
University Students Who Overcame Learned Helplessness: What Helped or Hindered? Des universitaires ayant surmonté un sentiment d'impuissance apprise : quels furent les éléments aidants et les éléments nuisibles?

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ABSTRACT

Learned helplessness in an academic environment often affects educational performance and mental health in adverse ways (Ciarrochi et al., 2007; Hu et al., 2015). Using a modified version of the Enhanced Critical Incident Technique, this study aimed to develop a better understanding of what helps or hinders university students in overcoming learned helplessness. Analysis generated 14 categories of helping incidents and seven categories of hindering incidents, most of which were consistent with previous research. This study identified the category *Being in the Spotlight*, which had not been noted at all in past research. Examination of the results contributes information about reported interactions between hindering incidents and the importance of autonomy in overcoming learned helplessness, topics neglected or understudied in past research on learned helplessness in university students. Overall, the results of this study provide additional direction for counsellors working with university students who experience learned helplessness and highlight the need for further research to understand in more detail the helping and hindering factors outlined in this study.

RÉSUMÉ

L'impuissance apprise est un contexte d'apprentissage qui a souvent une incidence négative sur le rendement scolaire et la santé mentale (Ciarrochi et coll., 2007; Hu et coll., 2015). S'appuyant sur la technique améliorée d'analyse d'incident critique, cette étude visait à mieux expliquer ce qui aide ou ce qui nuit aux universitaires tentant de surmonter l'impuissance apprise. L'analyse a permis de dégager 14 catégories d'incidents aidants et sept catégories d'incidents nuisibles, dont la plupart s'inscrivaient dans la continuité de la recherche antérieure. L'étude a permis de

cerner la catégorie *Being in the Spotlight* (se trouver sous le projecteur), qui n'avait pas encore été observée dans les recherches antérieures. L'examen des résultats contribue également à nous renseigner sur les interactions rapportées entre les incidents nuisibles et l'importance de l'autonomie pour surmonter l'impuissance apprise, ce qui représente des sujets peu abordés dans les recherches antérieures sur le sentiment d'impuissance apprise chez les universitaires. Globalement, les résultats de cette étude fournissent de nouvelles avenues aux conseillères et aux conseillers qui travaillent auprès des universitaires éprouvant de l'impuissance apprise, tout en soulignant la nécessité de mener d'autres recherches en vue de mieux comprendre les facteurs aidants et les facteurs nuisibles cernés dans l'étude.

Learned helplessness (LH) is defined as an experience in which humans or other animals do not attempt to change their environments when they believe their actions will not affect their situations (Maier et al., 2000; Seligman, 1972). In other words, when individuals experience repetitive failures, they may start to believe that they are unable to influence the condition of their lives, and consequently they lose the motivation to find solutions to these failures (Hooker, 1976). As a result, they stop active efforts to affect their lives, which further reinforces the lack of control they feel in their own lives (Hooker, 1976).

As indicated by an abundance of research, LH can be a debilitating experience and has frequently been associated with various psychological difficulties, such as grief (Rubinstein, 2004), clinical depression (Bodiford et al., 1988; Wang et al., 2017), and post-traumatic stress (Bargai et al., 2007). In addition to the mental health concerns listed above, LH has been shown to have an adverse effect on one's willingness to pursue academic goals (Bodiford et al., 1988) and to diminish one's academic performance dramatically (Bodiford et al., 1988; Firmin et al., 2004; Walling & Martinek, 1995).

Previous research has been largely quantitative in design and focused mostly on experiences that initiate or escalate LH (Walling & Martinek, 1995). These experiences include prolonged exposure to uncontrollability (Maier et al., 2000), negative feedback (Kamins & Dweck, 1999), and post-traumatic stress (Palker-Corell & Marcus, 2004). Furthermore, the amount of prolonged experience of LH is known to increase the severity of LH directly (Maier et al., 2000).

The experiences identified above and the cycle of increasing severity in LH have been previously studied specifically in academic settings. For example, Firmin et al. (2004) found that when students were given challenging questions earlier in a test, they demonstrated higher levels of LH than when they were given challenging questions later in the test. The researchers concluded that the experience of early failure reinforced students' belief that they were unable to answer easier questions later in a test.

Several quantitative studies have focused specifically on overcoming LH, which is also the focus of the current study. Strategies found to be effective in

past research have included shifting an individual's attributional style to a more internalized sense of control (Alloy et al., 1984), receiving positive feedback (Kamins & Dweck, 1999), reframing a situation to focus on control (Canino, 1981), helping others (Mueller, 2005), connecting with others socially (Hoffman, 2003; Mal et al., 2001), exercising (Greenwood & Fleshner, 2008), and developing a sense of *learned optimism* (Griffin, 2004; Maier et al., 2000).

Strategies to overcoming LH that are specific to academic environments have also been studied previously, such as teachers using a token reward system as positive reinforcement (Andrews & Debus, 1978) and students attaining a series of small achievements (Diseth & Samdal, 2014). These small achievements can also occur in areas outside of the classroom where LH has not developed (Hooper & McHugh, 2013). In a university setting, recent studies (e.g., Prihadi et al., 2018) have supported the association between control and LH, reinforcing this foundational relationship studied previously by Alloy et al. (1984), Griffin (2004), and Maier et al. (2000).

Overall, the majority of the published research on LH in academic environments has been based on quantitative correlational data (Walling & Martinek, 1995), and little research has been conducted on this topic over the last 10 years. This is potentially problematic. Given the limited amount of research on LH conducted on university students, there may still be unknown influential variables. Rich qualitative data could help uncover these variables. Further, because experimental designs and the causality conclusions they afford are difficult to do with human participants (and thus are rare), it is highly possible that yet-to-be uncovered variables could confound, mediate, or moderate the already observed statistical relationships between LH and variables found in past research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, pp. 179–210).

Studies by Walling and Martinek (1995), Hsu (2011), and Smith-Jackson et al. (2014) are exceptions to the plethora of quantitative investigations of LH in academic environments. Hsu (2011) used a focus group design to explore the factors that increased the experience of LH for students learning English. Smith-Jackson et al. (2014) used a mixed-methods design that included a series of semi-structured interviews to explore the experience of LH for women with eating disorders in a university sample. Only Walling and Martinek (1995) went beyond the experience of LH to include the investigation of overcoming LH, which is the focus of the current study.

