

The Attributional Model of Learned Helplessness

In response to this need, psychologists developed the **attributional model of learned helplessness** (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Miller & Norman, 1979). According to the new model, learned helplessness in humans begins with a perception of uncontrollability. For example, a man may find he can't control the outcome of his application for a job he really wants. This is followed by asking ourselves *why* we can't control the situation. The man who failed to get the job he wanted ponders the reasons his efforts were unsuccessful. Is it because the employer did not like him? Does he lack experience or skills?

The explanations people give for their lack of control, referred to as *attributions*, then determine whether learned helplessness develops. If the man decides the employer is a jerk and that he really does possess what it takes to get a good job, he probably will continue his job quest elsewhere with no ill effects. However, if he concludes that he lacks the skills to ever advance up the job ladder, then feelings of helplessness and depression may develop.

Which attributions lead to helplessness and which do not? According to the model, we can examine these attributions along three dimensions (see Table 16.3). First, we can classify the attribution as either *internal* or *external*. You can attribute your lack of control to something personal, such as poor skills or low motivation, or to an external cause, such as an unfair test. The more internal the attribution, the more likely you will experience learned helplessness. Second, attributions can be either *stable* or *unstable*. Attributions to relatively stable causes, such as intelligence, should lead to more depression than attributions to unstable causes, such as lack of effort. Finally, attributions can be classified as either *global* or *specific*. Global attributions apply to many different situations, whereas specific attributions apply to very few. Global attributions are more likely to lead to helplessness. For example, if you attribute the loss of a job to a general lack of skills and aptitude that will keep you from getting a good job anywhere else, you may be headed for depression. However, if you fail an algebra class and conclude it's because this particular instructor used a strange and unfair grading system, it is unlikely you'll generalize feelings of helplessness to other math classes or other subjects.

EXAMPLE OF A STUDENT FAILING AN EXAM:

	Internal		External	
	Stable	Unstable	Stable	Unstable
Global:	Lack of intelligence; or Laziness	exhaustion; or I have a cold which makes me stupid	Teachers give unfair tests; or (if female) Professors don't think women are smart	Today is Fri the 13 th
Specific:	Lack of math ability; or Math always bores me	I'm fed up with Math problems; or I have a cold which ruins my arithmetic	He gives unfair math tests OR People are usually unlucky on math tests	This was the math test from hell. OR Everyone's copy of the math test was blurred

THE TEN FORMS OF TWISTED THINKING

1. **All-or-nothing thinking** You see things in black-or-white categories. If a situation falls short of perfect, you see it as a total failure. When a young woman on a diet ate a spoonful of ice cream, she told herself, "I've blown my diet completely." This thought upset her so much that she gobbled down an entire quart of ice cream!
2. **Overgeneralization** You see a single negative event, such as a romantic rejection or a career reversal, as a never-ending pattern of defeat by using words such as "always" or "never" when you think about it. A depressed salesman became terribly upset when he noticed bird dung on the windshield of his car. He told himself, "Just my luck! Birds are *always* crapping on my car!"
3. **Mental filter** You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively, so that your vision of all of reality becomes darkened, like the drop of ink that discolors a beaker of water. Example: You receive many positive comments about your presentation to a group of associates at work, but one of them says something mildly critical. You obsess about his reaction for days and ignore all the positive feedback.
4. **Discounting the positive** You reject positive experiences by insisting they "don't count." If you do a good job, you may tell yourself that it wasn't good enough or that anyone could have done as well. Discounting the positive takes the joy out of life and makes you feel inadequate and unrewarded.

10. Personalization and blame

Personalization occurs when you hold yourself personally responsible for an event that isn't entirely under your control. When a woman received a note that her child was having difficulties at school, she told herself, "This shows what a bad mother I am," instead of trying to pinpoint the cause of the problem so that she could be helpful to her child. When another woman's husband beat her, she told herself, "If only I were better in bed, he wouldn't beat me." Personalization leads to guilt, shame, and feelings of inadequacy.

Some people do the opposite. They blame other people or their circumstances for their problems, and they overlook ways that they might be contributing to the problem: "The reason my marriage is so lousy is because my spouse is totally unreasonable." Blame usually doesn't work very well because other people will resent being scapegoated and they will just toss the blame right back in your lap. It's like the game of hot potato—no one wants to get stuck with it.

5. Jumping to conclusions

You interpret things negatively when there are no facts to support your conclusion. **Mind reading:** Without checking it out, you arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you. **Fortune-telling:** You predict that things will turn out badly. Before a test you may tell yourself, "I'm really going to blow it. What if I flunk?" If you're depressed you may tell yourself, "I'll never get better."

6. Magnification

You exaggerate the importance of your problems and shortcomings, or you minimize the importance of your desirable qualities. This is also called the "binocular trick."

7. Emotional reasoning

You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are: "I feel terrified about going on airplanes. It must be very dangerous to fly." Or "I feel guilty. I must be a rotten person." Or "I feel angry. This proves I'm being treated unfairly." Or "I feel so inferior. This means I'm a second-rate person." Or "I feel hopeless. I must really be hopeless."

8. "Should statements"

You tell yourself that things *should* be the way you hoped or expected them to be. After playing a difficult piece on the piano, a gifted pianist told herself, "I shouldn't have made so many mistakes." This made her feel so disgusted that she quit practicing for several days. "Musts," "oughts" and "have tos" are similar offenders.

"Should statements" that are directed against yourself lead to guilt and frustration. Should statements that are directed against other people or the world in

general lead to anger and frustration: "He shouldn't be so stubborn and argumentative."

Many people try to motivate themselves with shoulds and shouldn'ts, as if they were delinquents who had to be punished before they could be expected to do anything. "I shouldn't eat that doughnut." This usually doesn't work because all these shoulds and musts make you feel rebellious and you get the urge to do just the opposite. Dr. Albert Ellis has called this "*musterbation*." I call it the "shouldy" approach to life.

9. Labeling

Labeling is an extreme form of all-or-nothing thinking. Instead of saying "I made a mistake," you attach a negative label to yourself: "I'm a loser." You might also label yourself "a fool" or "a failure" or "a jerk." Labeling is quite irrational because you are not the same as what you do. Human beings exist, but "fools," "losers," and "jerks" do not. These labels are just useless abstractions that lead to anger, anxiety, frustration, and low self-esteem.

You may also label others. When someone does something that rubs you the wrong way, you may tell yourself: "He's an S.O.B." Then you feel that the problem is with that person's "character" or "essence" instead of with their thinking or behavior. You see them as totally bad. This makes you feel hostile and hopeless about improving things and leaves little room for constructive communication.