

## PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH LEARNED HELPLESSNESS AMONG ADOLESCENTS IN RIVERS STATE

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### ABSTRACT

The study examined psychological factors associated with learned Helplessness among adolescents in Rivers State of Nigeria. Ex-post factor design was used for the work. Sample size of 200 adolescents were utilized for the study; a thirty item questionnaire was developed by the researchers and it had a reliability coefficient of 0.98. Four research questions were answered using mean and standard deviation. The study found out that psychological factors such as depression, locus of control and self concept are associated with learned helplessness among adolescents. Based on the findings teachers and other significant others should always observe their children's feelings and behaviours that not part of them so as to dictate early signs of depression and low self concepts. Schools should employ qualified guidance counselors who will educate the adolescent on maintaining and sustaining adaptive behaviours.

### INTRODUCTION

Learned helplessness as a syndrome has fast gained entrance in the lives of our adolescents without them knowing. Many adolescents have developed mindsets of helplessness even when there is help and good opportunities to grab in order to grow and move forward.

Learned helplessness is a condition in a human or animal that has learned to behave helplessly, failing to respond even though there are opportunities for it to help itself by avoiding unpleasant circumstances or by gaining positive rewards. (Seligman, et al 2001) It is a learned expectation that cannot control important life outcome resulting in apathy and depression (Kassin, 2001). Hockenburry and Hockenbury (2006), defined learned helplessness as a phenomenon in which exposure to inescapable and uncontrollable aversive events produced passivity and helplessness. Nevid and Rathus (2010) describe helplessness as a model for the acquisition of depressive behaviour, based on findings that organisms in aversive situation learn to show inactivity when their responses go unreinforced.

The concept of learned helplessness offers answer to the frustrations that confront adolescents, parents and the educators. Learned helplessness creates three basic deficits in the adolescents namely:- cognitive emotional and motivational, which if adequate steps are not taken the adolescent's desire to learn declines. The motivational deficit stops learning by aborting the child's initiation of responses, while the emotional deficit leads to depression and lowered self esteem. Depressed adolescents may have problem behaviour that they express through anger, aggression, running away, stealing, truancy and other rebellious acts. The link between learned helplessness and depression has been well established in the psychological community. Cryan, in Onyekwere (2014), observed that learned helplessness can be passed on through observation, as in the case of a daughter watching her abused mother passively

obey her husband's commands. The daughter may begin to associate passivity and low self esteem with the "normal" demands of married life, leading to a perpetuation of the learned helplessness cycle. It has also been found to be associated with locus of control. Individuals with a high internal locus of control believe that events in their life depend primarily from their own actions, for example, if a person with an internal locus of control does not perform as well as they wanted to on a test, they would blame it on lack of preparedness or their part and then assume that they lack adequate learning skills and cannot continue in their learning endeavours.

### **Statement of Problem**

There is an increase in adolescents developing passive and withdrawal syndrome on working hard to pass their examination and developing logic and pro-social skills that will help them to be functional members of the society. These categories of students see their efforts as futile, hence they develop self-defeating strategies that eventually lead to failures they are attempting to avoid. These adolescents strive for unattainable goals, they procrastinate and eventually get depressed and give themselves names like "am a failure", "am done for" and others. The problem of this study therefore was to find out whether depression, locus of control and self concept can be associated with learned helplessness among adolescents, and to the best of the researchers knowledge no work has been carried out in this area among adolescents in Rivers State.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research work was to find out whether learned helplessness among adolescents in Rivers State can be associated with depression, locus of control and self concept.

### **Significance of the Study**

The result of this study will help the adolescent, parents, and educators to find lasting solutions to the problem of learned helplessness that has come into the students. With the findings of this work, adolescents will develop life skills that will help them to resist giving up too quickly. They will also develop coping strategies that will help them face academic challenges without giving up to excuses and laziness.

Parents and educator are now informed about the three major deficits in a child that they must deal with decisively. It will also enable them to give objective and informed advices on how their children and students can survive in the midst of harsh and unfavourable situations without relating to fate or failure.

### **Research Questions**

To what extent is depression associated with learned helplessness among adolescents in Rivers State?