Walling and Martinek (1995) used a case-study design to investigate the lived experience of a single individual in junior high school and her experiences of trying to overcome LH. The authors concluded that, consistent with existing quantitative research, LH in an academic environment, if not overcome, can generalize to other areas of an individual's life and may develop into more severe mental health concerns. The authors were able to document the reported helpfulness of the following experiences in decreasing LH for this one individual: focusing on

effort rather than outcomes, engaging in physical activity outside of academics, engaging in leadership roles, and increased participation in class.

Walling and Martinek's (1995) study has several notable limitations that reduce the impact of its contribution to advancing this area of study. First, due to its focus on only one research participant, we are unable to judge which findings may be idiosyncratic to that one individual and which ones may hold relevance for other people. Second, Walling and Martinek did not ask the participant directly about her experience of trying to overcome LH but rather inferred the development of her LH through their observations and analysis and then speculated about possible interventions based on observing interactions that appeared to decrease the experience of LH. This leaves significant gaps for future research to address, namely what hinders or helps people overcome LH as understood directly by those who are experiencing it.

Given the notable limitations of Walling and Martinek's (1995) study and the overall lack of qualitative, exploratory data on the process of overcoming LH experiences, this study sought to fill these gaps by employing a modified version of the Enhanced Critical Incident Technique (ECIT) to examine what helps and hinders university students' ability to overcome LH. The ECIT is designed to investigate what helps or hinders achievement of a particular outcome (Flanagan, 1954), such as overcoming LH. Exploratory qualitative data, such as those provided by the ECIT, can supplement previous quantitative research on how to overcome LH. The aim of this study was potentially to add specific examples of lived experiences associated with helping or hindering the process of overcoming LH. A qualitative study can also encourage participants to define the parameters of an experience in their subjective frame of reference and contribute exploratory data about potentially novel variables to investigate further (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, pp. 179–210).

Method

Ontological and Epistemological Assumptions

McDaniel et al. (2020) encouraged researchers to make clear their ontological and epistemological assumptions when conducting an ECIT study, given that the method lends itself to both post-positivist and constructivist philosophical stances. This study was designed from a post-positivistic philosophical (i.e., ontological and epistemological) stance. Participants were given a definition of LH, reflecting the expectation that the experience of LH was definable and that different participants would have similar experiences of LH. We took the position that LH is an objective phenomenon that is relatively independent from individuals' subjective experience of it but that the latter is needed to understand the construct fully. For example, we worked on the understanding that each participant's experience of

overcoming LH was a relatively stable one that was unlikely to change through dialogue with the interviewer.

Researchers' Subjectivity Statements

The first author, who was primarily responsible for this study's data analysis, is a white, cisgender, heterosexual male of European descent. He was drawn to this topic of study because of his own observations of LH. More specifically, he noticed that many classmates, mentees, clients, and friends had specific memories of being told they were not good at specific subjects in school, accepting this opinion as a fact, and then challenging this opinion later in life. Prior to the start of the study, he expected to find specific critical incidents that helped individuals overcome LH because there was a similar sequence of events in these narratives.

The second author was the academic supervisor who oversaw this project. She is a white, non-binary, queer female of European descent. Going into this study, she had professional experiences with clients who had experienced learned helplessness and had expected participants in this study to share similar experiences of overcoming it.

The third author, a South Asian Indian heterosexual male, assisted with reviewing and suggesting updates to the category names and to the descriptions of the categories in order to increase their clarity and connectedness to the data. He also assisted with adapting the manuscript for publication, including adding content to help clarify the findings for a counselling psychology audience. He was motivated primarily to promote the professional development of the first author and to invest in the first author's academic advancement, for which research publications are important, and to share his considerable expertise in conducting and publishing research to strengthen the study and research report. The topic of overcoming LH is also very consistent with the third author's desire to support research on positive topics such as overcoming LH. This author had no prior significant thought or expectations for the results of the study, and his experience with LH centres on helping various clients overcome it in an academic setting through counselling.

Participants

Eight university students who overcame LH in an academic environment participated in this study. Participants were between 21 to 32 years of age ($M = 25.63$, $SD = 3.58$) and enrolled at one of two universities in Vancouver, BC. Seven participants were enrolled in master's programs and one was enrolled in an undergraduate program. Five participants identified as male and three participants identified as female. This sample size was supported by an exhaustiveness check explained below. This sample size is also within the range of published Critical Incident Technique studies (e.g., Dieckmann et al., 2012; Pott, 2015) and within Flanagan's (1954) recommendation of eight to 12 participants.

Materials

This study used a semi-structured interview guide, which included five prompts for the interviewer: (a) Describe your experience of LH in the academic environment; (b) What helped you to overcome LH? (c) What hindered you in overcoming LH? (d) How did this process impact you? and (e) Has this process changed your perspectives in other areas of your life?

Recruitment

Participants were recruited through word of mouth and through advertisements on Facebook. The Facebook post read as follows: “Attention students: I am currently conducting a research study examining the factors that help and hinder post-secondary students to overcome learned helplessness. If you have experienced situations in which you believed that your actions did not affect change and are interested in contributing to further research on these experiences, please contact me,” followed by a means of contacting the first author. The first author invited prospective participants for a brief screening interview to confirm that all participants self-reported that they had overcome LH in an academic environment, which is the main inclusion criterion for this study.

Design and Procedures

The current study employed the ECIT (Butterfield et al., 2009) without soliciting wish list incidents (i.e., we asked only about actual experiences of helpful and hindering incidents rather than speculate about other incidents that may have been helpful but were not directly experienced). The ECIT is commonly used to explore what factors are believed to help or to hinder individuals in achieving desired outcomes in specific situations (Butterfield et al., 2009). With regards to academics and students, the CIT, the predecessor to the ECIT, has been used to investigate student identities (Lin, 2012), transitions to higher education (Trautwein & Bosse, 2017), Indigenous student experiences (Curtis et al., 2015), and student empowerment (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2007).

