your helplessness is caused by feeling overwhelmed with your workload. You’ve admitted this and looked for solutions, like learning how to prioritize your lists. Unfortunately, you still feel like you’re underwater.

If so, you may have to dig deeper. What tasks can be automated, delegated or removed? Are there meeting alternatives like email or a quick call? Are you more productive working at home or in the office?

What if you’ve answered all of these questions, and nothing has changed? It may be time to leave your current job for greener pastures.

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