OVERCOMING LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

Lesson Objective:

Examine the nature of learned helplessness and then focus on your abilities not your limitations

UNDERSTANDING HELPLESSNESS

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, serious accident, illness, or an injury. In any 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. Hopelessness is a feeling, and helplessness is the non-action coming from those feelings. Helplessness and hopelessness may cause you to feel stuck, uncertain, and paralyzed, although it is possible to overcome these feelings and their resulting behaviors. This lesson will identify the nature of helplessness, and help you develop a new perspective. In this worksheet you will identify and affirm your possibilities and your capabilities rather than your limitations.

WRITING YOUR STORY

People with co-occurring disorders often feel helpless. Look back over your life and describe a time where you felt powerless, inadequate, and incapable. Recall times where you felt hopeless and out of control. Describe situations that have evoked these feelings such as divorce, the death of loved ones, illnesses, or injuries. Include the thoughts and feelings you were experiencing during that difficult time.

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THE NATURE OF HELPLESSNESS

Consider the list below and check the items you experienced recently:

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

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.

WRITING YOUR STORY

Helplessness is often a feeling and a perception. Think back to a time in your past where you had distorted thoughts and interpretations. What difficulties were you experiencing? Describe how your thoughts were distorted and inaccurate. Include how your distorted thoughts contributed to poor behavioral choices.

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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,
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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
☐ 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 in this alone
☐ 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
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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?

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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.

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

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

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