

RISE UP AND SHINE – Episode #66: Learned Helplessness



FULL EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

Ashley

This is Episode 66. Learned Helplessness. You're listening to the rise up and shine podcast with Claudine and Ashley as an empty nester and a mom with young kids, we have both shared very similar and very real struggles. From chaos to coaches, we now help other women live an authentic and meaningful life. So tune in weekly for girl talk and tips on how you too can rise up and let your light shine bright. This is the rise up and shine podcast.

Claudine

Welcome back listeners. Today we're talking about a topic that I know firsthand. So let me ask you have you ever felt like you were helpless in a situation felt like you had no control, and you couldn't make the changes that you want. And you don't even try you lack motivation? Well, I spent years in the state many, many years. And today we're talking about learned helplessness. So learned helplessness is after enduring, stressful situation or a traumatic event, you can learn that you are helpless in that situation, and in all situations, and then you no longer try to change it even when change is possible. And I cannot tell you how many years I spent in this state where I just felt helpless. I was just a victim, a victim of my circumstance, a victim of other people. And I couldn't change anything. So I just was stuck for many, many years. And of course, that led to depression. And it was very confusing, because spiritually, I felt like, of course, I can make changes. But honestly, my brain had been trained that I couldn't. So it was very conflicting, I had very conflicting beliefs that fought each other. And so it just left me in this stuck, unmotivated state. And several years ago, when I started learning all these new things and start coaching, I radically changed my beliefs that I absolutely can control a lot of things. I can't control everything, but I can certainly bring about change in my life. So that's what we're talking about today. learned helplessness.

Ashley

Yes, so something just popped up into my mind as you're speaking, how, cuz I've done this too. I was thinking that the wording stuck in assumption, we basically get stuck in all these assumptions, right? These limiting beliefs, these beliefs that we've conditioned our brain to believe, right, that feel true. And we get stuck there. And so we think, well, we can't grow, or we can't overcome this, or we'll never reach this in our life will never end. How many times have we heard around us? Or maybe we've also said it I mean, there's common ones. Right, right. I'm not meant to find love. We hear sometimes we even say this about other people. Oh, they're stuck in their ways. I'm not meant to have close friends, or people always leave me. Or I can't handle this is mine. I can't handle as much as other people can. That's that's the one that actually my husband was talking to me about this week. He's in our conversation. He kept pointing out when I would say I can't. And I thought, Oh, my gosh, I didn't even realize I'm saying that.

Claudine

Yeah, learned helplessness being an example. That's it. That's it. I can't.

Ashley

And one of the ones you mentioned is that I can't make dinner while I'm talking with somebody at the same time. I think I said that to you. Did I say it when your husband came over for dinner? I'm like, I can't focus on dinner and focus on you at the same time. But it goes back to that. I can't. Is that really true? Well, it feels true. Because that's, you know what I've been doing? Yeah, but I believe it's my belief. I'm sure if I change that and said I can, then I would actually be able to do it. But what a simple little thing to show our example, right? Of learned helplessness.

Claudine

Yeah. And we all I think to a certain degree, we all do it. I mean, like, you know, you gave some great examples. There's others with weight loss, you know, I can't lose weight. I've tried everything under the sun. I think a lot of women struggle with this. relationships. You mentioned that. Yeah, that's for other people, but not me. I can't find dry. You know, that's not for me. And there's so many ways that we do this to ourselves. And it's true. It's just a training of our brain, that we've trained our brain, we've learned how to be helpless. It can start with people, it's children. You know, I can't do math. How many people say that? I'm just not good at math? Well, maybe one math class was difficult, but you probably use math every single day. You know how to count apples and oranges and a dozen eggs and you know, there's all kinds of ways that we use math every day, but it's that learned helplessness that keeps us from seeking opportunities for relief or change. It's what keeps us stuck. So that's what we're talking about today because it is important. People like I shared people that struggle with this, you have a higher rate of depression, elevated stress levels and less motivation to take care, their physical health. So it really affects our whole lives. It's really hard to rise up and shine and live this life to the full that we all want to live. If we have this learned helplessness mentality.

