

Adolescent Helplessness: Depression, Explanatory Style and Life Events as Correlates of Helplessness

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The aim of the study was to investigate the association between life events and helplessness, therefore indirectly testing the diathesis stress model of helplessness. In the study it was proposed that on the basis of explanatory style and depression measures, adolescents can be correctly classified into helpless / non-helpless groups. It was further proposed that dimensions of life events would be significant correlates of adolescent helplessness. A sample of 473 adolescents both boys and girls in the age range of 13 to 16 years was selected. The students were studying in different geographical locations of Mumbai city and suburb. The measures administered were: The Center for Epidemiological Studies – Depression Child Test (CES-DC), the Children's Attribution Style Questionnaire (CASQ) and Presumptive Stressful Life-Events Scale (PSLE). The result of logistic regression showed that on the basis of measure of depression and explanatory style 86.1% of students were correctly classified into helpless and 78.5% of students were correctly classified into non-helpless groups. On the factor of life events, the dimensions of life events of the life time and undesirable life events emerged as significant correlates of helplessness, therefore providing indirect support to the diathesis stress model of helplessness-hopelessness.

Keywords: Helplessness: Depression, Explanatory Style, Life Events

The term learned helplessness was defined by Seligman (1975) as "motivational, cognition and emotional deficits due to prolonged exposure to uncontrollable events" Seligman draw parallels between these deficits and the motivational, cognitive and emotional deficits of human depression. According to Maier and Seligman (1976) individuals act helplessly because they have learned to be helpless. The critical determinant of such helplessness is experience with uncontrollable events. Maier and Seligman proposed that when people encounter bad events repeatedly, regardless of what they do or don't, they learn that bad outcome are uncontrollable. This learning leads to a general expectation that future outcomes will be uncontrollable. The diminished sense of personal control thereby produces ineffective behaviour. At the same

time, it is also found that everyone who encounters uncontrollable bad event does not become helpless. Therefore the question that needs to be answered is – what determines people's helplessness as against vigour in the face of uncontrollability? The answer has been provided in terms of explanatory style. Explanatory style is individual's characteristic style of offering causal explanations for bad events. An explanatory style can range from pessimistic (when uncontrollable bad events are explained with internal stable and global causes) to optimistic (when opposite explanation are involved). People with pessimistic explanatory style are at a greater risk for helplessness than their optimistic counterparts. (Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994, Galambos & Ehrenberg, 1997). Studies have also shown that those with a pessimistic

explanatory style are more likely to be depressed (Sweeney, Anderson, & Bailey, 1986).

One of the important factors associated with helplessness and depression, is life events. Over the years, many studies have shown association between life events of a severely negative kind and psychiatric disorder in children and adolescents (Goodyer, Kolvin, & Gatzain, 1985, 1987; Goodyer, Cooper, Vize, & Ashby, 1993). Depression is often associated with negative life events, such as change of school, death of a loved one, a serious accident or family illness, a violent family environment or parental conflict or divorce.

At times minor stressful events or daily hassles such as argument with parents or criticism from a teacher may also result in depression. Relative to non-depressed youngsters, those who become depressed experience significantly more severe and non-severe stressful events in the year preceding their depression, especially in the area related to romantic relationship, education, and relations with friends, parents, work and health. The diathesis stress component proposes that the tendency to attribute negative life events to internal stable and global causes (i.e. the diathesis) contributes to the onset and maintenance of depression symptomatology in the presence, but not in the absence of negative life events (i.e. the stress)

Based on the above mentioned theoretical discussion, the present research aimed at studying adolescent helplessness and depression with reference to explanatory style and life events. It is proposed that on the basis of explanatory style and depression scores, adolescents can be correctly classified into helpless/ non-helpless groups. It is also proposed that dimensions of life events such as life events of the past one-year, life events of the life time, desirable life events, undesirable life events and ambiguous life

events would be significant correlates of helplessness.

Method

Participants:

A sample of 473 adolescent boys and girls in the age range of 13 to 16 years was selected for the study. The students were selected from schools located in different geographical locations (south, central and north) of Mumbai and Thane. The students were studying through English medium of instructions.

Measures:

The Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale for Children (CES - DC) by Weissman, Orvaschel and Padian, (1980). This is a 20 item self-report scale assessing the frequency of various depressive symptoms. Participants rated each item on a scale that ranged from 1 (not at all) to 4 (a lot) for each item allowing a total score to range from 20 to 80. The CES-DC scale has been found to correlate moderately with children's self-reports of depressive symptoms on the Children's Depressive Inventory ($r=0.58$) Internal consistency (Croabach's alpha) has been reported at 0.51

Children Attributional Style Questionnaire (CASQ) - Seligman et al., (1984). It is a 48 item forced choice measure of explanatory style. Each item presents a hypothetical event and two possible explanations for why that event occurred. Respondents were instructed to imagine the event occurring to them, then choose which of the two explanations best described why the event would happen to them. There were 16 events that pertain to each of the three explanatory dimensions. Half of the events were positive and half were negative. Thus there were six subsets on the CASQ: The internally, globality and stability subsets for bad events, and the internally, globality and stability subscales for good events. The lower the overall explanatory style scores, the more

the child explains bad events in terms of internal, stable and global causes, while explaining good events in terms of external, unstable and specific causes. The coefficient alphas for CP, CN and CPCN scales are .71, .66 and .73 respectively (Seligman et al., 1984).