The procedures in this study followed the standard procedures of ECIT data collection and analysis outlined by Butterfield et al. (2009). Participants were interviewed by the first author in person and were asked to recall specific events and experiences that they believed had helped or hindered their ability to overcome LH in an academic setting. In addition to the standardized prompts noted above, additional open-ended prompts were used as needed to encourage the participants to elaborate on and clarify their responses (e.g., “Can you explain that in more detail?”; “Is there a particular example of that?”). Furthermore, summaries, empathic reflections, and paraphrasing were also used to ensure that the information collected was an accurate description of that participant’s understanding of helpful and hindering factors associated with overcoming LH.

Each interview continued until participants were unable to recall any more events or experiences related to overcoming LH and typically lasted about 1 hour. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

In line with standard ECIT procedures, critical incidents (CIs) were extracted from the transcribed accounts if they demonstrated clear context and specificity, including information about the antecedent that led to the incident, a detailed description of the experience of the incident, and the outcome of the incident. After each transcription was analyzed and after CIs meeting ECIT inclusion criteria were extracted, extracted CIs were compared against CIs extracted from previous interviews to determine if any new incidents related to overcoming LH had been reported. After eight interviews, no new CIs were reported, and data collection ceased.

The first author categorized the identified CIs initially according to the type of event/experience, the source and context of the event/experience, and the outcome (i.e., helped or hindered the participant's ability to overcome LH in an academic setting). Next, the categories were reviewed by the second author, who suggested modifications. An independent judge (a volunteer MA student in psychology) and the third author also reviewed the categories and provided feedback. A review of the categories continued at each step until consensus was reached between the first author and the particular reviewer. Once all categories were confirmed, the participation rates and the CI rates were calculated for each category.

For the ECIT, Butterfield et al. (2005) and Butterfield et al. (2009) proposed nine credibility and trustworthiness checks with the intention to honour and to portray accurately the perspectives of participants and to reduce the influence of inherent researcher biases. The present study completed eight of the nine checks. The credibility check of submitting the categories to other LH researchers for review was not conducted for the current study: three experts in the field of LH were contacted to complete this check, but unfortunately, none of them agreed to participate. This absence is tempered, however, by the consensus of categorization that emerged between the three authors and an independent research judge.

The four credibility checks that were built into the design of the study—audio-recording interviews, reviewing for interview fidelity, achieving exhaustiveness, and cross-checking by participants—are described below. The three credibility checks that required computation after data collection was complete—independent extraction of the CIs, the placement of incidents into categories by independent judges, and participation rates—are indicated in the results section. Finally, theoretical agreement, the credibility check of comparing the research findings of this study to previous literature, is addressed throughout the discussion section.

Audio-recording interviews rather than relying on interviewer memory or on fallible note-taking promoted descriptive validity. Interview fidelity was addressed

by the second author, who periodically reviewed 25% of the interviews to ensure that the interview process was comprehensive and as impartial as possible and who provided formative feedback as necessary. To address the exhaustiveness of the data and to determine when to stop data collection, the first author compared the incidents in each interview with the incidents reported in previous interviews until no new incidents emerged in the subsequent interview. No new incidents were reported in the eighth interview, which is when data collection stopped.

To incorporate cross-checking by participants, six of eight (75%) participants provided written consent to be contacted again to participate in cross-checking interviews conducted by email. They each reviewed a summary of the results and a list of their extracted statements and were invited to request revisions or confirm that there was no misrepresenting or identifying information in their statements. None of these participants indicated that their statements or the summarized results contained misrepresented or identifying information. Two participants did not verify the accuracy of their interviews, and as such, quotations from them have been excluded from this report.

Results

In total, 304 CIs were extracted from the transcribed audio recordings. Participants provided between 14 and 27 helpful CIs ($M = 22.13$, $SD = 4.88$) and between eight and 26 hindering CIs ($M = 15.88$, $SD = 6.08$). This study yielded 21 categories; 14 of these were helpful and seven were hindering to the process of overcoming LH in academic environments by university students.

Table 1 summarizes the categories that were reported to be hindering in overcoming LH in an academic environment by those who had overcome LH. Table 2 summarizes the categories that were reported to have helped overcome LH. Both tables include the category name, a brief description, the participation rate (i.e., the percentage of participants who reported an incident placed into this category), the CI rate (i.e., the percentage of incidents placed into the category), and sample incidents that were sorted into that category. The participation rate was calculated for each of the 21 categories, all of which were above 25%, meeting Butterfield et al.'s (2005) recommendation that a category should have a participation rate of at least 25% to be viable.

In both Table 1 and Table 2, the categories are arranged in descending order based on participation rate. A brief description was created by the authors to summarize the participants' reports. The sample incidents in the tables are direct quotations from participants. No participant numbers were included in the representative quotations as a way to protect confidentiality. For the discussion, categories are explored in groups based on similarity and common themes.

Table 1
Hindering Factors in Overcoming LH in an Academic Environment

#	Category	Description	P-Rate	CI-Rate	Abbreviated Sample	Incidents
1	Not Meeting Expectations	Incidents where participants did not meet expectations.	100%	8.6%	“When various [name of class] terms were discussed in class and troubleshooting [was going on], I would hear the terminology but I think that was more overwhelming than it helped. They were talking about building on what they had already started, where I was still trying to figure out my starting point.” “Um—I would say also probably with that new worries of inadequacy. I’m still not getting it. I’m asking for help so this in some way make me less than.”	
2	Loss of Control	Incidents where participants experienced a significant lack of control over their academic environment.	100%	7.9%	“I had to do a painting for an art class. We had to imitate the Group of Seven. I kept trying and trying ... and then the teacher came and painted over my entire canvas and was like, ‘You’re doing it wrong, you’re doing it wrong.’ After that, I still had to produce some sort of painting. So I did, but I stopped caring. I stopped putting effort into it.” “Yeah, she cut me out of my own process, you know, and I guess in that way—that way—betrayal is an accurate word.”	
3	Fear of Failure	Incidents where participants were preoccupied about failure.	100%	11.8%	“The blatantly obvious answer for not telling anyone [about failing my university courses] is the fear of judgment and the fear of letting people down, particularly my parents.” “It was just a very fear-based situation that, um, in my mind at the time, by avoiding these experiences there wasn’t the opportunity to fail.”	
4	Criticism	Incidents where other individuals provided verbal or written negative judgments toward the participants.	87.5%	4.6%	“She asked me if one of my friends, who was actually an incredible artist—she asked me, ‘Are you sure that [name of friend] didn’t draw this?’ and I said, ‘I’m sure but thanks for your voice of support.’ To hear that it couldn’t have been me because I am obviously not good enough [felt shitty].” “‘Well, if we’re talking more extensively I would say comments from, again, early teachers [who] were critical in the past especially [when] I was in elementary school and that was forming but ‘oh, he needs more confidence and asks too many questions,’ etc. etc.”	

