People struggling with substance use disorders, anxiety, and depression frequently complain about feelings of helplessness. They can point to a series of past life circumstances they had no control over. These experiences often include job loss, marital conflict, death of a loved one, infidelity, divorce, a serious accident, illness, or injury. In many of these situations, the person did not have control of the situation or circumstance. Because they had no control over these events, they may believe they were inadequate, incompetent, and powerless. Consequently, they begin to feel helpless. Helplessness and hopelessness may cause you to feel stuck, uncertain, and paralyzed. In this lesson, we will take a careful look at the experience of helplessness and examine ways to overcome these feelings and resulting behaviors. This lesson includes over 30 positive, confidence boosting statements to help increase your initiative, strength, and personal resourcefulness.
OVERCOMING LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

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UNDERSTANDING HELPLESSNESS

Researcher Dr. Martin Seligman conducted some fascinating experiments linking helplessness with depression. He constructed an environment in which a shock was administered to a kenneled dog. The dog could not escape by jumping or hiding. Dogs enduring this treatment learned they were helpless to escape, and nothing they tried would reduce the pain. These dogs were conditioned to accept the shock as an inevitable consequence of living.

Seligman then demonstrated the dogs exposed to this treatment had more trouble avoiding an escapable shock than dogs not previously conditioned by such training. Additionally, those conditioned not to avoid painful consequences developed characteristics of depression. They had difficulty eating, sleeping, and grooming themselves. They moved more slowly and appeared less alert (Papolos, 1992).
NEUROCHEMICAL CHANGES
Scientific studies shed light on the relationship between learned helplessness and neurochemical changes in the body. In one experiment, rats were taught helplessness by shocking them. Scientists were able to measure neurological changes, indicating depression at various beta receptor sites. Papalos and Papalos explain:

“Dr. Henn and his colleagues induced depression in another group of rats, but treated them without medication. They made a behavioral intervention and ‘taught’ the rats how to escape the shock. Actually, a medical student working in the lab knit the rats little sweaters with long sleeves over their front paws. Strings were attached to the sleeves and the researchers could pull the rats paws up, marionette–like, and to train them to push the lever that would stop the shock. With the rats no longer helpless, their symptoms of depression abated, and the beta receptor sites returned to their previous state. Dr. Henn and others have concluded from these studies that, just as neurochemistry affects behavior, changes in behavior affect neurochemistry.” (Papolos, 1992)

HELPLESS THINKING PATTERNS IN PEOPLE
Similar findings are true in human depression. Cognitive behavioral therapy focuses on the thought processes of a depressed person, particularly the hopeless, helpless thinking, and changing negative thought patterns. In treating depression, this change in thinking has proven as effective as some antidepressants.

THE NATURE OF HELPLESSNESS
Consider the list below and check those you experienced recently:

- Feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt
- Reduced levels of motivation
- Approaching new circumstances with caution and mistrust
- Feeling stuck
- Lower achievement and productivity
- Feeling insecure
- Inadequate problem solving
- Believing change does not matter
- Inability to persevere under stress

THE ORIGINS OF HELPLESSNESS
Learned helplessness is a concept easily placed on a continuum. Not everyone can relate to feeling helpless or inadequate, and those who do may describe the experience as lesser or greater degrees at given times in life, certain situations, or in particular relationships. As you develop increased confidence and assurance in your abilities, helplessness will diminish. Helpless thoughts and actions often have their origins in past traumatic experiences where you had limited resources, few choices, or felt defeated, trapped, and overwhelmed. Those feelings become generalized to other, more common, and less threatening situations.
Learned helplessness is a common, adaptive coping style in abusive relationships. The abused person, having been powerless to change the situation in the past, may approach future situations with a similar defeated mentality and feeble actions. It is common among those who are depressed, anxious, addicted, or feeling unable to control their situation to give up and quit trying to make changes.