Presumptive Stressful Life Events Scale (PSLE Scale) - Gurneet Singh, Dalbir Kaur and Harsharan Kaur (1983). This was a measure of life events, both positive and negative. It measured events occurring in the past one-year and those occurring in one's lifetime. It was 50-item events that were experienced by almost everyone at some time or the other in their life. The respondent is required to make a tick mark in the respective columns for the events they have experienced in the past one-year or in their lifetime. The last item has a provision for the respondent to mention any other event that may have occurred but was not listed in the scale.

Results

On the basis of table 1 it was seen that the percentage of corrects classifications for the helpless group was 86.1 and for the non-helpless group was 78.5. The overall percentage of correct classification was 82.5. The obtained Mean and SD of different dimensions of life event show that helpless group had obtained greater mean scores (8.95, 9.09, 6.48, 7.75 and 3.80) on all the dimensions of life events than the non-helpless group (5.02, 8.64, 6.37, 4.37, and 2.01). The Beta score of life events of past one year was -1.86, S.E. 0.63, Exp (B) 0.15. These findings show that there was 85% greater probability of higher scorers being categorized into helpless group. The Beta scores of undesirable life events was 1.49, S.E. 0.58 and Exp (B) was 0.22. This indicated that there was 78% greater probability of higher scorers being categorized into the helpless group.

Table 1. Logistic regression: Results of classification for learned helpless group.

Original Learned Helplessness	Predicted Learned Helplessness		Percentage correct	
	Observed Non-Helpless	Helpless	Non-Helpless	
		62	10	86.1
	Non-Helpless	14	51	78.5
Overall Percentage				82.5

Table 2. Group Mean and SD of life events for two groups of helplessness (helpless and non-helpless).

Groups	Helpless n 41		Non-helpless n 37		Total N 78	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Life events of the past one year	8.95	3.92	5.02	2.81	7.08	3.94
Life events of the life time	9.09	4.63	8.64	6.61	8.88	5.62
Desirable life events	6.48	2.82	6.37	2.90	6.43	2.84
Undesirable life events	7.75	4.34	4.37	5.44	6.15	5.15
Ambiguous life events	3.80	1.90	2.91	2.05	3.38	2.01

Table 3. Logistic regression: Variables in the equation of life events for two groups of helplessness (helpless and non-helpless)

Variables in the equation	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp. (B)
Life events of past one year	-1.86	0.63	8.67	1	.01	0.15
Undesirable life events	-1.49	0.58	6.69	1	.01	0.22

Discussion

The results of the study confirmed the first hypothesis. It was proposed that individuals can be categorized into helpless /non-helpless group on the basis of depression and explanatory style scores. On the basis of table 1 it was seen that the percentage of correct classifications for the helpless group was 86.1 and for the non-helpless group was 78.5. The overall percentage of correct classification was 82.5.

A strong association between depression and pessimistic explanatory style is proposed. People susceptible to depression interpret bad events in internal, stable and global terms. If reality is ambiguous enough a person may project his habitual explanation into it. If these tendencies are towards internal, stable and global causes for bad events, then that individual would tend to become depressed and helpless.

It was proposed that various dimensions of life events such as life events of the past one-year, life events of the life time, desirable life events, undesirable life events and ambiguous life events would be significant correlates of helplessness. A look at table 2 and 3 partly validated the hypothesis. The obtained Mean and SD of different dimensions of life event (table 2) show that helpless group had obtained greater mean scores (8.95, 9.09, 6.48, 7.75 and 3.80) on all the dimensions of life events than the non-helpless group (5.02, 8.64, 6.37, 4.37, and 2.01). The results of table 1.3 show that among the various dimensions of life events, the dimensions of life events in the past one-year and undesirable life events were found significant. The Beta score of life events of past one year was -1.86, S.E. 0.63, Exp (B) 0.15. These findings show that there was 85% greater probability of higher scorers being categorized into helpless group. The Beta scores of undesirable life events was 1.49, S.E. 0.58 and Exp (B) was 0.22. This indicated that there was 78% greater probability of higher scorers being categorized

into the helpless group. Thus these two dimensions of life events (life events of past one year and undesirable life events) distinguished the probability of membership to either helpless or non-helpless group.

Prior researches have shown that stressful life events affect one's health. Psychological factors are critical in this stress illness link specifically; an event becomes stressful and likely to lead to illness to the degree that one thinks about it in a particular way. The more one regards events as unpredictable and uncontrollable, the more stressful they are. When one blames oneself for bad events but feel powerless to change them, they are particularly stressful. Similar conclusion was drawn by Chang and Sanna (2003). They examined optimism – pessimism as a moderator of link between recent hassles and psychological maladjustment (viz. depression symptoms and hopelessness) in adolescents (aged 14 to 19 years). Results indicated that optimism – pessimism and hassles significantly predicted scores on each adjustment measure. Moreover, a significant optimism-pessimism x hassles interaction was found in predicting depressive symptoms and hopelessness. Thus it was concluded that the adjustment was significantly more exacerbated for pessimistic compared to optimistic adolescents.

On the basis of obtained results it was concluded that: Depression and explanatory style scores were valid measures for classifying the respondent into two mutually exclusive (helpless vs non-helpless) groups. Among the various dimensions of life events, the life events of the past one-year and undesirable life events were found to be significant correlates of helplessness.

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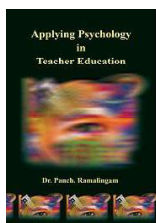
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