#	Category	Description	P-Rate	CI-Rate	Abbreviated Sample Incidents
5	Isolation	Incidents where participants removed themselves physically or emotionally from a situation.	87.5%	2.6%	<p>"Isolation is key because that drove me further and further away from getting help or being more active in my other classes. I think that isolation is a key description of what it felt like because I felt so ashamed that I didn't give anyone the opportunity to even ask me how school was going."</p> <p>"Yeah—there were times when I just didn't want to get out of bed. I didn't want to—I'd get to school and I'd wait in the bathroom until everyone was in class, and I would try to sneak into class just so I didn't have to engage with people because I was just so afraid."</p>
6	Dwelling	Incidents where participants were preoccupied by previous negative experiences.	87.5%	4.3%	<p>"So, it was definitely a profound moment when I failed that first assignment because it destroyed my world and all of the organization that I had done up to that point to prepare for all of my other courses.... I stopped prepping. I stopped reading...."</p> <p>"I would say first my negative self talk (okay) about the potential to actually do the task (okay), which funnelled into anxiety (okay), which funnelled into inactivity of avoiding it, so avoidance and inactivity."</p>
7	Being in the Spotlight	Incidents where participants felt they were being observed and judged by others.	37.5%	3.0%	<p>"Well, it was already hard, but she's painting over it in a space where all my classmates were around. We all had our easels out, and we were painting. She's doing something in a space where everybody else is around. I am definitely not the only person seeing this, right? And now that's another thing I'm bad at, right?"</p> <p>"I think it's kind of a social embarrassment—I think that's what it kind of ties to. It's not self-esteem—like, I don't worry about, like, if I'm stupid or if I don't know the answer [in class]. It's more of 'will everyone else think I'm stupid.'"</p>

Note. P-rate refers to the participation rate or the percentage of participants who reported incidents placed into this category. CI-rate refers to the critical incident rate or the percentage of incidents that were put into this category.

Table 2
Helpful Factors in Overcoming LH in an Academic Environment

#	Category	Description	P-Rate	CI-Rate	Abbreviated Sample Incident
1	Genuine Corrective Feedback	Incidents where participants received feedback on their abilities and how to improve their performance.	100%	5.9%	<p>"I think one of the big things is having a group that highlights or gives you feedback because sometimes I think I [have] trouble knowing exactly how I'm landing with people if I'm up giving a presentation or something. I've noticed that my read of the room is dramatically different than how other people see it. Usually, I see it much more negative when I've actually done a good presentation.... So being able to ask for feedback and have people give really genuine, really constructive feedback like I've gotten in this program, I think that really helped."</p> <p>"I think one of the big things is having a group that is willing to give you feedback."</p>
2	Acceptance and Encouragement	Incidents where participants felt accepted and encouraged, usually in conversations with supportive others.	100%	4.6%	<p>"[Counselling] was very helpful. It was more so an opportunity to speak without judgement because the primary sources of connection on [an emotional] level were my parents, and I could not share what I was experiencing with them.... It was the opportunity to say anything I needed to say.... Yeah, counselling just really gave me the opportunity to have that bond or connection with someone to feel accepted for exactly with what I was bringing in."</p> <p>"Yeah and even if there is frustration on the part of a professor, it really helped that it wasn't shown."</p>
3	Facing the Original Situation	Incidents where participants voluntarily chose to return to the primary situation in which the participant experienced LH with the intention to try to overcome it.	100%	7.2%	<p>"I'm not afraid of [speaking publicly] anymore. When somebody announces [that I need to publicly introduce myself], I might like roll my eyes a little bit more, but there's no anxiety around [speaking publicly] anymore. Just because we've been constantly been doing [introductions]."</p> <p>"I like to think of it in terms of soil sediment that as time goes on each level becomes strong and stronger because you're packing more on, more experience, more successes, more acceptance and so I feel as though, as time goes on, I have to go back less and less."</p>

#	Category	Description	P-Rate	CI-Rate	Abbreviated Sample Incident
4	Taking Ownership of One's Life	Incidents where the participant took responsibility for their choices, and they experienced a greater sense of control in their lives.	100%	6.6%	<p>"There was just the opportunity [after speaking to my parents about how their expectations were affecting me] to finally assert myself in the way I wanted to be treated and viewed. That sense of autonomy and agency really gave me more confidence to move forward into that year of my degree [in a different academic program]."</p> <p>"The first year at [university] I did very well. I used what I had learned in high school about taking notes."</p>
5	Growth Mindset	Incidents where participants reflected on how their efforts contributed to their overall development instead of focusing on achieving specific results.	100%	9.2%	<p>"I also think just that kind of the reframe, the shift in mindset, from [my ability to write] being my set personality to being just another skill that [I] can learn like anything else."</p> <p>"There wasn't an evaluation by an authority."</p>
6	Comfortable Settings	Incidents where participants were involved in casual, low-pressure settings.	87.5%	3.3%	<p>"[It took many years to paint] around peers or around people who could potentially judge me. . . It was at [name of school], so within the academic space, but within [an art space] which is a low-pressure environment, and I think the idea of being complimented or supported in my art made the difference [in being able to show my art to others] and despite all of my contradictions [and being criticized in the past about my art abilities]."</p> <p>"Absolutely, so much so that I carried on working there for another six years and I'm still in contact with these women today, profound impact on my life and it was just so nice to be around adults like that without feeling like a failure."</p>

