

American psychologist Martin Seligman initiated research on learned helplessness in 1967 at the University of Pennsylvania as an extension of his interest in depression. This research was later expanded through experiments by Seligman and others. One of the first was an experiment by Seligman & Maier: In Part 1 of this study, three groups of dogs were placed in harnesses. Group 1 dogs were simply put in a harnesses for a period of time and were later released. Groups 2 and 3 consisted of "yoked pairs". Dogs in Group 2 were given electric shocks at random times, which the dog could end by pressing a lever. Each dog in Group 3 was paired with a Group 2 dog; whenever a Group 2 dog got a shock, its paired dog in Group 3 got a shock of the same intensity and duration, but its lever did not stop the shock. To a dog in Group 3, it seemed that the shock ended at random, because it was his paired dog in Group 2 that was causing it to stop. Thus, for Group 3 dogs, the shock was "inescapable".

In Part 2 of the experiment the same three groups of dogs were tested in a shuttle-box apparatus. All of the dogs could escape shocks on one side of the box by jumping over a low partition to the other side. The dogs in Groups 1 and 2 quickly learned this task and escaped the shock. Most of the Group 3 dogs – which had previously learned that nothing they did had any effect on shocks – simply lay down passively and whined when they were shocked.

In a second experiment later that year with new groups of dogs, Overmier and Seligman ruled out the possibility that, instead of learned helplessness, the Group 3 dogs failed to avert in the second part of the test because they had learned some behavior that interfered with "escape". To prevent such interfering behavior, Group 3 dogs were immobilized with a paralyzing drug (curare), and underwent a procedure similar to that in Part 1 of the Seligman and Maier experiment. When tested as before in Part 2, these Group 3 dogs exhibited helplessness as before. This result serves as an indicator for the ruling out of the interference hypothesis.

From these experiments, it was thought that there was to be only one cure for helplessness. In Seligman's hypothesis, the dogs do not try to escape because they expect that nothing they do will stop the shock. To change this expectation, experimenters physically picked up the dogs and moved their legs, replicating the actions the dogs would need to take in order to escape from the electrified grid. This had to be done at least twice before the dogs would start willfully jumping over the barrier on their own. In contrast, threats, rewards, and observed demonstrations had no effect on the "helpless" Group 3 dogs.