



*Clear Thinking newsletter from Uncommon Knowledge - Issue 87*

In this month's Clear Thinking...

1. Learned helplessness and depression
2. Online course: Rewind technique

## **Beating learned helplessness and depression**

*3 ways to help your clients believe life **can** be better*

"Learned helplessness is the giving-up reaction, the quitting response that follows from the belief that whatever you do doesn't matter."

*Arnold Schwarzenegger*

Whatever your thoughts on the 'Austrian Oak', this is a pretty good description of a central experience of [clinical depression](#).

Consider these examples:

- a man is rich but will not spend any money; memories of his desperately poor childhood haunt him
- a woman has a relationship with a kind and caring man but feels angry and distrustful of him; she's haunted by memories of her abusive ex
- a child is never allowed to have friends or make her own decisions; as an adult she shuns relationships and feels unable to steer her own course.

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Feeling helpless when you're not, because you *were* helpless in the past, is known as 'learned helplessness' (a term first coined by psychologist Martin Seligman). It leads to passivity and loss of energy and needs to be addressed when [helping lift depression](#).

Here's three ways you can start to steer a 'victim' of learned helplessness towards [confidence](#), self assertion and vital optimism:

## 1. Use metaphor

People's minds work in metaphorical way and are often more responsive to a *parallel pattern* than a direct appeal. "You are suffering from learned helplessness!" is too stark a message, and risks making a person feel (paradoxically) *more passive* – because they haven't had the chance to make the connection themselves.

So I might ask a client to imagine a beautiful bird that, through no fault of its own, has been shut away in a cage for many years. One day the cage door is left wide open. Now the bird can fly free! But even though it still has its wings, even though the circumstances have plainly now changed, the bird makes no move to leave. *Why? It believes it is still trapped...*

Depressed clients affected by learned helplessness tend to respond well to ideas couched in such metaphorical terms.

## 2. Vive la différence! (Difference rules, OK!)

Learned helplessness means *assuming* that a new situation has the same limitations as an old one that resembles it, when in reality there are lots of positive alternatives. These new possibilities may exist because the *situation* is different, or because the *person* has changed, or both.

Consider the case of a man who'd been beaten and ridiculed by his parents as a child whenever he'd expressed an opinion, and who now fears to speak up at work. We might suggest drawing up a list of the *differences* between the two times:

*What happened then:*

- laughed at
- beaten
- not listened to
- didn't know how to express myself
- disrespected

*What happens now:*

- colleagues are decent and fair
- I've learned to speak clearly and know what I want to say
- respected
- liked
- not beaten

This would be a great exercise to do before proceeding with hypnotic work as a way of seeding in your client's mind the notion that there really *are* differences between then and now.

### **3. Encourage active problem solving**

[Psychotherapy](#) needs to be an active endeavor to help people escape their real or perceived psychological and/or environmental difficulties. A woman who was passively worrying that something she'd said had upset her friend was encouraged to actually call her friend during the therapy session, so that at least she'd know the situation (her friend was fine). Depressed people with learned helplessness tend *not to act* and instead just build [worry](#) upon worry.

If your depressed client has become very passive, it's not a good idea to deluge them with too much positivity at once. But when they've relaxed with you and gradually started to feel a little more optimistic, you can gently start to steer them to pro-activity with questions like:

- “*What steps* can you take to avoid this?”
- “If you were ever to start feeling depressed again, *what have you now learnt* that would help you stay out of depression in the future?” (implying they have control and can determine their own lives more)
- “*What ways* can the two of you start to [improve your relationship](#) again?”

Learned helplessness drains motivation and energy. When we learn our own potential to positively influence our own lives we can't help but become more fulfilled.

## Dealing with the past

Learned helplessness is not the only way people can become 'trapped' by bad experiences in their past. Another common 'trap' you will encounter as a therapist is post-traumatic stress.

PTSD puts people in a 'time warp'. The traumatic experience they went through fails to be stored as a 'memory of a past event' and so remains 'live'. Encountering almost *any* reminder of the event makes the sufferer physically and emotionally feel as if it is all happening right now.

Which can wreck your life.

But we know how to help people escape the time warp and take up their lives again, having put the bad experience, finally, behind them.

Our [rewind technique online course](#) will teach you everything you need to know about how to help people make the past *be* the past – in complete comfort. They will still remember the events, but they will no longer experience them as sources of current unbearable distress. They will be able to look back on them without becoming emotionally aroused.

No therapist can afford to be without this knowledge.

The next rewind technique course starts on 14 April 2010 and we are offering a 25% Early Bird discount if you book your place by 24 March. Places are limited, so make your reservation early.

See you in a fortnight.

[Mark Tyrrell](#)

Co-Founder

Uncommon Knowledge

*Psychology trainers since 1995*

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