#	Category	Description	P-Rate	CI-Rate	Abbreviated Sample Incident
7	Changing the Environment	Incidents where participants changed their physical surroundings in a permanent way, such as by changing schools or moving to a different city.	87.5%	2.3%	<p>"I wanted to kill myself like three days into Grade 8.... Oh, my god—I totally put myself in a private school because I couldn't handle [public school], because I was already hanging out with Grade 12s when I was in Grade 8.... Yeah, [private school] was a safe little haven."</p> <p>"Just not being around people who didn't care—you know what I mean? That social situation, that party scene. Yeah, being away from that really helped me wake up a little bit."</p>
8	Strengthening One's Self-Concept	Incidents where participants engaged in active efforts toward improving their sense of self-worth and esteem, such as engaging in counselling or learning new study and other academic skills.	87.5%	4.3%	<p>"I think I also kind of viewed the move as kind of a chance to remake myself; however, I wanted to, you know? New people who don't have any preconceived notions about me so I can kind of develop a personality that's more in line with what I want to put out into the world."</p> <p>"I had really taken the time to focus on my values and finding out that yes—it's what I'm doing and how it makes me happy versus what that says about me, in terms of status and prestige."</p>

#	Category	Description	P-Rate	CI-Rate	Abbreviated Sample Incident
9	Helping Others	Incidents where participants voluntarily assisted others in accomplishing tasks, especially tasks related to participants' LH, especially but not necessarily academic ones or academic ones related to LH.	75.0%	2.0%	"I actually taught English in Korea. I'm always engaging in the things that I'm not good at. Somehow, I'm finding myself doing things I'm bad at.... There's a lot of things I'm not—I feel like I'm not good at. I feel like I need to tackle them, and English is really one of them and language in general.... Yeah, I guess teaching English gave me time to reflect on how difficult it was to learn English. I kind of forgot about [how hard it was]." "I worked with an arts organization and made art with kids because I felt useful in that space, which I don't know if I would have before."
10	Engaging in Motivational and Purposeful Activities	Incidents where participants engaged in pleasurable or beneficial tasks that related to their interests, or potential career, or provided entertainment.	75.0%	3.3%	"Throughout that year, I was also volunteering at a sexual assault centre, and that really solidified that I really like a helping profession. So, finding [subjects and projects] that really connected with me after that initial reflection period was really important to finding happiness and success in another academic environment." " [The professor] had very interesting things [to say] and I think that's when I had more things to write about and I was more engaged in writing. I'm like, I want to write even though I didn't really think I was good at it."

#	Category	Description	P-Rate	CL-Rate	Abbreviated Sample Incident
11	Achieving Small Goals	Incidents where participants set specific small goals and the experience of achieving these goals, especially as related to troublesome academic issues, such as mentioning one's academic difficulties to the instructor and completing a smaller course assignment first.	62.5%	2.0%	"[My goals] wouldn't have been possible four and [a] bit years ago.... I couldn't think logically long enough to be able to put the steps, and like, I'd have a goal, I couldn't put the steps in motion, but now I've learned ways. If I compact things into three steps, I can do it, I can remember it, even if it's a long-term thing." "I still need to focus on the nuances of writing but allowing that to be its own process instead of getting in the way [of completing class assignments]. Like they're separate."
12	Normalizing	Incidents where participants realized that their academic difficulties were shared by other members of their peer group, especially if these individuals were role models or authority figures.	62.5%	2.6%	"I always saw a good friend of mine, who was, I would say, more versed in kind of the quantitative aspects of academics, mathematics and statistics, research. And he actually normalized the fear of not getting it. I hadn't known that it was a part of his academic journey. Him not having the fear of reaching out, as much as I did, to professors who evaluate him, I think to have him say, 'It's not that bad' ... to ask for help and then to persist in asking for help on something you're struggling with for a [name of class] course." "I think he did it because he kind of understood how it felt like to be an immigrant and the difficulty of assimilating into different culture."

#	Category	Description	P-Rate	CI-Rate	Abbreviated Sample Incident
13	Healthier Living	Incidents where participants introduced a healthier lifestyle and behaviours such as exercising, decreasing or removing substance use, and improving sleep habits.	62.5%	3.0%	<p>"I've been making a lot of lifestyle changes since during this program because I recognize that I actually have very low threshold for unhealthy lifestyle behaviours and so I've been more healthy. Like I've cut back drinking, like I haven't, yeah, I drink very seldomly compared to before, and I get way better sleep, and just I have a more enriching lifestyle."</p> <p>"Yeah [exercise] allows me to think clear... I have better executive functioning, I can concentrate a lot better compared to before."</p>
14	Achievable Activities	Incidents where participants engaged in life activities that they could do consistently well outside of the situation in which participants were experiencing LH.	37.5%	1.0%	<p>"Having that job gave me meaning outside of school and a door that I could walk through and say, 'if I'm not at school, I can work here, like this is a good place for me to work.'"</p> <p>"I created art in between studying and in between assignments and created images with what I was doing or when I was studying. I created diagrams or images ... even just painting in between things helped me."</p>

Independent Extraction and Categorization

The independent judge extracted incidents from 25% of the transcripts with a 95% concordance rate with the first author's extracted incidents, which exceeds Flanagan's (1954) recommendation of 75%. The judge was then given a randomly ordered list of 25% of the incidents that the first author extracted. The judge placed only 11 out of the 304 incidents into different categories than the primary researcher had, resulting in a concordance rate of 85.5%, which exceeded Flanagan's recommended 75% agreement rate. As a result of this feedback and of subsequent discussions between the first author, the judge, and the second author, two new categories were included to represent the data better and three categories were redefined to be more specific and exclusive. Discussions with the third author resulted in minor wording changes only.

Discussion

This study identified 14 categories of incidents that were reported to help and seven categories of incidents that were reported to hinder university students in overcoming LH in an academic environment, as experienced by individuals who overcame LH. The following subsections summarize the categories identified in this study, embed the study's findings within existing research literature, and highlight the unique findings of this study. Throughout the discussion, quotations are used to identify participants' wording in contrast to the researchers' summaries. Italics are used to identify the first use of a technical term, and important terms that reference headings, categories, or themes are styled in title case, with all major words beginning with a capital letter. The hindering categories are described first, as it appears that all reported hindering incidents are also related to the development of LH. The helpful factors are described second. Overall, the findings of this study are predominately consistent with previous literature.

Hindering Categories

The seven categories of hindering incidents that were reported to impede individuals from overcoming LH in academic settings can be understood further as falling into two themes: *Specific Hindering Events* (discrete events that participants could observe or experience concretely) or *Personal Processes* (internal shifts in thought patterns) that intensified the experience of LH and hindered the process of overcoming it.