Ashley

Right. Have you ever been around somebody who just has such a positive, vibrant, easygoing energy about them? And you think, gosh, I could never be like that. I wish I could be like that. Like, they're just, you know, totally different. And that's not me. That's not me. And I think about that, because I have a specific person, I'm thinking in my head, who's a neighbor. And it's like, gosh, I would love to be just like her. She just she, I really admire her. But then we think what, because I can't do that, or I, you know, and I immediately back it up with why I'm not this, and I'm not that and I can't, and I can't, you know, I mean, wow, how easy that can happen. And fortunately, you know, I, you and I both have become aware of these limiting beliefs. Because I've done this work, right, we've learned what our limiting

beliefs are. And so we can see it in varying situations and circumstances. And a lot of times, it's a pattern, it's very similar beliefs that keep popping up. And I like what you said to is a huge point is our childhood. So especially as I was going through counseling, and the trauma course, and going through my whole I like I call it transformation. I mean, yeah, it's just amazing transformation. I learned about the traumas of our childhood and what it does on our brains, right. So as a child, when we go through, and it could be a big trauma, it can be a smaller trauma, it could be whether you have PTSD, or CPTSD, which is complex post. Yeah. Not postpartum depression, complex PTSD. But also, if any experience, we've all experienced some sort of trauma in our life, right? Whether it's someone saying something mean, at school to us, or whatever, whatever we dealt with as a child, our underdeveloped brain comes to these conclusions, right? Our prefrontal cortex isn't fully developed at that time, so we don't properly use logic and reason and draw appropriate conclusions yet. So with our child brain, we come to a conclusion and form this belief in our childhood that carries us into adulthood. And we get stuck. That's where we get stuck, we are still functioning from those beliefs that are still the underdeveloped brain. Right? And so the awareness is so crucial, because when we are aware that we're saying these things to ourselves in our head, or we're believing these things, and we can realize, Oh, that's not really true. I kind of came to that conclusion as a child, because that's what I believed in the moment. And my brain just had to find a reason. Our brains just have to make sense of something. Yeah. And so when it does that, it just, it follows us, right. And so depending on things that you've experienced in your life, and I did, I had a lot of trauma growing up. Yeah, so so many of my beliefs. Now I fall into that, that's why I say, Well, I can't handle as much as other people, or even the friendships like, I don't know how to do friendship. I can say that, like, people don't, people are gonna leave me, I tend to run that one through my head. Well, people are just gonna leave me. So I'm just gonna stay at arm's length. And, you know, this is the safe zone right here. So I don't feel that pain. Right. And so we get stuck in those things. Right. And those beliefs.

Claudine

Yep. And that's exactly what learned helplessness is and how you can, as you were speaking, reminded me of that scripture in First Corinthians 13, where it says, When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child, but when I became an adult, I put away childish things. And that's part of,

Ashley

That's good.

Claudine

Yeah. And that's part of our work that we do with our clients is really helping people move past beliefs and mostly the limiting ones that they learned in their childhood, either through their primary