To what extent can locus of control be associated with learned helplessness among adolescents in Rivers State?

What is the association between self concept and learned helplessness among adolescents in Rivers State.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY****Design**

The design used in the study was ex-post-facto. Ex-post-facto seeks to establish cause-effect relationships as an experimental study but differs from experimental because the research has no control over the variables of interest and therefore cannot manipulate them (Nwankwo 2010, Nworgu, 1997). The population of the study was made up of all the students in public senior secondary school in Port Harcourt City Local Government Area of Rivers State. According to the state ministry of Education statistics 2014, there are about 41,705 senior secondary students in SS2. A purposive sample of 200 students was used for the study.

A forty (40) item questionnaire was used to collect information for the study. The questionnaire was titled Factors associated with learned helplessness (FAWLH). It was a four point likert scale consisting of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD).

**Validity and Reliability of Instrument**

The face validity of the instrument (FAWLH) was determined by three experts in Educational psychology and the reliability coefficient was 0.98 using Pearson Product Moment correlation coefficient. The data were analysed using mean, standard deviation as shown below.

**Results of Findings**

The results of the findings are presented in tables 1,2 and 3.

**Table 1: Depression and Learned Helplessness Association**

S/N	Item	Mean	SD	Remark
1	My future seems hopeless	3.1	0.99	Agree
2	I have difficulty making decision	3.25	0.97	Agree
3	I feel sad even when good things happen to me.	3.37	0.82	Agree
4	I spend time thinking about how I can kill myself.	2.75	1.04	Agree
5	I am agitated and jeep moving around when faced with a task.	2.76	1.04	Agree
6	I have lost interest in the aspect of my life that used to be very important to me.	2.95	1.06	Agree
7	I am getting too little or not enough sleep.	2.70	1.15	Agree
8	I feel like a failure	2.55	1.12	Agree
9	I lack concentration while reading.	2.85	1.34	Agree
10	I spend too much on a single task.	2.72	1.04	Agree

The result above shows that depression can be associated with learned helplessness among adolescents. All items were accepted because they were more than 2.5 which is the criterion mean.

**Table 2: Locus of Control and Learned Helplessness Association**

S/N	Item	Mean	SD	Remark
1	I feel am too old to change	2.15	1.19	Agree
2	I feel there is not a lot I can do about it if someone hates me.	2.69	1.07	Agree
3	I feel there is little in making plans as more can predict the future.	2.54	1.07	Agree
4	I feel my personality is formed from all I inherited from my parents.	2.68	1.08	Agree
5	I feel there is always something expected that will interfere with my plans.	2.64	0.99	Agree
6	I feel I can succeed at any exam if I study hard.	2.72	1.04	Agree
7	I feel I can accomplish whatever I set out to do, if I persevere	2.69	1.07	Agree
8	I feel when I pass a test it is because it was an easy task.	2.69	1.07	Agree
9	I feel am the master of my own fate.	2.65	1.17	Agree

The result in table 2 revealed that locus of control is a fact associated with the development of learned helplessness among adolescents in secondary school. All items were accepted because they are more than the criterion mean score of 2.5.

**Table 3: Self-Concept and Learned Helplessness Association**

S/N	Item	Mean	SD	Remark
1	I feel it is always my fault when things does not happen the way I planned them.	2.76	0.97	Agree
2	I feel things will always go wrong no matter how much I try to make it right.	2.68	1.08	Agree
3	I feel other people have control over their lives than I do.	2.53	1.03	Agree
4	I feel, I am destined to failure.	2.69	1.07	Agree
5	I feel my inabilities to	2.52	1.08	Agree

	solve problems is the cause of my failure.			
6	I feel I don't have any control on the outcomes even though I spend large amount of energy on a task.	2.72	1.04	Agree
7	My physical look prevent me from succeeding	2.69	1.07	Agree
8	I feel I cannot succeed without the aid of peers.	2.75	1.19	Agree
9	Everybody does better than me.	2.75	1.19	Agree
10	I feel I can never be what I want to be, despite all attends	3.1	0.90	Agree

The result in table 3 showed that self concept is a contributory factor to the development of learned helplessness among secondary school adolescent. All items were accepted because they are more than the criterion mean score of 2.5.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

### Table 1: Depression and Learned Helplessness

The findings of this study revealed that depression is found to be associated with learned helplessness among the participants in the study. This is supported by the study carried out by Cox, Abrahamson, Devine & Hallon (2012) who explained that learned helplessness is a key factor in depression, that is caused by prejudice. They explained that some facing inescapable prejudice may develop learned helplessness and depression as a result. Helplessness born in the face of inescapable prejudice matches the helplessness born in the face of inescapable shocks.