**PESSIMISM FUELS HELPLESSNESS**

People with a negative and pessimistic nature may struggle more with feeling helpless, inadequate, and inferior. They may use extreme language, such as “this is the worst day of my life” and “I can't take this anymore.” Over-generalizing one hardship into all of life is common. Others may see a stressful situation as a daunting, horrific, and overwhelming disaster.

Optimistic people have a more positive, explanatory style. They are more likely to take an appropriate amount of responsibility for a situation and no more than their share of the credit or liability. They may see things as related to one specific event, not letting it spill over into all of life and see troubled moments as short-term and temporary. Their positive attitude and traits allow them to move forward, try again, and live more confidently.

**CHANGE YOUR THINKING**

We feel helpless when we perceive having little or no control over a situation or circumstance. We want to feel as if we have some control of our own experiences. Feeling helpless comes from our perception of a situation and the meaning we assign to the thoughts and feelings experienced. Those thoughts, perceptions, and interpretations can be altered. I can see something as a difficulty or as a disaster. I can perceive myself as capable of trying, or as helpless and incompetent. Framing something as possible rather than impossible is an important first step.

**A NEW PERSPECTIVE**

To decrease feelings of helplessness, focus on your abilities, not your limitations. Regularly think through what is going well, and do not get stuck on what is not. Consider your recent successes, and be intentional about seeing the ways you positively contributed to your own success. Minimize difficulties, hardships, and stressful situations. Maximize your strengths and positive traits. Collaborate with people who believe the best about you. They will encourage, inspire, and affirm you in your journey, without solving the problem for you.
SEEING IT DIFFERENTLY

Review the following list. Choose statements that reflect your commitment to be more positive, confident, and assured.

☐ I can handle this
☐ I can adapt, endure, and overcome
☐ I'm making progress
☐ I have good people around me
☐ Although difficult, this situation is not impossible
☐ I can stand it, make do, and get through it
☐ I can choose to be happy
☐ I'm confident and strong
☐ I'm positive and optimistic
☐ I am capable of this challenge
☐ Peace comes from the inside, not from outer circumstances
☐ I can choose my response and not be reactive
☐ I see the difficulties I face as opportunities to grow
☐ This is distressing, but not dangerous
☐ I can stay calm and manage my distress
☐ I do not need to avoid this situation
☐ I am responsible
☐ I'm confident in my decisions without doubting or second-guessing myself
☐ I can work my recovery plan
☐ I have good, supportive people around me
☐ I am not alone in this
☐ I'm not hopeless
☐ I can enjoy the present moment
☐ I can ask for help when I need it, without feeling guilty
☐ I am approachable
☐ I have good ideas and plans for the future
☐ This situation is not a catastrophe
☐ I can face my fears
☐ I'm comfortable sharing my opinion
☐ I am positive and confident
☐ I can count on my friends for emotional support
☐ I am able to solve problems
☐ I'm able to share what I think and feel with others
☐ I can reach out to others when I need help
☐ I have good ideas
☐ I am not afraid to try new things
☐ I have friends who share my interests
☐ When things get tough, I know who I can rely on

PRACTICING

Without depending on someone else to help you, list three small tasks in which you can exercise increased confidence, assertiveness, and strength.

1. ________________________________________________________________
                                                __________________________________________________________________
2. ________________________________________________________________
                                                __________________________________________________________________
3. ________________________________________________________________
                                                __________________________________________________________________
Name several areas in the past you when have been tempted to give up too soon. How can you practice being more diligent and persevering in the future?

____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

Think of a task or opportunity you decided not to pursue. What were some of the feelings, sensations, and thoughts you had? List several ways to manage those emotions in a healthier way.

____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

How has learned helplessness been a part of your addiction journey?

____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

What are some projects or activities where you could display greater resourcefulness, initiative, and strength?

____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

SOURCES

Minimize difficulties, hardships, and stressful situations. MAXIMIZE YOUR STRENGTHS and positive traits.