caregivers, or through experiences or situations that no longer serve, right. A lot of things we believe, because when we were little it, that's how we thought, like you said, Our undeveloped prefrontal cortex. That's how it made meaning of the situation. But now that we're adults, we have the ability to choose our thoughts. And I love Romans 12, to where it says, be transformed from the inside out by renewing your mind. And that's what we get to do. As adults. We get to choose what we're going to think about we get to choose what we're going to focus on and we get to be transformed. our whole lives get to be transformed. And as you were talking to it reminded me of you know, there's the learned helplessness But one of the doctors that helped do the study on this, wrote a book called learn optimism by Dr. Martin Seligman. And he's a pioneer in this work. And I think I have yet to read this book. But I'm looking forward to reading it now that we're talking about this subject. But just as we've learned how to be helpless, we can learn how to be optimistic, which is like you're talking about your neighbor, that's so optimistic and happy go lucky. That's not me, in my nature, that's what I say, and my nature, I'm a half glass empty kind of gal, right? It's like, there's only half a cup of water, it's missing half a cup, right? The world and my circumstance, and I've had to train my brain through all the work that we do, and all the studying and books I've read how to train my brain to be optimistic, to see things differently, to think differently. And that's helped transform my life. So when we talk about that, we know that unlearning this, these associations that we have in our minds and deconditioning, because it really is a conditioned response, right? That's what learned helplessness is, is we've been in a situation and it worked out a certain way. And maybe it happened a second time. So now it's conditioned response, well, this happens. So I just respond this way, or I don't respond at all, I just become inactive. Because what's the point? Right, and so deconditioning, our responses takes a little bit of practice. And that's what we're going to talk about today, ways that we can learn how to not be helpless ways we can learn to be optimistic, and to take back the control that we do have. I mean, God is a creative, powerful God, and He made us in His image, we have the power to create in our lives, we have the power to take response ability to the circumstances in our lives, we're not just hapless victims, just puppets, that fate is just happening to you. But there is cause and effect. And that was huge for me to realizing that, you know, a lot of the effects that I've experienced in my life are caused by some of my actions or inactions or my beliefs or my responses. And that's why I have the circumstance I have. It's not like, I just got up, you know, I got on the wrong side of the the receiving line and didn't get all the good stuff that other people got so. Powerful.

Ashley

Yeah. You know, when you're talking about conditioning, the conditioning that we've gone through, when we go through experiences, it's the understanding the why, while the Why is for survival, right? I mean, our most primitive basis is for survival. That's what the fight flight freeze, is for. It's for our survival. And so as I mentioned earlier, when we formed these beliefs, it was because our brain had to kind of rationalize with the little rationale we had right at the time. But it was to keep us safe or to understand, and you know, what was going? It was to keep us safe and sur-, you know, survival. And it. So one thing that's actually helpful that I want to mention, as we do work on deconditioning those beliefs is, one thing you can do is thank your younger self, for protecting you. For the time being, we don't have to feel ashamed that Oh, my gosh, like, I grew up with these beliefs. And I can't believe that I'm treating myself this way. I can't believe I thought that or, you know, don't shame yourself, just for

the time being your child self, this is the way that it protected you, you know, for whatever you were going through, and you think your your younger self will thank you for protecting me with the information you had at the time you were trying to do your best for me, you know, and just accept that. But also recognize that we can always learn and grow, you know, we don't have to be stuck, like, hey, this worked for me for a while. Now I'm ready to move on and try something else, you know, I'm ready to move on and move forward. And a lot of times this can happen because we get stuck in the past, right? We write about that we get. We're still kind of keeping ourselves in the past, when we're holding on to these limiting beliefs. And the real power comes again, with the awareness because a lot of these beliefs like even over the last weekend, my husband pointing out every time I say I can't, I can't Yeah, so many times it's subconscious, so many times we don't even know. And if I wasn't having this conversation with him, or sometimes even journaling, I would not come to that conclusion and that awareness and realize, Wow, I didn't realize I was doing this. I didn't realize these words coming out of my head. It was so automatic. I, who have learned a lot of this stuff, right and teach this stuff, I was still unaware of what I was saying, Yeah, or what I was thinking. I mean, there's so much to dig into. But just remembering that, hey, it serves you for a while. But now let's move on and try something else that's going to better serve you in your adulthood. And the direction that you want to go.