### Table 2: Locus of control and learned helplessness

The result of this study revealed that locus of control is associated with learned helplessness among adolescents in secondary school. This study is in agreement with the earlier works carried out by Carlson, (2007), who explained that more exposure to uncontrollability is not sufficient to make the child helpless, but the child comes to expect that failure is inevitable. Equally there is cognitive debilitation and decrease of logical perception and thinking in adolescents that suffer learned helplessness. The emotional deficit leads to depression and lowered self esteem. Depressed and low self concept adolescents have problem behaviour that they express through anger, aggression, running away, stealing, truancy and other rebellious acts to cover up their learned helplessness. Instead of being rational they choose to be irrational, instead of working hard to choose to be idle and lazy, exerting their useful energies on trivialities. There was certainly nothing intrinsic in the sound of a bell that should have aroused the taste buds of Pavlov's dog, but a conditioned response, the same applies to these adolescent who have conditioned their response to turn off after failure (Onyenkwere, 2014).

**Table 3: Self concept and Learned Helplessness**

The learned response or behaviour operates to stop thinking process in the same way as pulling the breaker switch or a power outage disrupts the electricity from getting to the lights in your house. Just as the power outage must be traced and repaired, so the source of children's failure to learn must be understood and remediated through counselling interventions. Adolescent who have low self concept do not remain neutral but are actively developing maladaptive systems of responses to learning. (Furham, 1993, Onyekwere 2014). The longer the child is in this situation, the greater the number of times the child will have practiced inappropriate response systems. They keep trying, but the response system is like a big snake wrapped around the child or a ball of twine that gets more knotted with each effort to untie it. The act of helplessness becomes a habitual, automatic way of thinking which is referred to as explanatory style. Poor perception of self and poor self image indeed is linked to lack of confidence and this also affects performance in school work and other phases of human endeavours.

**Implications of the Finding**

This study has shown that adolescents learned helplessness can be associated with certain psychological factors like depression, locus of control and poor self concept. This is so because of the transitory nature of this stage of development. Adolescents are more vulnerable to failure or giving up easily because of the physiological and biological changes they find themselves. It is important to note that in order to remedy learned helplessness counselors should focus on effort attribution and not on ability attribution of adolescents. Also sustained continuous feedback should be encouraged by both parents and teachers of these adolescents. Do not give chances to resign to self defeating excuses, help them to find their feet whenever they fail.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Adolescents should always think highly of themselves because as a "man thinks in his heart so he is". They should be positive and accept challenge as a stepping stone towards growth and maturity.
2. Parents should be attentive to their adolescents feelings, so as to attend to their emotional needs in order to curb depressive tendencies that might come up if they are not checked, especially in this transitory period that is marked by changes that the adolescents are not used to.
3. Schools should mount awareness campaign that failure in an area is not the end of one's academic pursuit but a pathway to greater height if managed properly.
4. Workshops, seminars should be organized and motivation speakers involved to motivate the adolescents not to give up because greater opportunities awaits them in the future if they do not give up trying.

**CONCLUSION**

Withdrawing into oneself and emotional syndromes may be early signs of learned helplessness. Also statements of helplessness and failures should be adequately counteracted by teachers, parents and counselors so that our adolescent will not be keep in darkness. Adequate sensitizations and reorientations of thoughts towards hard work, resilience and self



confidence development should be encouraged in our adolescents in secondary school. Educators should be more dedicated, proactive and accessible to the adolescents who have learned to be helpless in order to assist them re route their energy towards change and growth.

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