Specific Hindering Events

The following categories can be conceptualized as specific hindering events: *Loss of Control*, *Not Meeting Expectations*, *Criticism*, and *Being in the Spotlight*. Loss of Control included incidents where participants did not feel that they controlled the outcome of an experience. As a result, they did not attempt to overcome their

feelings of helplessness. In the present study, the Loss of Control category appears to be synonymous with the experience of uncontrollability, a central factor of LH in previous studies of broader populations than university students (Donovan & Leavitt, 1985; Maier et al., 2000).

The Not Meeting Expectations category builds on previous literature that identifies not meeting expectations as common to LH (e.g., Donovan & Leavitt, 1985) by highlighting specific examples of how university students experience the perception of uncontrollability when not meeting expectations in an academic setting. When participants were not meeting expectations, usually set by teachers or parents, they reported that they experienced an internal loss of control.

The Criticism category included incidents that involved other individuals providing negative judgments about participants' abilities or performance. Participants reported that, after experiencing explicit or implicit criticism (e.g., verbal critiques, written negative feedback on assignments, poor grades), they felt "judged," "hurt," and/or "inadequate." Based on their reports, participants appeared to internalize and generalize these negative judgments, which prevented participants from challenging the judgments. This finding is consistent with the results of Kamins and Dweck (1999), who found that criticism can lead to LH in classrooms.

The Being in the Spotlight category included incidents that involved feeling exposed in front of others as a result of being expected to perform in an academic environment when others were observing. Being in the spotlight was reported to be exceptionally hindering to overcoming LH because it usually occurred alongside other specific hindering events. When they described past incidents of being in the spotlight, participants reported feeling an increased sense of uncontrollability and an escalation in their experience of helplessness. The relationship between LH and the experience of being in the spotlight is a unique finding of this study.

Personal Processes

The following categories can be conceptualized as personal processes that are a hindrance to overcoming LH: *Isolation*, *Dwelling*, and *Fear of Failure*. Incidents placed into the Isolation category hindered participants' abilities to overcome LH because they separated themselves from supportive influences that might help them overcome LH. Similarly, this result is supported by Mal et al. (1990), who found that social deprivation was related to increased LH for university students.

The Dwelling category included incidents of repetitive thinking on negative experiences. Incidents of dwelling distracted participants from considering potential solutions and reduced their motivation to seek out or implement change to reduce LH in an academic environment. Incidents of dwelling also appeared to prolong and increase the severity of LH by perpetuating the experience of helplessness through memories. The work of Dygdon and Dienes (2013) is consistent with our finding that repetitive thoughts can perpetuate the experience of LH.

The Fear of Failure category included incidents where participants stated that they had “avoided situations” where they had previously experienced an incident of loss of control or of not meeting expectations. The hindering nature of incidents placed into the Fear of Failure category is supported by Fincham et al. (1989), who found that repeated failures among children in classroom settings resulted in a greater inhibition to continue attempting to challenge LH.

The current study builds on past research on personal processes that develop LH and that hinder individuals from overcoming LH by providing a conceptualization of how LH, for university students, is reported to be perpetuated through an escalating cycle of isolation, dwelling, and fear of failure that ultimately hinders overcoming it. The escalating cycle of isolation, dwelling, and fear of failure seems to intensify LH from previous experiences. For example, a participant’s isolation after receiving unexpectedly low grades was followed by dwelling on that “failure,” followed by increased fear of failure and then by increased isolation to avoid further “failures.” Proposing this specific cycle is a unique contribution to the literature that addresses LH.

Helping Categories

The 14 categories of helpful incidents were placed into four overarching themes: *Control*, *Helpful Feedback*, *Shifting Perspectives*, and *Self-Development*. This organization was used to highlight similarities in previous studies and potential connections between categories.

Control

This overarching theme included three categories: *Taking Ownership of One’s Life*, *Engaging in Motivational and Purposeful Activities*, and *Achievable Activities*. The reportedly helpful influence of control is supported by the work of Maier et al. (2000), who reviewed decades of quantitative research and found that the primary method of overcoming LH was to engage in activities that provided a sense of control. These researchers described this general strategy as learned optimism, but the process is also referred to in other studies as developing an internal locus of control (Prihadi et al., 2018) or as developing an internal attributional style (Khan et al., 2005). This general strategy of overcoming LH also has been recently supported in a university student population. Prihadi et al. (2018) reported that an internal locus of control was more predictive of lower rates of procrastination than LH. This finding supports the idea that developing a sense of control can mitigate the effects of LH. The following paragraphs describe participant experiences that build on previous research by providing more specific strategies of how to increase one’s sense of control.

One strategy was Taking Ownership of One’s Life, which was a category of helpful CIs in the current study and included incidents of “working,” “paying [their] own tuition,” “paying for [their] own apartment,” “making choices

[about careers],” personalizing their notes, and personalizing their assignments. Participants reported that these incidents contributed to a “sense of autonomy” and “control,” which ultimately led to a decrease in LH. These results are consistent with previous studies that demonstrate a correlation between control and a reduction in LH for university students (Mal et al., 1990; Tuffin et al., 1985). That said, the specific examples provided by participants in this study increase the richness of the description available in existing research.

Other examples of increased control include incidents placed in the Engaging in Motivational and Purposeful Activities category. This category included incidents that involved focusing on a task or on an aspect of a task that was interesting to the participants, such as tasks related to their passions or careers or that provided entertainment. Participants reported that engaging in these tasks helped to challenge their sense of LH because doing so created a sense of motivation and purpose. The link between motivation and overcoming LH is supported by various other studies (De Castella et al., 2013; Raufelder et al., 2018), but Sucu and Bulut (2018) reported that taking a course for enjoyable or engaging reasons resulted in lower LH compared to taking a course for the purpose of a career. Future research is required to resolve this discrepancy in investigations of the influence of motivation, purpose, and enjoyment on LH.

Finally, the Achievable Activities category included incidents where participants engaged in activities outside of the academic environment that they could do consistently well, such as “painting,” “having a [rewarding] job,” or “hobbies,” all of which helped overcome LH. The participants in the present study reported that the control they gained consistently outside of an academic environment by engaging in achievable activities helped them to overcome LH in an educational environment. Maier et al. (2000) also supported the notion that individuals who experience an increased sense of control in one area of their lives observed that this sense of control could generalize to other areas of their lives, helping to decrease LH in those other areas as well. Maier et al. (2000) referred to this phenomenon as learned optimism.