Claudine

Exactly. And there are different ways to do that. But it's interesting, you pointed out that subconsciously, you say, I can't, I can't all the time. But that's, that's what happens is we get these grooves built in our brains, right? Our neural pathways are formed. And then it becomes automatic. It's like habitual, you know, it's just because we've set it so often now. That's right. Oh, to default mode of thinking. And that's what so much of our work is it's helping people develop new neural pathways develop new thoughts, new beliefs that serve them, rather than write them back. So one of the ways that that helps understand learn helplessness is understanding our explanatory style. Which is how we explain the events in our lives. And there's three different ways according to the story, there's personalization, whether we view things in our life is internal or external. There's pervasive whether we view it as global or local as in this always happens to me in every area of my life, or it just happens in this specific area of my life. And then permanent is the circumstance is it all the time, or just transitory like it's happened, this bad situations happen, but it's gonna pass. And the way we look at things, the way we view the circumstances in our life, will determine whether we have this learned helplessness or whether we can stay optimistic about it. So I remember several years ago, when the real estate market crashed my husband and I basically, basically both lost our jobs. And then a bunch of financial problems ensued. And I remember thinking at the time, oh, my goodness, we're always going to be broke, this is always going to be like this. And at the same time, one of our children was going through a difficult time. So then it felt like it was in every part of my life, like, we're just never going to make it we're never going to succeed. It's always it's everywhere. And so those are some of the key words you have to look for. If you start thinking it's always or never, or every part of my life, you know, then you probably have some learned helplessness going on. You have some thoughts in your mind that are explaining the events in your life, not in a healthy way and In a way that serve you. Another way, is creating an optimistic viewpoint. And we don't have a whole lot of time on this episode to delve into that. But I do have a resource, we both have resources on our website for that. So check it out, it's called the ABC method.

And it will help train your brain to have an optimistic viewpoint about the circumstances in your life. And sometimes that's all we need is just a resource, something to help train our thinking and look at things in a new way. And lastly, a third thing is goal setting that can really help overcome learned helplessness. Because when we achieve goals, when we set small, realistic goals and achieve them, then we realize we're not helpless after all, that we actually do have some control, and it increases our desire, our motivation to reach certain things in our lives. So there are ways to overcome helplessness. But it is not easy. It's simple, but not easy. And it does take work.

Ashley

Right? You know, something else I'm going to add is labels, like being careful of how we label ourselves because we can use and I mentioned several times, some of my own thoughts is like I am, or I can't write. And so we tend to label I am lazy, I am just a lazy person. I said that to myself for a long time. And my siblings would say that to me, and I realized I was probably depressed. That explains why I felt lazy, like, okay, there's a reason for this. But we label ourselves and we will function in life based on that label. So we can limit ourselves to Well, since I told myself I'm lazy, then I'm just going to act lazy, that's my behavior, even unconsciously, right? Well, that's like, basically as high up as I'm gonna, you know, like the expectation I'm gonna live up to that expectation. And so when we fill ourselves with, well, I can't do this, and we're never going to do that. And this, you know, those absolutes? Well, you are going to read that, you know, we've learned from experience we've learned from researching and setting this out and talking with clients. That does happen. When you say those things it is that's what you're gonna get. Right? So it's very important to change that narrative in your head and be very careful of those labels. Hey, what do I label myself as? How do I you know, like, as Case in point, my husband mentioned, you say, you can't talk while cooking dinner? Oh, I labeled myself that. And so I feel like I can't it feels true. When we have conditioned ourselves, it feels so true. And that's why it's so hard to overcome it. Because we don't feel like it's possible. Like, well, this is who I am. And it's just I've learned to accept it yet. No, you don't have to. Is that really what you want? Do you want to live in that state? Is that who you want to be? Is that rising up and shining and being your best self? Probably not. And so it keeps us at this powerless level? We believe that we are completely powerless, and especially I fall into that victim mentality as well, like, well, things just happened to me. Right? You know, granted, there is a certain amount of that that does sometimes life just happens. But I have I've learned in the past. And this came with awareness that I do live that way I and things fall into place to prove that to be true. Right. So people always leave me that was that was one of them. People, people leave me people have moved people have I can't control that I can't control right? A friend moves. Right that that is what it is. Doesn't mean we're not friends anymore. How come I couldn't keep in contact? Right? I took it as they left me. And so all ties cut, right? And Ouch, that hurt. So I'm going to retreat into my little shell. For self preservation. That's right. As we talked about before, but being very careful. And so one thing that is really powerful, we need to empower ourselves more, right? And I have this conversation with my children all the time, especially one who will remain nameless, is very similar to me in our own heads. We have very limiting beliefs in our own heads, right we have this issue with self esteem we don't think very well of ourselves. We are very negative and feel a lot of shame and so we can do that we can well I'm this and I can't do that and I'll never but we just have to change that dialogue. Well I can I am focus on the things like you mentioned the optimism, right focus on what we can do focus on what we are and

