Learned Helplessness

Seligman wanted to classically conditioned dogs to associate a tone to the pain of an electric shock. In order to do this, the dogs were harnessed and could not avoid electric shocks. It was expected that the dogs would be undergoing operant conditioning (negative reinforcement) to avoid the electric shocks.

However, when the harnesses were removed, the dogs did nothing to escape the electric shocks. Another group of dogs that were never harnessed learned to avoid electric shocks by jumping over a barrier.

The dog’s reacted by being passive and not escaping the electric shocks when unharnessed. Martin Seligman described this behavior as learned helplessness.

Learned helplessness: A phenomenon in which repeated exposure to inescapable, uncomfortable, or uncontrollable aversive events produce passive behavior.
Learned Helplessness: Martin Seligman and the Dogs:

The dogs are Harnesssed

Electric Shocks are delivered

The dogs tried to escape, but cannot

Then...

The dogs are unharnessed

Electric shocks are delivered

The dogs do not try to escape and acted passive

Dogs don’t try to escape an adverse condition (even when they can) because they have learned in the past that any attempt doesn’t help.
Learned Helplessness and Voting:

Fewer people are turning out to vote

People vote for candidates based on how they feel about the candidate and not on issues

Politicians are elected on an emotional appeal and not on issues voters want addressed and lobbyists have a strong influence on voting.

Political issues do not get addressed.

The next time people try to vote…
What are “real-life” examples of learned helplessness (and perhaps their cause)?

- **Political process:** People are becoming discouraged with the political process and not turning out to vote because nothing gets done.
- **Weight loss programs:** There are many weight loss programs (including those that use hypnosis—Chapter 4) that are ineffective that they discourage people.
- **Cell phones and driving:** The reason why driving while talking on cell phones is due to divided attention. This problem is still present with hands free phones and may reduce a small portion of the problem, but not a majority of the problems.
- **Studying for class:** Students with poor study skills or are using *ineffective* strategies start to give up on their classes and resign themselves to poor grades.
- **Stopping Attacks on American Troops:** American troops are under constant attack by Iraqis. Killing Saddam Huessin’s sons (Uday and Kusay) will probably lead to learned helplessness because it fails to understand why our troops are not seen as liberators.
What are common examples where learned helplessness can occur?

- “War on Terrorism”
- Banking crisis of 2008
- Dealing with problems of CEOs and CFOs “cooking the books”
- Dating
- Getting a job
  - Not having the job skills or connections
  - Rules not being applied equally or fairly
  - Rules created to bias a particular group based on criteria irrelevant to the job.
- Improving our marriage or relationship
- Abusive relationships