Helpful Feedback

This overarching theme included three categories: *Genuine Corrective Feedback*, *Acceptance and Encouragement*, and *Normalizing*. Participants reported that feedback could help overcome LH because it allowed for the opinions of others to help “reframe,” contextualize, and/or provide more information about their experiences. In contrast to the Criticism category, the Genuine Corrective Feedback category included incidents of receiving feedback on how to improve objective abilities. Participants reported that feedback was considered genuine when it was given freely from trusted sources. Incidents of genuine corrective feedback were reported to help overcome LH by providing a greater sense of one’s abilities. While participants in this study reported incidents of genuine corrective

feedback primarily in a university setting, their reported incidents of criticism occurred mainly in childhood. These reports support the work of Kamins and Dweck (1999), who found that feedback that was focused on the process rather than on the student was less likely to result in LH for children in primary school.

Participants also reported that incidents of acceptance and encouragement included supportive conversations with parents, significant others, and counselors. These incidents were reported to interrupt the cycle of dwelling and isolation, allowing them to experience a “break” from shame and helplessness because they felt accepted and encouraged. These findings are also consistent with the work of Kamins and Dweck (1999), who found that incidents of criticism led to increased LH unless the individual experienced more supportive conversations.

Finally, the Normalizing category included incidents where participants felt that their experiences were shared by other members of their peer group, as a result of speaking with a peer or a role model who could relate to a participant’s experience. Incidents of normalizing were reported to be helpful in the process of overcoming LH because they were thought to reduce the hindering effects of shame experienced when participants believed they were not meeting expectations or were experiencing criticism. Furthermore, participants in the present study reported that normalizing their experiences facilitated a transition from internalizing criticism to focusing on their ability to improve. These findings are supported by Canino (1981), who found a statistical relationship between normalization and overcoming LH among students with learning disabilities across primary and secondary schools.

Shifting Perspective

This overarching theme included four categories: *Growth Mindset*, *Strengthening of One’s Self-Concept*, *Changing the Environment*, and *Comfortable Settings*. In response to positive experiences of feedback and personal experiences of control, participants reported that a shift in perspective helped overcome LH in an academic setting. This shift marked an internal change in how participants perceived their current situation and past experiences involving LH.

The Growth Mindset category included incidents that involved participants reflecting on their overall development, which helped them challenge the perspective they held that they were unable to change their abilities. For example, participants reported remembering previous academic progress, remembering times when they had been successful in overcoming obstacles, and/or reflecting on other areas of their lives where they were developing their abilities. Canino (1981) also found that focusing on improvements instead of on specific outcomes helped decrease LH among students with learning disabilities across primary and secondary schools. The present study advances existing literature by providing specific participant examples of how they focused on a growth mindset: taking a “pause” or a “break,” which reportedly facilitated an interruption in thoughts related to LH.

The Strengthening One's Self-Concept category included incidents where participants identified their contributions for self-change in their environments. This identification was facilitated through "self-reflection," "counselling," "challenging [their] beliefs [of helplessness]," and improving their academic skills. Participants reported that acknowledging their contributions allowed them to focus on improving. Similarly, Maier et al. (2000) reported a shift in perspective (moving from the belief that people's environment primarily influences change to the belief that people can influence their environment) in what they termed attributional style. These attributional style shifts have also been observed within an academic environment (Khan et al., 2005) and have been linked to long-term changes in emotional well-being for university students (Ciarrochi et al., 2007). The current study advances this previous research by providing specific examples of how university students were able to shift their attributional style through strengthening their self-concept.

The Comfortable Settings category included incidents that involved casual, low-pressure settings where participants could engage in small discussions about their academic work, such as professors' offices, therapeutic spaces, their own apartments, small classrooms, and their parents' homes. These settings were reported to be helpful in overcoming LH because they provided a physically relaxing setting where participants could reflect on their situation, identify factors that were contributing to their LH, complete assignments, research alternative options, and plan for their futures. Similarly, Evans and Stecker (2004) argued that being in a stressful setting reminded individuals of their lack of control and hindered their attempts to overcome LH. The current study appears to add more depth to Evans and Stecker's findings by providing specific examples of comfortable settings for university students.

The Changing the Environment category included incidents in which the participants changed their physical surroundings by returning to their parents' home, leaving for other schools, living on their own, or moving to different cities. Incidents of changing the environment were reported to be helpful because participants were moving to a new environment that was not associated with past experiences of LH. Similar to the Comfortable Settings category, the Changing the Environment category adds details to Evans and Stecker's findings by providing specific examples of how university students changed their environments to help overcome LH.

Self-Development

This overarching theme included four categories: *Achieving Small Goals*, *Healthier Living*, *Helping Others*, and *Facing the Original Situation*. These categories involved incidents of participants' intentional behaviours to better themselves. The Achieving Small Goals category included incidents of setting specific, attainable goals and completing them. Participants talked about how achieving small goals

contributed to a “sense of accomplishment” and to a sense of control, which ultimately helped them in their process of overcoming LH. Participants reported that incidents of achieving small goals were helpful even outside of academics because the sense of control generalized to include their academics. This finding is consistent with Diseth and Samdal’s (2014) research on secondary school students having lower levels of LH when achieving goals.

The Healthier Living category included incidents such as sustainable exercise, decreasing alcohol use, and better sleep habits. These incidents were reported to contribute to participants’ positive sense of self and to a shift in perspective that made them believe they could now make changes in their lives. While with a different species, this finding is consistent with the results of Greenwood and Fleshner (2008), who found that exercise interrupts the experience of LH in rats. In humans, there is less direct support because it is difficult to determine the specific role of exercise versus the distraction inherent in exercise, but distraction has been found to mitigate LH for university students (Hooper & McHugh, 2013). The present study builds on the work of these researchers by providing concrete examples of how university students could use exercise intentionally to reduce their experience of LH.