as we mentioned before, our value in our last episode, right we talk about our value we align with God because God tells us the truth. Yeah. that's what that's what was really freeing that I want to drive home for our listeners. God is truthful. So we focus on those true things of how and God has said all over in the Bible of how he feels about us. Those are the things we need to be playing in our head. I am a child of God, I am.

Claudine

I got one. What is it, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. I mean, I can write all things, not some things, all things through Christ who strengthens me, that was a huge one for me to overcome my learned helplessness. There were things I wanted in my life. I mean, my goal is to be debt free. You know, my husband and I, we desired to be debt free. As we're approaching our later years in life, we want the freedom that that brings and not tied down with a lot of debt or a high mortgage. And, you know, I had to overcome that learned helplessness that I'll always be broke, or, you know, we don't have success in finances. So this is the way it'll always be, we had to start thinking out of the box. And one of the things we decided to do was sell our home, our family home down in Southern California, which, if you've been listening at all, you know, has been quite the saga. But you know, I had to, we had to think outside the box to get this deal done. Because there were some obstacles, a guest house on the property that was permitted, but not real property, it was just too much to go into detail here, we had to get really creative to overcome it. And there were times where it's so hard, we both just wanted to give up right? Like, oh, hard, let's just sell it for pennies on the dollar. But the truth of it is, then we wouldn't be able to be debt free, when we wouldn't be able to buy our next house, house and have a manageable mortgage. So we need to think outside of the box, we need to lean on the strength that God gives, right. And as Christians, we know, we have the power of the Holy Spirit's work working in us and through us. And so I could have just said, We both could have just said, This is too hard. Let's just give up because it would have been easier and just take, you know, much less money. But we had to climb out of ourselves climb out of this room, especially me not so much my husband, but really look for the opportunities to overcome and remind myself I can do hard things, right? Because I know you you shared you thought you were lazy. Well, I was like, I'm just kind of wimpy I can't do. That's kind of was one of my beliefs, like, hard things are just too hard for me. That's for other people. They're overcomers. I'm like, I just want to kind of glide through life simply and easily/

Ashley

And be comfortable.

Claudine

Right? My primitive brain is constantly striving to keep me comfortable and safe. And now I realized I can do hard things in I can recognize this is going to be hard. And I tell myself, so what you can do hard

things. And then I just do it, it's much easier. You know, the minute we believe it, the minute we have that thought I can do hard things, and we can do it. I can do all things, I can do hard things, I can do all things. And I can do this, and we're gonna do this. And then the feelings change. And there's this motivation, then there's this feelings of self worth. And I love what you brought up earlier about even just self compassion that for a time when we didn't do it, maybe when we were younger, have compassion, because that got us through today. I can look back and go, Wow, I spent 40 plus years thinking these thoughts. I mean, where would I be today? If I hadn't. But the truth of it is. I got to where I am because I survived. And I'm just so grateful that I learned it when I did, which really is about to take decades after you. So what I'm here now, yeah, and that's the point. And now I can rise up and shine and live life to the full and be present is my best self. So we can do hard things and we can do all things.

Ashley

Absolutely. And you know, I was thinking, I say that to myself a lot. I could do hard things. Because when we say this is too hard. Then again, we're limiting ourselves because that's a belief we have Well, it's too hard to I can't do it. And doing virtual school with the children at home. I see this so much. I'm sure many of us who are in the same situation, see this a lot. And you're constantly like trying to encourage our kids. You can do it. You can do hard things. I know it's tough. I know this is different. You know, we're trying to be their champion, right. One thing I've been working on with my clients, as well as myself is having our adult self talk, and rationalize help bring that logic and rationalize with our child's self, right like that inner child. So it helps with having kind of those two roles in our own heads going on. It brings, it eliminates the shame factor, and it just helps us like we mentioned earlier, well, thank you to my child's self for protecting me and helping me through these years. And now and just bring the rationale to it. Right. So for example, one of the things I've been working through is, in my friendships, right, as I mentioned, one of the things that I can repeatedly say to myself is, well, people just leave, you know, people leave. And my husband actually said it really well. I expect people to fall out of my life. I thought wow, the way you said, that just really triggered. me. I'm like, that is that was brilliant. Like, that's exactly like he articulated what I felt, I expect that people are gonna fall out of my life. So I live at arm's length. Right? So what happens now, that was a belief that I formed from growing up, right through my experiences, and having a lot of people leave, I had a grandmother who passed away when I was very young, my mom had a lot of challenges with my brother, my older brother, who had a lot of health issues. So they were in and out of the hospital together, which is why we would spend a lot of time with my grandparents. So she had to be away for a while my parents went through a divorce. I've had friends that have moved, I've had friends who we just lost contact, or, you know, just weren't friends anymore. So there's a lot of that type of stuff going on. So here comes adulthood. And my brain says, Well, people just leave or as my husband so eloquently put it, people fall out of my life. And so that was a belief that was like an absolute, that's just what happens. That's what I expect. So it limited me in my friendships with my relationships with people, right. And so my adult self now needs to use rationale, that prefrontal cortex that now is fully developed, and to help my inner child self understand that situations, right, because what happens is when we have that belief that going through every situation, they're different circumstances, but that belief is the same through all those circumstances, right. And so we have to tell ourselves, in this situation, this is what's happening. They're not abandoning me, they're not rejecting me, they're just moving. Right? So that's a example of our child,

our adult self rationalizing, and really sharing with our inner child, right, that the true circumstances No, they are not rejecting, you know, they're not abandon you that this is just something that happens in life, right. So. So it really helps being able to do that. Because since we're so much in our head, anyways, it's very important for us to bring in that rationale, because a lot of the beliefs that we have formed that we have conditioned our brains to believe, aren't accurate, right? You know, they're not necessarily accurate, or they may have been true with one circumstance when you were seven. But Come, let's say 38. It's not true in this circumstance, it might feel like it's the same situation, but it's not. And so that's where our adult self, I mean, it's just brilliant how God has created our brains, right to be able to do this. And that's, that helps bring the awareness and it helps us to be able to change those, those beliefs, and really focus on what we can do really focus on what we are and who we are in God's eyes.

Claudine

Right? Well, and as much as we learned helplessness, we can learn optimism, and God has equipped us to do just that. So I hope there have been some practicals today that have helped you and as always, send in any requests for topics or any comments, we'd love to hear from you. And don't forget to subscribe if you haven't already, and we have lots of resources on our website, so please check in there. Until next time,

Ashley

Alright everyone, thank you for joining in on our conversation here on the Rise Up and Shine podcast. If you haven't already, please take a second to hit that subscribe so you'll never miss an episode and while you're at it, share this episode with a friend who you know it can bless today. If you wanna visit us as well on our websites, you can catch Claudine over at claudinesweeney.com and Ashley at mindoverchaos.com our links are at the description. We also have some free resources there for you as well. So remember ladies, no matter what you are facing in life, it is never too late to rise up and shine and live your best life.