The Helping Others category included incidents that involved voluntarily assisting others in accomplishing tasks, such as volunteering at not-for-profit organizations, tutoring others in academic subjects, and helping family members with chores. Incidents of helping others were reported to be helpful because they provided the opportunity for participants to feel useful and connected to others. This finding is supported by Mueller (2005), who found that young people had lower levels of LH when they were empowered through volunteering and service learning. This study extends the work of Mueller by replicating this finding with university students. Further, the participants in this study reported that they found incidents of helping others especially helpful when this help involved the same tasks in which they had experienced LH.

Finally, the Facing the Original Situation category included incidents of voluntarily challenging LH in the same situation that it developed in. Examples include going back to school, bringing hobbies back into academic settings, raising one’s hand in class again, or subsequent attempts to improve one’s skill at an academic activity. Although other incidents helped the process of overcoming LH, only incidents of facing the original situation were reported to provide participants with the opportunity to observe directly that they were overcoming their LH in their target situation. The research of Fincham et al. (1989) supports the helpfulness of facing the original situation to overcome LH in a classroom because facing the original situation is a direct intervention to interrupt the development of LH. The present study also advances the research of Fincham et al. by exploring this theme in a university population and suggesting that challenging LH through facing the original situation is only effective when it is a personal choice (i.e., voluntary).

This specification contributes a unique proposal to LH literature: autonomy is necessary for the process of overcoming LH if participants try to overcome it by facing the original situation.

Limitations

There are several notable limitations to this study. First, two participants elected not to participate in the cross-checking, so it is less certain if their reported critical incidents were understood correctly by the researchers. Second, none of the contacted experts agreed to participate in the expert opinion check. Therefore, this study's results have undergone external evaluation outside of the research team only through an audit of the research procedures by an independent judge. Third, only individuals who have overcome LH were interviewed. Therefore, the reported hindering and helping factors may not represent the experiences of those who have not overcome LH in an academic environment and consequently, the results of this study should be viewed only as an incomplete list of all possible factors. Finally, it is possible that the results are particular to the specific individuals interviewed for this study and that a different sample of individuals could report different critical incidents. Still, we expect that the categories of critical incidents will remain robust across different participants because of the observed participation rates, the achievement of data saturation in this study, and the ability of the set of categories to represent the experiences of eight individuals completely.

Future Research

Future research could focus on determining specific strategies that counselors and educators would be able to implement to target the specific critical incident factors identified in this study and on testing the respective factors in experimental designs intended to support more strongly causal claims of impact on LH. To demarcate the findings of this study better, future research could compare the experiences of overcoming LH for graduate versus undergraduate students as well as the experiences of overcoming LH across genders. To identify factors involved in LH more comprehensively, future research could compare the findings of this study to the reported experiences of university students who have not yet overcome LH. Finally, qualitative designs such as a grounded theory method could also be used to explore further and possibly to model the strategies of overcoming LH.

Implications

If this research study is replicated and supported by future research, the results provide some concrete self-help guidance and a tentative road map for individuals hoping to overcome LH in academic environments. To break the cycle of LH, changing the environmental context (especially to a more comfortable environment) appeared to be helpful. In the beginning stages of overcoming LH in

academic environments, the following strategies appear to be especially helpful: helping others, engaging in motivational and purposeful activities (especially achievable activities), and healthy living. Only once the cycle of LH is broken will individuals be better able to re-establish their goals and to begin facing the original situation. In doing so, they may still struggle to challenge their feelings of helplessness, but achieving small goals, engaging in motivational and purposeful activities, taking ownership of their lives, and receiving genuine corrective feedback seem helpful in finally overcoming LH.

Counsellors working with university students overcoming LH may also find this road map to be useful as a general guide. In addition, the results of this study offer more specific implications for counsellors. The results highlight specific hindering incidents that could be directly targeted in counselling and the specific helping incidents that could be introduced to help university students overcome LH.

As a result of the reports of hindering incidents, counsellors are encouraged to explore the specific hindering events related to the development of learned helplessness, such as those related to loss of control, criticism, being in the spotlight, and not meeting expectations. In order to have a comprehensive understanding of LH for a university student, counsellors are also encouraged to explore the personal processes that were reported to intensify the experience of LH. The conceptualization of the escalating cycle of indicants related to fear of failure, dwelling, and isolation may be particularly useful to counsellors in identifying areas to focus on in the counselling process and in choosing interventions.

As a result of the reports of helping incidents, this study provides several areas that counsellors can focus on to help clients overcome LH. For example, counsellors may want to incorporate generally positive social interactions in their treatment plans for these individuals. One option to incorporate social interaction would be to recommend peer support groups. These groups may also be able to provide similar experiences to those included in the helpful categories of normalizing and of helping others. In general, counsellors are encouraged to include or promote experiences of control, helpful feedback, shifting perspectives, and self-development.

Counsellors could also help students develop a better sense of control by helping them to take better ownership and responsibility for their life in other domains, engage in more motivational and purposeful life activities, and feel a greater sense of success by participating in achievable activities. To counter the tendency to dwell on negative experiences and the aversiveness of not meeting expectations, counsellors may want to encourage university students to focus their efforts on activities not related to academics, rather than a more direct approach to tackling LH. Overall, focusing on other areas may help students' sense of learned optimism in other areas to generalize to academics before they experience facing the original situation.

Counsellors could also help students have positive experiences with feedback by providing genuine corrective feedback, acceptance and encouragement, and normalization in individual counselling. As described above, a support group could also be an option to have positive experiences with feedback. If the option for positive experiences with feedback outside of counselling is not possible, then counsellors may want to focus on helping students shift their perspective on the feedback they are receiving. These shifts in perspective may be attainable through working with students to introduce and incorporate a growth mindset and to strengthen their self-concept by focusing on their progress and on their ability to affect their environment and experiences. The act of coming to counselling may already offer the experience of changing the environment to a comfortable setting because participants reported that one of the examples of a comfortable setting was a counselling office, but the change in environment may also be more drastic, since other participants reported changing schools and moving to different cities.

Finally, counsellors are encouraged to explore experiences of self-development such as helping others, making healthier life choices, and engaging more in achievable activities. This emphasis away from tackling LH directly, while perhaps counterintuitive to some, would replicate the reported success of participants in this study in overcoming LH and may be needed before students are ready to face the original LH situation. When students have been able to challenge and overcome LH in other areas, it appears to be paramount that they be allowed to make the decision of when and where to face the original situation to avoid experiencing another loss of control.

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